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The Implementation of Role-Play-Based Activities: What EFL Students Learned

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ABSTRACT

Role-play has been utilized in higher education in various fields with varied procedures. Its ability to foster language learning and certain soft-skills has been investigated in myriad of studies. The current study investigated five EFL students' views of their learning in role-play-based activities. The study took place in an English language department in a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The data for this qualitative research were taken by in-depth interviews through online video calls. The finding revolves around the four role-play-based activities, namely self-inventory, job-interview questions, presentations, and role-play performances. In the self-inventory activities, participants mostly learned about themselves, where they made a reflection of what can describe who they are. The job-interview questions activity supported participants' learning the knowledge of the role-play topic. In the presentations, most participants learned interpersonal skills. Lastly, the role-play performances fostered the different aspects learned in the prior activities, namely how to present their strengths and weakness in the self-inventory, the questions which might be asked and answered by interviewers and interviewee, and the dos and don'ts of a job interview. The conclusion which can be drawn from the findings is that a careful and well-planned structure of applying role-plays in higher education setting is one of the keys that seems to support students' learning.

Keywords: role-play, learning through role-plays, role-play implementation in higher education

INTRODUCTION

Role-play has been used in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning enormously. It is used in different manners in different context,

depending on various factors such as the age of the learners, the goal of the learning, and the skills to be improved. It can be in the form of a performance of a

short dialogue, planned or impromptu, or a longer performance with lengthy preparation.

The reason why role-play is used often in the field of EFL might be due to the benefits that it has. Role-plays have been found to improve students' oral communication or speaking skills in English (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010; Rahimy & Safarpour, 2012; Shen & Suwanthep, 2011), encourage students to speak (Kumaran, 2010), reduce the anxiety to speak in English (Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2013), and improve writing skill (Erdogan, 2013), to name a few. In addition, some studies on the use of role-plays in TESOL in higher education reveal that role-plays might, among others, facilitate the development of students' cognitive skills (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012), self-discovery (Crutchfield, 2015), and emotional aptitude (DiNapoli, 2009). With these findings, it is plausible to consider the use of role-plays in the process of teaching and learning; and therefore, it is important to keep evaluating its implementation to understand how it supports teaching and learning. The current study is one of the efforts to understand one implementation of role-play from the students' view, who would eventually be the one benefitting from its implication.

In higher education scheme, role-plays have been used in different forms and are usually a part of a set of related activities. The role-play performances are usually the product of these sets of activities. Among the many sets of activities, few instances are called critical drama (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012), creative drama (Erdogan, 2013), public reading (Crutchfield, 2015), process drama (Donnery, 2014), and applied drama (Sharp, 2014). All of them incorporate rigorous preparation and various activities before the actual role-play performance.

However, there have been lack of studies exploring role-play as a part of a set of activities. Most studies mentioned above and in the previous paragraph only looked at a particular aspect as the end result of the activities in relation to what skills the role-play helped develop. This is the gap in which the current study tried to fill. With this study, I aimed at investigating the implementation of role-play-based activities by looking at each part of the overall activities from the students' view. More specifically, I looked into what the students learned from their involvement in each of them and/or how the activities help them learn

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ROLE-PLAY-BASED ACTIVITIES IN EFL

In the context of higher education, role-plays might be scarcely seriously regarded. This may be due to the idea that role-play is viewed merely as fun activity, which focuses on 'play' that might be seen as not suitable and too superficial for students in higher education (Sharp, 2014). Therefore, the application of role-plays in this level of education should be approached in a different way from when it is applied for younger learners, and not treated as merely a fun activity. Some of the examples of how it is applied in higher education context are discussed in the following review.

In an English for Academic Purpose (EAP) subject, Saphiro and Leopold (2012) used role-play with the approach of critical drama pedagogy, which is the concept of using drama for classroom, where the role-plays should be "cognitively challenging" and "linguistically relevant" (Saphiro & Leopold, 2012, p.123). The critical drama was done in two classes

focusing on oral and written communication accordingly. The topics of the role-plays were 'legal trials' and 'scholarly dialogues'. For eight weeks, students had to be involved in the activities specifically prepared to meet the standard of the ten questions mentioned above. The activities included several research activities, analyses, and discussions as the preparation. In the 'legal trials', students in the beginning of the course were only given cases, and in the end, their role-play was all based on the preparation that they did based on the given case. Meanwhile, the scholarly dialogue was a role-play done before the research to prepare students' ideas of writing their paper. Related to 'legal trials', the students in this study suggested that the activities have reached the cognitive and linguistic goals (argumentative and English skills), but one of the topics was rather remote from their preference, so they enjoyed the activities less. In addition, one of the students' suggestions was referring to the need of more balanced preparation between the research and the role-play performance. Meanwhile, concerning the role-play in 'scholarly dialogue', students felt that it helped them structure their research paper.

Another set of activities using role-plays is called creative drama (Erdogan, 2013). These activities were conducted in three steps as proposed by Adiguzel (as cited in Erdogan, 2013). The first step is the preparation-warming up activity, which is aimed to activate the senses and build the group dynamics. The second step is called animation, which focuses on the development of a topic. And the last step is the evaluation-discussion step, where the outcomes of the activities are evaluated. This program was applied for seven weeks, where participants were to write six different genres of narrative. Each section followed Adiguzel's

three steps. The preparation steps included activities aimed at preparing the students mentally and physically for the upcoming task. The animation step involved some drama techniques such as improvisation and role-plays. The last step, the evaluation step, was conducted in different ways depending on what extent measured in each section. The students stated that these activities were enjoyable and made writing easier for them, and thus, made them like writing more. The creative drama also helped students' interpersonal skill since they had to work with the other students, although the big number of students involved in one class seemed to be a drawback that the students felt.

The next application of role-play was conducted by Crutchfield (2015) in a class to investigate the experience of students in a theatrical performance. The role-play performance here is in the form of public reading. To gain the students' insight on their experience, the students were asked to write course journals, "where they wrote responses to in-class creative writing prompts, reflections on their personal experiences with these prompts, and more free-form expressions of thoughts and feelings, particularly in relation to their experience of the Public Reading" (Crutchfield, 2015, p.4). In the end of the program, students performed a public reading, where they read the scripts they produced during the program in front of audience, which comprised of their peers, faculty members, and the public. Therefore, this performance is slightly different from the more common form of dramatic performance which involves movements and props. The students were given two prompts which asked about their feeling prior to and after the performance. The first prompt about their feeling before the

performance resulted in emotions such as nervousness, excitement, fear, concerns about audience and their upcoming performance. The second prompt concerning students' feeling after the performance resulted in themes such as pride, pleasure, self-knowledge, ensemble feeling (the feeling of comfort as a part of a group), relief, nervousness, knowledge of performance, and courage. Gaining from the data, Crutchfield (2015) concluded that the students' performance experience became a place for a "deep emotional investment" (p.27) and the performance became the place for their "self-discovery and validation" (p.28).

Of all three examples of how role-play is applied in the classroom in higher education context, each was conducted in a different and specific procedure based on the need and the goal of the class discussed. The students' gain and experience were also varied. This means that there is not one exact way of applying a role-play based activity for teaching and learning because each way will result in very specific and different experience, which at some points, supports some type of learning.

METHODOLOGY

Since this qualitative study was conducted to a very specific and particular setting, a case study design was implemented (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Cohen et al. added that this means that it was conducted by gathering in-depth data, but the result has limited generalizability.

The study was conducted in an English Language Education Department of a university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The subject where the role-play-based activities were applied was one of the subjects

offered in the first year, where subjects are mainly focused on building students' language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing). Since the department is aimed at producing graduates who are not only ready to be English teachers – as its name suggests – but also ready to be entrepreneurs, some subjects are made related to career and business. The subject that became the context is one of those subjects. In this subject, the topic is focused on English listening and speaking skills that are commonly needed in job-interviews and business presentations.

There were four students taking part in this study as participants voluntarily. There were one male student and three female students. It was a coincidence that all of them received a high grade for their role-play performance from the teacher. This might influence the way they viewed the implementation of the role-play and how it helped their learning process. The participants are presented in pseudonyms, namely Anin, Zaki, Mariana, and Elia.

The data were collected through interviews. At the time of data collection, I did not have the access to meet each participant in person. Therefore, all interviews were conducted through online video call while being recorded with the participants' consent. The collected data were coded using what Saldaña (2016) called as "values coding", which is used to code "data that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (Saldaña, 2015, p.131). This suits the aim of this study, which looked into the participants' views of what they have learned through the role-play based activities.

Concerning my positionality, as one of the teachers working with the students in the setting of this study, and as a person having a particular interest and experience in dramatic plays, I might hold certain bias and subjectivity in analyzing the participants' perceptions. My teacher-student relationship with the participants might also have influence on the answers they gave to the questions I posed in the interview. Therefore, the readers of this paper should take that into account to take the findings cautiously.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ROLE-PLAY-BASED ACTIVITIES IN THE STUDY CONTEXT

Before I present the findings of the study, first it is imperative that I give a detailed description of the activities conducted in the context of the study. The role-play-based activities implemented in the current study context is a part of a subject entitled English for Career Development and focused on listening and speaking skills (ECDLS). This subject has its pair, which was called English for Career Development and focused on reading and writing skills (ECDRW). The first half of the semester (eight weeks), the subjects focused on teaching students about job-interviews. While in ECDRW students learned to prepare documents for a job-interviews, such as application letter, curriculum vitae, and resumé, in ECDLS, students learned how to perform or face the job-interview. This is where the role-play-based activities were implemented.

The activities consisted of four parts. The first two parts functioned as the preparatory activities before the actual performances. The first part is called 'self-inventory', where students should learn about themselves regarding their strengths and

weaknesses, and what they wanted for their career. This activity was aimed at preparing students to choose how they would present themselves in a job interview.

The second part was understanding questions that might appear in a job-interview and how to answer them well and follow-up questions that a job applicant might ask in a job-interview. In this second part, students learned and discussed the questions from the material brought by the teacher. This activity also involved a small role-play where half of the students played a role as a company owner and half of them played a role as job seekers. These activities were aimed at giving students insight about the dialogue that might take place in a job interview between an interviewer and interviewee.

The third part was students' group presentation, where students were required to do research about the dos and don'ts of a job-interview and shared what they found in front of their peers. The materials for the presentation were totally from students' research. Teacher's role in this activity was to give feedbacks and shared her experience as a job-seeker and an interviewer in the past. The activity aimed at understanding knowledge around job interviews which exceeds language skills, such as rules of grooming, body language, and ethical conducts.

The last part is the main part, which is the role-play of two job-interviews. This is where the students participated in the role-plays in pairs, in which they played the role as an interviewer and interviewee. Previously, each student was required to find a job-vacancy of their choice from any sources (internet, newspaper, magazine, flyers, etc.), and their role-plays would be

the simulated interviews for this vacancy. The students created their own script and planned their play based on the knowledge they gained during the preparatory activities. The students performed the role-plays with the teacher as the sole audience. This activity was aimed to give the space for the students to apply the knowledge they gained from the previous activities.

FINDINGS

Interviewing the participants, I focused on understanding how each part of the role-play-based activities helped them learn and what they learned from it. The findings are presented into four parts, namely, self-inventory, job-interview questions, presentation, and role-play. The part naming is based on the label I use to name each activity. As explained previously, the first three parts are the preparatory activities that would eventually become the base to hold the role-play performance in the form of job-interview simulations.

Self-Inventory

This first preparatory activity was set to prepare the character or the role that the students would play in their role-play performance. Since job-interview was a topic that the students might face in real life outside the classroom, the role as the interviewee, or job seeker, should reflect the students' characters in reality. All four participants stated that the activities in self-inventory helped them learn more about themselves, and help them decide how their character should be presented in the role-play performance.

Anin stated that she learned something new about her weaknesses from her group mate in the small group discussion as a part

of the activities in self-inventory. She mentioned her being talkative as her weakness. She mentioned that what she felt as a normal behavior was apparently an annoyance to her classmates. She stated that she was defensive at first, but then learned to accept what her friends said about her and tried to control herself.

Meanwhile, Zaki, Mariana, and Elia declared that in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, they in fact, had known them before the self-inventory activities. Mariana said that the self-inventory activities helped her to be more honest about her weaknesses. In line with this, Elia elaborated further that addressing her strengths and weaknesses with her friends and reflecting them for preparing her character for the role-play made her start to think of making self-improvement. She mentioned that she started to think of how to work on her weaknesses and put into practice in her daily life. This thought of starting self-improvement was also shared by Zaki and Mariana.

Other than helping the participants learn about themselves, the self-inventory also helped them make the considerations on how to present the character that they played as the interviewee. From these activities, all participants stated that they started to build the character of the interviewee that they would play. They started to think about one part of the scenario, which was, the selling part, in which they should talk about their strengths and weaknesses in a way that could convince an interviewer.

Job-Interview Questions

After self-inventory, students learned few questions that often appear in a job-interview. This part consisted of listening to

lectures, watching videos containing the material, and discussions of the possibly best ways of answering those questions, and a short role-play. All participants stated that these activities helped them compose their dialogue in the role-plays. What they learned was rather straightforward. This means that they learned what they were supposed to learn, namely the questions and answers in a job-interview. Most of them took for granted what the teacher brought to class because they had no experience in a real job-interview before taking the subject and thus, they immediately took the knowledge shared by the teacher. However, all participants mentioned that they eventually also looked for other resources, namely the internet and their more experienced peers to give them options in composing the dialogue in the role-play and to crosscheck whether a real job-interview had the same questions as the ones learned in class.

Presentation

The presentation that students should give was about the dos and don'ts of a job interview. This activity was independently done by the students in small groups. This means that the teacher did not provide any material prior to the activity. Students researched for their materials from any sources available to them. All participants stated that what they found and learned while preparing their materials for the presentation became the consideration in preparing their role-play scenario and dialogues; what to include and what to avoid.

Since the activity was conducted in groups, what participants learned were mostly related to their interaction with other group members. Mariana, for instance, shared that she experienced a

struggle because she was in between two strong-headed group mates, who had contrasting ideas. She said that she learned to stay calm and control herself because she had to be the peace maker and the one finding the middle ground. Similarly, Elia said that she learned to communicate with different types of people, and how to solve problem with that communication, or to make a decision when a group member is someone that she had problems to cope with.

Concerning working with others, Zaki shared that he learned to take responsibility. He shared that one of his group mates did not participate fully in preparing for the presentation. He said that because in the end, the teacher would also look at how the group performed as a team, he felt that he needed to take action to save the group's face in case his irresponsible mate did not show up in the presentation. Therefore, he decided that everyone in the group should understand the whole presentation material and not just their individual part to ensure a good presentation.

While the other participants learned how to communicate and work with other students when there were difficult peers in the group, Anin, on the other hand, chose to work alone for the material preparation and did not want to bother compromising with her group members. She stated that her group mates only counted on her and did not want to contribute enough for the group. What she learned from this activity is related to what makes a student take a task seriously, viz. grades. She said that when it was time to present in front of the class, her group mates became very responsible and tried their best to perform. She concluded that this was because of the teacher's policy to grade the student as a

group and individually. She learned that grades were powerful enough to make students do a task seriously.

Role-Plays

Performing the role-plays by preparing the dialogue and scenario based on what they learned previously, four participants shared different views of what they learned. Anin and Mariana mentioned nervousness in the job-interview role-plays. They shared that they felt nervous in the performance. While Anin learned that a job-interview is a nerve-wrecking situation, Mariana focused more on learning about herself. She found out that she was a nervous person because of the tension that she felt.

In addition to what she learned about job-interview tension, Anin also learned about herself after feedbacks from her partner. She stated that she likes improvising in her role-plays, which makes her incompletely committed to the prepared dialogue. This resulted in her partner's struggle. She stated that later, her partner confronted her because of what happened. From then on, she received more feedbacks from other classmates that she needed to focus on the plan. She learned that she had a focus issue, and learned that something, which she thought as harmless, such as improvising, could cost other people. It is clear that Anin's perception of herself is influenced by what her peers said.

The role-plays in the context of the study are aimed to give the students a space to practice or implement what they have learned theoretically. This aim seemed to correlate to what Mariana, Elia, and Zaki shared with me. Mariana believed that after she had learned the theory, she needed to put it into practice. She said that role-play

made her become experienced in a job-interview, even though it was not a real job-interview. For Elia, the role-plays helped her recall everything she learned previously, namely the knowledge about job-interview. She stated that the knowledge was stuck with her. She could not forget the things that she learned and what happened in the role-play. In line with this, Zaki mentioned that what he learned from the role-play performance is about how many details that he had to pay attention to when facing a job-interview. There were various aspects that he and his partner considered when creating the dialogue and other aspects of the role-play, such as his outfit and his body language. These aspects were the knowledge that they learned during the preparatory activities. Thus, it can be summed up that there was a reciprocal benefit, namely, the preparatory activities help Zaki performed his role-play, and the role-play help him implement what he learned in the preparatory activities.

Finally, Elia learned that role-plays made everyone actively participate. She argued that in other activities, usually, only certain students stood out. However, role-plays gave the chance to everybody to be actively involved because if he/she is not, it would show clearly in their performance. She stated that many of her friends felt the joy of being recognized by the teacher because of succeeding in their performance.

DISCUSSIONS

From what I found in this study, I can draw some important points about the role-play-based activities. First and for most, a thorough and extensive preparation for a role-play performance seems to

be the key to what the participants learned and how the role-play-based activities helped them learn. All participants related the quality of their performance to their preparation. Erdogan (2013) emphasized that the preparation before the role-play is one of the parts effective in improving the skill aimed to improve. In the current study, each preparatory activity supported the role-play performance and conversely, the role-play performance supports the learning of the knowledge gained in the preparatory activities. This reciprocal benefit can also be found in Saphiro and Leopold's (2012) study, where role-play helped students compose their writing, and research conducted prior to role-play supports the role-play performance. In Saphiro and Leopold's (2012) study, higher order of thinking, such as analyzing and evaluating cases became one of the aspects paid attention to. This skill also seemed to be fostered in the current study because students were given significant independence to decide and to make their own judgment in preparing and performing their role-plays.

Another point to take from the finding is that putting the students in a position where they have to work with others can foster learning about themselves and others. All participants shared their issues in working with their peers in one or two of the activities. Each of them shared different ways of solving the issues with their peers. They learned to communicate, compromise, and avoid conflicts, such as what Mariana did by being the peace-maker between her conflicting group mates. This corroborates to Erdogan's (2013) finding that role-plays help students learn interpersonal skill since they have to work in groups. In addition, having issues with other group members also helps the participants learn about themselves. Mercer (2011) argued that external factors such as

the experiences of learners with others and the feedback from others might sometimes influence the way the learners view themselves. Mercer added that how the influence works also depends on the relationship between the learners and the feedback giver. The way the learner perceives the feedback giver will decide whether the feedback is taken or not. If the learner thinks positively of the feedback giver, he/she possibly considers the feedback. In the case of Anin, for example, she might have a positive relationship and positive thought of her peers since she seems to listen to their feedback about her and really thought of how her action affected her peers.

Another point that I draw from the finding is what the participants learned about teacher's influence on the students' performance. Anin mentioned the teacher's grade and Elia mentioned the teacher's recognition as two of the factors that encouraged students to perform well. Both participants learned this from their observation on their friends' attitude. They learned that teachers also play a significant part to influence some students' willingness to perform well. The conclusion that Anin and Elia made that the teacher's grade and teacher's recognition influence the students' performance might be a useful reference as a student-teacher. This is in line with Sharp's (2014) argument that drama in EFL teacher education has dual functions; it provides students with the opportunity to practice and improve their language skills, while at the same time learn some practical relevance to their future career as a teacher.

Last but not the least, the important aspect to pay attention to is the theme or topic of the role-play and its relevance to

students' real life. DiNapoli (2009) implied that role-plays often lack affective aspects because of lacking dramatic aspects; and therefore, provide less meaningful experience for the students. I would argue, however, that role-plays can still be meaningful for students when the topic played is related closely to their real life. From the beginning of the preparatory activities to the actual performance of the role-play, the center of attention is the students themselves. The character they played was basically themselves in a new identity - a job seeker. The dialogue was also based on how they wanted to approach a role-play based on their own imagination if they were in a real job-interview. All participants stated that at some points, they learned about themselves and the improvement they needed to do apart from what they expected to achieve in the classroom. Take for example, how Mariana learned to be more honest about herself, or Anin's realization of how her peers viewed her. Both seemed to take a meaningful mark in their learning that they saw themselves slightly differently than they used to.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

All in all, it can be summarized that the role-play-based activities in the current study became a place where students learned some aspects. In the self-inventory activity, the participants learned about themselves (self-reflection). In the job-interview activity, the participants learned about the possible questions in a job-interview. Meanwhile, in the presentation, the participants learned about interpersonal communication and what could make a student took a task seriously. Lastly, in the role-plays, participants learned about themselves concerning their interaction with other students. The conclusion which can be drawn from the findings is that a

careful and well-planned structure of applying role-plays in higher education setting is one of the keys that seems to support students' learning. What the students in the current study learned was all fostered through carefully prepared activities, which connect to each other and the ones holding the theme related closely to students' real life.

As concluded previously, a careful and well-planned structure of applying role-plays in higher education setting is one of the keys that seems to shape students' perception on their learning. Students in this level of education is within the time frame that urges them to have independence, confidence, and higher order thinking, which can be promoted through the application of role-play. Thus, this should be the consideration when an educator or an institution plans to use this approach in teaching and learning.

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