Enhancing the first year students' English communicative competence through role-play activities at Thai Nguyen University of Technology

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Abstract- This paper presents a study on the application of role-play activities to the first year students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology and deals with the question if role play enhances the students' communicative competence. In the research, the experimental method was used. The pre-test and the post-test were assigned to both the control group and the experimental group to collect data. Then the data was analyzed through the descriptive statistical procedures of SPSS Version 20. The findings indicate that the students' communicative competence was improved through role-play activities. The students used their grammar and vocabulary more correctly and appropriately. Additionally, the students' pronunciation was improved substantially with intelligibility and they also communicated with each other better. Therefore, role play should be encouraged at Thai Nguyen University of Technology.

Index Terms- communicative competence, control group, experimental group, role play

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization requires a common language in which people can communicate with each other. Among the languages, English plays an important role, which makes globalization more possible and effective (Bodapati, 2016). English language has become a compulsory subject at schools and universities in Viet Nam so that students can use English to exchange in the globalization process.

In order to meet the demand, university graduates not majoring in foreign languages in Vietnam are required to achieve a B1 level of English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Regarding spoken interaction, students at this level can exploit a wide range of simple language to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling. They can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events) according to European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is, however, difficult for Vietnamese students in general and students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology

(TNUT) in particular to reach B1 level, especially the criterion of spoken interaction. This is firstly because students at Vietnamese high schools unequally pay attention to the four English skills. They only focus on reading, writing and grammar, which are tested in the national high school exam to finish schools. The untested speaking skills in the exam make students ignore it during their studying; and when going to university, they find it hard to speak in English. Moreover, students at Thai Nguyen University are often placed in a big class with more than 40 students. Students, therefore, have less chances to practice, discuss and talk to each other in English. In addition, students do not have many opportunities to communicate with foreigners in real life.

In the context of TNUT, appropriate techniques and strategies need to be implemented. Role play is one of communicative techniques which develops fluency in language students, promotes interaction in the classroom and increases motivation. (Ladousse, 1989).

Being aware of effectiveness of role play in increasing interaction and the necessity of improving the students' communicative competence at TNUT, I decided to conduct this research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Communicative competence

There have been many different theories and definitions of communicative competence up to now. Chomsky (1965) defines that competence is the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language.

In the following years, Hymes (1972) and Campbell and Wales (1970) propose a broader notion of competence, that of communicative competence. This notion is intended by them to not only grammatical competence (or implicit and explicit knowledge of the rules of grammar) but also contextual or sociallinguistic competence. (as cited in Canale ans Swain 1980)

Canale and Swain indicate that communicative competence refers to both knowledge and skill in using this knowledge when interacting in actual communication. Knowledge refers here to what one knows about the language and about other aspects of

communicative language use; skill refers to how well one can perform this knowledge in actual communication. (as cited in Richards &Smichdt 1983, p.5).

In their book, Canale and Swain (1980) also point out that communicative competence refers to the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and social competence, or knowledge of the rule language use.

2.2. Definition of role play

Ladousse (1989) defines what role play means by looking at the words themselves. He shows that when students assume a role, they play a part (either their own or somebody else's) in a specific situation; play means that the role is taken on in a safe environment in which students are as inventive and playful as possible.

Having the same opinion with Ladousse, Ur (1996) shows that role play is used to refer to all sorts of activities where learners imagine themselves in a situation outside the classroom, sometimes playing the role of someone other than themselves, and using language appropriate to this new context. In term of the number of participants in a role play activity, he demonstrates that the role play is done in pairs very often, sometimes it involves interaction between five or six different roles.

2.3. Types of role play

In his book, Littlewood (1981) mentions that there are four types of role play.

The first type is role-playing controlled through cued dialogues. In this kind of role play activity, learners will normally have their cues printed on separate cards. These cues enable them to predict a large proportion of what the other will say and to prepare the general gist of their own responses.

The second type is role-playing controlled through cues and information. One learner is given detailed cues and the other has information that enables him to respond as necessary.

The third type of role play is role-playing controlled through situation and goals. In this role play, learners are initially aware only of the overall situation and their own goals in it. They must negotiate the interaction itself as it unfolds, each partner responding spontaneously to the other's communicative acts and strategies.

The fourth type is role-playing in the form of debate or discussion. This kind is a variation of role-playing activity. The situation is a debate or discussion about a real or simulated issue. The learners make sure that they have adequate shared knowledge about the issue and different opinions or interests to defend.

Looking into the four types of role play, the author decided to select the third type that is role-playing controlled through cues situation and goals for students to practice. This type is suitable to students and help them to develop their creativity and interaction. In this research, all the situations were designed for pair work on role cards.

2.4. Relation between role play and communicative activities

Role play plays an important role in communicative activities. According to Littlewood (1981), role play is a kind of communicative activity. He shows that role play is a social interaction activity which is an important technique for creating a wider variety of social situations and relationships.

Through role play, the range of functions, structures and the areas of vocabulary that can be introduced, go far beyond the limits of other pair or group activities, such as conversation, communication games, or humanistic exercises. Furthermore, a very wide variety of experience can be brought into the classroom. When students carry out a successful role play, they will develop their ability to interact with other people, practice speaking skills in any situation and build up the social skills from a very low level. Role play is one of a whole gamut of communicative techniques which develops fluency in language students, which promotes interaction in the classroom and which increases motivation. (Ladousse, 1989).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 40 first-year students majoring in electrical engineering, including 4 female students and 36 male students. They were all in the beginner level and at the end of the course they were expected to reach level 2 (A2) according to Vietnam's English 6-level language proficiency framework or they can communicate in simple and routine tasks.

To conduct the research, the participants were divided into two groups namely the control group and the experimental group. Twenty students were chosen for the control group and 20 students were in the experimental group.

3.2. The instruments

The study was conducted with a combination of the two main data collection instruments including pre-test, post-test and observations.

3.2.1. Pre-test and post-test

The pre-test and post-test were designed in the form of speaking and carried out to both the control group and the experimental group. Before role play was applied, both control group and experimental group were given a pre-test in which the students played roles to make conversations using situations on the card. After 15 weeks of the treatment, the students in control group and experimental group were required to do the post-test with the same situations of the pre-test.

3.2.2. Observations

The observations were implemented for 15 weeks. During that time, the author took notes information about the students' participation and interaction.

3.3. Data collection procedures

When students did the pre-test and post-test, their performance was recorded and marked by the teacher using assessment scales-level A2 of Cambridge English. Then the data was analyzed through the descriptive statistical procedures of SPSS Version 20.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Results from the pre-test and the post-test

4.1.1. Results of the average scores.

After being rated, the average scores of the students were demonstrated in the following table.

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control group	Pre-test	5.0000	20	1.62221	.36274	.000
	Post-test	7.3500	20	1.75544	.39253	
Experimental group	Pre-test	4.9000	20	1.71372	.38320	.000
	Post-test	9.7500	20	1.48235	.33146	

Table 1: The paired t-test results of the scores

It can be seen from Table 1 that the Sig (2-tailed) was 0.000 smaller than 0.05 which showed that there was an average difference between the pre-test and the post-test of both the control group and the experimental group. As for the control group, the sores of the post-test were 7.35 higher than those of the post-test with M=5.00. In table 1, the average sores of the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group were significantly different with M=4.90 and M=9.75 respectively. To compare the results of the post-test between the control group and the experimental group, it was clear that the average scores of the experimental group were much higher than those of the control group. Mean of the control group was 7.35 while mean of the experimental group was 9.75.

As reported above from the results, the control group changed in a positive way. However, the mean difference was not the most remarkable because the results of the post-test in the control group were 2.35 points larger than those of the pre-test while the scores of the post-test was 4.85 points higher than those of the pre-test gained by the students in the experimental group. It can be concluded that there was a considerable change after 15 weeks of the intervention. Participants in the experimental group improved their communication skills a lot after the treatment of role play.

4.1.2. Results according to each assessment criterion

When students in the control group did the pre-test and post-test, the results were rated in term of vocabulary, pronunciation and interactive communication and shown in the following graphs.
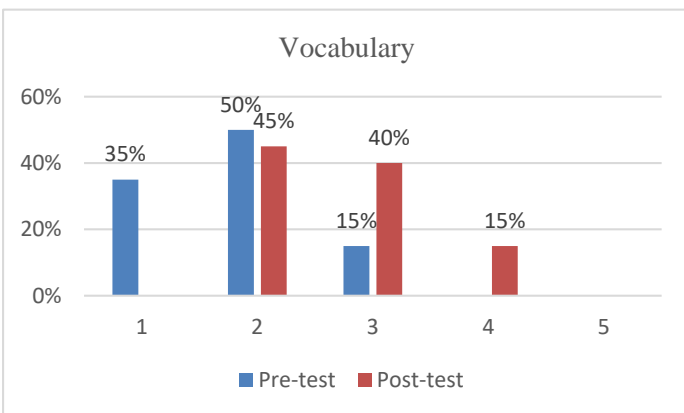

Figure 1: Comparison of scores in term of Vocabulary obtained by the control group in the pre-test and post-test
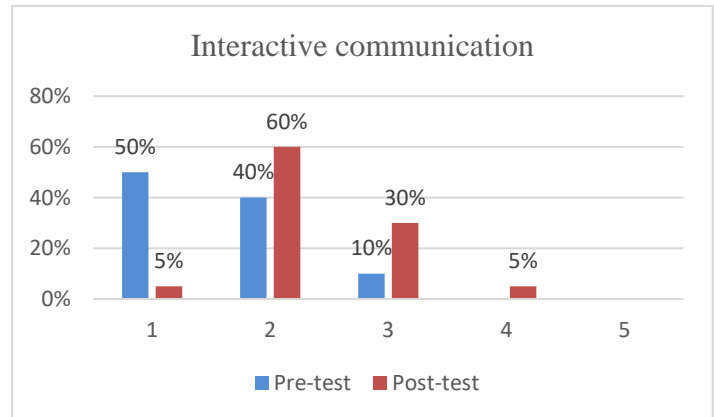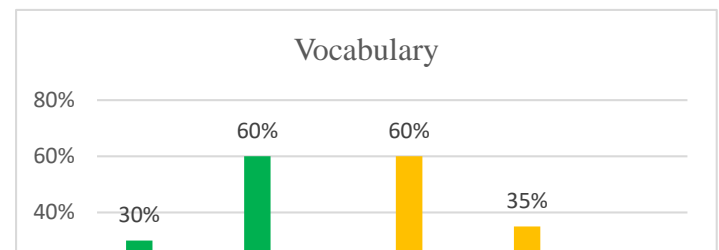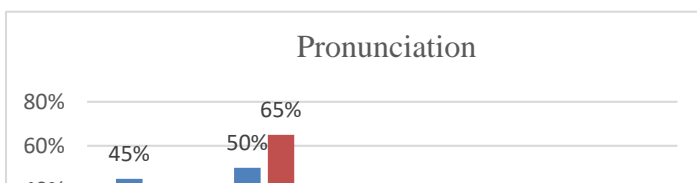

Pronunciation

Figure 3: Comparison of scores in term of Interactive communication obtained by the control group in the pre-test and post-test

As illustrated in Figure 1, according to vocabulary criterion, 35% of the students got 1 point while 50% of the students had 2 points and only 15% of the students obtained 3 points in the pre-test of the control group. Nevertheless, in the post-test none of the students got 1 points, 45% and 40% of the students had 2 and 3 points respectively. The number of the students reaching 4 points was 15%.

It is revealed from Figure 2 that none of the students got 5 points based on the criterion of pronunciation in both the pre-test and post-test. In the pre-test, the percentage of students got 1, 2 and 3 points was 45%, 50% and 5% respectively. However, the number of students receiving 1 point decreased significantly at 5% so the students getting 2 points increased to 65%. Likewise, 25% of the students obtained 3 points, rising by 20% compared to the pretest and only 5% of them had 4 points.

In reference to the category of interactive communication, from Figure 3, there were still students getting 1 points with 50% in the pre-test and 5% in the post-test. The percentage of students obtaining 2, 3 points in the pre-test was 40%, 10% and in the post-test was 60%, 30% respectively. Only 5% of the students in the post test reached 4 points.

Looking at the experimental group, the data rated in term of the three criteria was shown in the three graphs below.
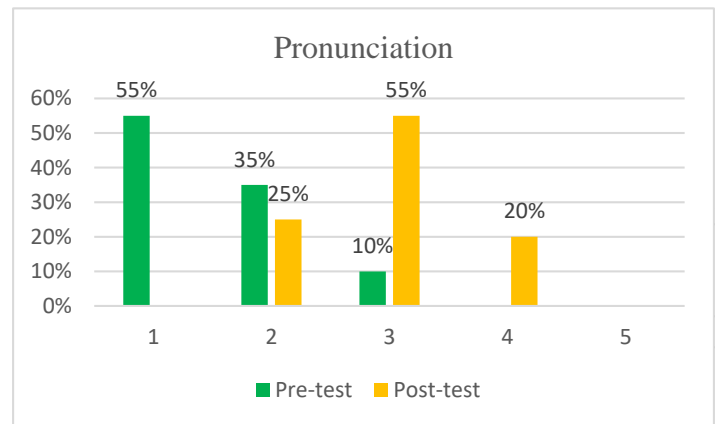

Vocabulary

Figure 5: Comparison of scores in term of Pronunciation obtained by the experimental group in the pre-test and post-test
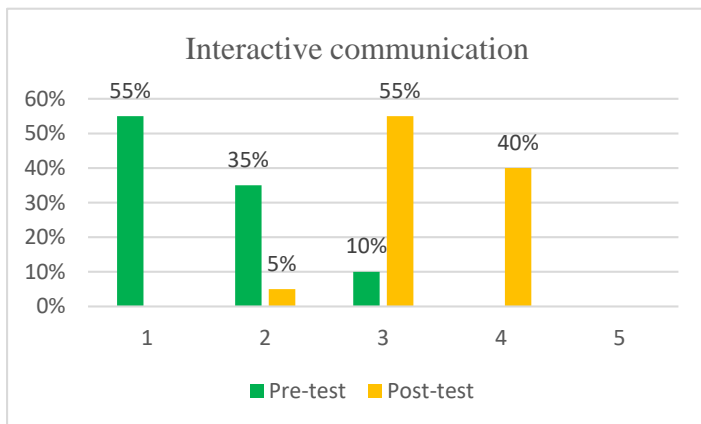

Figure 6: Comparison of scores in term of interactive communication obtained by the experimental group in the pre-test and post-test

Figure 4 shows the scores in term of vocabulary. It can be seen that in the pre-test of the experimental group, the percentage of the students got 1 and 2 points was 30% and 60% respectively while none of the students in the post test got 1 or 2 points. Moreover, only 10% of the students in the pre-test received 3 points, but the percentage rose to 55% in the post test. The number of students obtaining 4 points in the post-test was 40% and 5% was a number for the students reaching 5 points.

Another assessment criterion in the tests was pronunciation which was illustrated in Figure 5. It is clear from Figure 5 that in the pre-test the number of students with 1 points made up 55%, but the percentage of students getting 2 and 3 points was lower points. On the post-test, none of the students got 1 point and only ... number ... with

From the results above, it is obvious that there was some improvement in the control group in which the students' vocabulary was enhanced most. Nevertheless, the students' pronunciation and interactive communication were slightly improved. In comparison with the control group, the experimental group's communicative competence was improved substantially after role play had been applied.

After 15 weeks of the treatment, the students could make a great progress in vocabulary. They obtained 3, 4 or 5 points and none of them got 1 or 2 points changing a lot compared to the pre-test. They could, furthermore, improve their pronunciation and interactive communication especially interactive communication. Through role play, they interacted better with 40% of the students getting 4 points while none of them reached 4 points before the treatment. It is clear that their vocabulary, pronunciation and interactive communication could be improved considerably after the intervention.

It is actually evident that the students of the experimental group made considerable enhancements in communicative competence after taking part in role play activities in 15 weeks. This change was apparent compared with the control group.

4.2. Results from the observation

It can be reported from the observations that most of the students actively participated in role play activities with high excitement. Moreover, they also positively interacted with each other because the situations were similar to their real-life. Besides, the students could improve the ways to control the conversations and keep them going.

However, the author had difficulties in managing the class since the class was a bit noisy when students took part in role pay activities.

V. CONCLUSION

In the paper, role play activities used in the classroom have been explored. The results show that the scores of the experimental group were better than the scores of the control

group in the post-test. It cannot be denied that using role play could enhance communicative competence than using other kinds of activities, demonstrated by the results of the control group without the intervention of role play.

Through role play, the students pronounced more correctly and intelligibly and sometimes they could use some phonological rules such as linking and stress etc... They also improved their vocabulary and grammar considerably as they could use appropriate vocabulary and correct simple grammatical forms when taking part in real-life situations. Especially interacting in a conversation was easier and they could make the conversation smoother and exchange with each other. From the observations they were, furthermore, enthusiastic about the activities and engaged in the tasks.

In fact, role play was very effective in enhancing communicative competence for the first year students at Thai Nguyen university of Technology.

Because of the benefits of role play in teaching speaking skills and enhancing communicative competence, teachers should fully exploit it. It is suggested that teachers should choose the types of role play which are appropriate to their students' level and teachers' purpose of teaching. Moreover, teachers should decide the number of students in each role play activity that is proper with students' interest and topics. It is also recommended that teachers prepare different useful languages so that students can use them in each role play activity.

Besides, selecting materials is important so it is advisable that teachers utilize materials in which topics and situations can interest students and are familiar with students' everyday life. This stimulates students to participate in role play activities and use language more properly. In addition, when choosing course books, teachers should pick up the course books in which role play activities are included and can adapt them to suit to their students.

In conversing with each other, students can make some noises but teachers should not worry. It is advisable for teacher to go around the class and keep the control.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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