

# Using Scripted and Non Scripted Role Plays to Improve English Speaking Performance of Hotel Engineering Staff

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of using scripted and non-scripted role-play activities on EFL learners' speaking performance. The participants in the study were twelve engineering staff members of a hotel in Phuket. They were divided into two groups. Both groups attended 15 lessons of the English for Hotel Engineering Staff course. The lessons were given twice a week; each lesson lasted two hours. At the end of the lesson, staff members in one group were asked to pair up and perform scripted role-play activities whereas those in the other group performed non-scripted ones in a separate room. An actual interaction with a native speaker of English was used as the pre-test and post-test to assess the participants' oral English performance at the beginning and at the end of the study. The results of the study show that the twelve participants' overall post-test scores were significantly higher than their pre-test scores at the level of 0.01, indicating that both scripted and non-scripted role-play activities helped the participants to improve their English speaking performance. However, non-scripted role-plays contributed to the improvement of the participants' discrete oral performance to a more significant degree than scripted ones. The t-test results reveal that the six participants assigned to practice non-scripted role-plays showed significant speaking improvements especially in terms of accent and comprehension at the level of 0.01. Their post-test scores on vocabulary and fluency were also significantly higher than the pre-test scores at the level of 0.01. The other six participants, who were assigned to perform scripted role-plays, showed significant improvement at the level of 0.01 only in terms of vocabulary. The study suggests that non-scripted role-play activities better contribute to the holistic improvement in oral English performance of the Thai EFL learners than scripted ones. Further studies are recommended to investigate the outcome of using the two types of role-play with different groups of learners, particularly those with higher levels

of proficiency, and to find ways to make the most of each type of role-play in improving different aspects of the learners' speaking performance.

**Keywords:** Thai EFL learners, speaking performance, scripted role-play, non-scripted role-plays

## Introduction

English is the major communication medium between people from different countries around the globe. The increasing demand of good communication skills in English has activated English teaching around the world (Richard, 2006). In Thailand, today English is taught in every level; Thai students are required to study the language from primary school to university level. In fact, most of them spend more than ten years learning English through formal education.

Despite such a long time of learning English in school, the results of their studying immensely vary. As English teachers, we can see that in some English classes there are few students who can speak the language fluently. A possible reason for this is that the English classroom is too rigid. The students always sit and listen to the teacher emphasizing the structure of language rather than participating in activities that promote communication skills, or the development of even basic oral ability.

Many English teachers have consequently shifted their lessons to make them more active by employing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). As the teaching method focuses on providing students opportunities to use the target language, many activities are introduced to the students in order to develop their speaking ability. Larsen-Freeman (1986) said that a classroom during a communicative activity will not be quiet. The students do most of the speaking and the ambiance of the classroom

during a communicative exercise is active. The students may leave their seats to complete a task. Due to the increased responsibility to participate in the communicative task, students may find that they gain confidence to use the target language in general. They are also more responsible managers of their own learning.

As mentioned above, the students in CLT classroom settings are well engaged in communicative activities that provide them the opportunity to use the target language in communication with each other, and role-play is one of the most popular communicative activities used in the CLT classroom.

There are two broad types of role-play activities often used in English language classrooms: scripted and non-scripted role-plays. To perform role-plays of the scripted type, the students will have to work in pairs or small groups. They are given prompts related to the target scenarios. Then, they will have to use the prompts as the model to form the target dialogue. The students rehearse that dialogue before performing it in front of the class. In the non-scripted role-play, on the other hand, the students are assigned to perform the role-play activity in front of the class based on the prompts given without preparing or writing the script in advance (Byrne as cited in Davies, 1990).

Livingstone (1983) stated that role-play is a classroom activity allowing the students to practice the language, the aspects of role behavior (e.g. formality, register, function, attitude, paralinguistic features, extra-linguistic

features, acceptability and appropriateness, and the immediacy of oral interaction), and the roles outside the classroom that they may need to know. She commented that the teacher cannot accurately predict all the roles that the students may need to know in order to communicate in real life. Hence, she suggested that the teacher may help raise students' awareness and understanding of role behavior and have them extensively practice the language associated with these roles. However, there are some activities often confused with role play, including play acting, group work, and dialogue work (e.g. reading dialogue with meaning, class composition, writing skeleton dialogues, and free dialogue writing in groups). Although the mentioned activities are not role-play, Livingstone recommended the teachers to use them for the role-play preparation.

According to Crookal and Oxford (1990), there are a few technical terms often used interchangeably with role-plays. These are *simulations, games, role play, simulation games, role-play simulation, and role playing games*. The most confusing term is *simulation*.

Livingstone (1983) described that role-plays provide the student the specific information and the role to act. The students are required to act based on the roles given. They cannot add their own opinion or personal view to the roles. In contrast, performing simulation, the students can put their own personality, experience, and point of view through the given roles. Similarly, Ladousse (1987) and Kodotchigova (2002) explained that students put themselves into others' shoes to perform the role-plays, whereas they can play their own roles under the particular situation to perform simulation.

To develop the oral skills of the students, a wide range of communicative activities are used in language classrooms and role-play is among the popular choices. There are a number of studies investigating the effects of role-plays on activities on students' speaking proficiency. Alwahibee (2004) for instance investigated the results of using role-play activities to improve a group of Saudi Arabian students' speaking ability. In the study, the subjects spent eight weeks studying the target language before performing role-plays in pair. It was found that speaking proficiency of the students in the experimental group was improved since role-play activities gave them the opportunities to use the target language to communicate and interact with their peers. Moreover, the activities also created the collaborative learning atmosphere in the classroom, (which has been) claimed to be one of the factors that creates successful communication of the students in the classroom.

Klanrit (2007) conducted a study to compare the effectiveness of role-plays and information gap activities in improving students' oral ability. The results of the experiment indicated that both types of activities contributed to the improvement of the participants' speaking ability in different ways. The students slightly gained new elements of the target language or language use such as new vocabulary and useful expressions. That is, role-play may not help to improve the students' language use.

Furthermore, Ding & Liu (2009) conducted a study similar to Alwahibee (2004) to investigate the influence of role-plays in the improvement of oral ability of Chinese students. The findings showed that the students were able

to speak English fluently; yet, accuracy in their utterance needed to be improved.

Chotirat (2010) studied the repair organization in English conversation of 16 Thai college students given the lessons with scripted and non-scripted role play activities. The participants' role play conversations were videotaped, transcribed, and analyzed according to the principles of Conversation Analysis (CA). The results of the study suggest that non-scripted role plays provide students more opportunity to practice features of language used in natural occurring conversation.

In conclusion, role-play is a possibly effective way to improve speaking proficiency of the students. The activity not only creates the opportunities for the students to communicate, but also establishes the collaborative learning atmosphere which encourages them to develop strategies to overcome problems that occur when performing their role-play. This directly prepares the students to face communication in their real life.

In Thai education, teachers normally implement scripted role-play to improve student speaking proficiency. Non-scripted role-play is rarely found in English language classes, with the reason being that this type of role-play is quite complicated, and teachers should look to set achievable goals for the students. It can also create too rigid, stressful atmosphere for the students since there is little opportunity to prepare and rehearse the dialogue.

However, it is still too early to lay claim that scripted role-plays have the advantage over non-scripted ones in developing the student's oral ability. The results show that some students trained with scripted role-play really struggle to

speak English in real-life situations. As a matter of fact, there have been few studies directly investigating the results of both types of role play activities with the focus on the aptitude of students in speaking English. This study is therefore designed to investigate the effects of scripted and non-scripted role-plays on the student speaking proficiency. The specific research questions explored in the present study are listed below:

1. Does the speaking proficiency of the students improve after practicing the scripted and non-scripted role-play activities?
2. If so, which type of role-play gives better results and in what respects does the role-play type better contribute to the improvement of the students' speaking proficiency?

### **Benefit of Research**

This study expects to find that the scripted and non-scripted role plays differently affect the students' speaking proficiency. In addition, the different types of role plays show the different problems with which the students struggle while they are performing each type of the role-plays and how the students deal with them. Consequently the teacher can use this information to prepare appropriate lesson plans and to select the type of role play activities that mostly suit their students.

### **Research Process**

In this study, the participants were divided into two groups and attended the English for Hotel Engineering Staff course. Total 15 lessons were given twice a week. At the end of each lesson, one group was asked to practice

performing scripted role-play and the other performed non-scripted ones in a separate room.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 12 engineering staff members of a hotel in Phuket with pre-intermediate oral English proficiency. In the hiring process, the engineering staff had been interviewed by a native speaker in order to measure their oral English proficiency and were put into the pre-intermediate level judging from the test results (only generalizable in this company). This group of staff was required by the company to attend the same English class which was taught by the researcher.

In this study, the student engineers were divided into two groups. Both groups attended the English for Hotel Engineering Staff course using theme-based materials the topics of which include maintenance work on site, maintenance report, equipment order and purchase, monthly maintenance report, and future maintenance plan. Total 15 lessons were given twice a week; each lesson lasted 2 hours. At the end of the lesson, one group was asked to practice performing scripted role-play activities and the other performed non-scripted ones in a separate room.

### **Instruments**

The teaching materials used in the class were designed based on the needs of the participants. The theme is related to their job included maintenance work on site, maintenance report, equipment order and purchase, monthly maintenance report, and future maintenance plan.

The role cards were prepared for the students to practice performing role-play activities at the end of each lesson. After the

students completed studying each unit, they were required to perform the role-play based on situation and language focused in each unit.

Lesson plans were written by the researcher based on the needs of the students as mentioned in 4.2. Each lesson consisted of the actions that the students had to be able to master in order to perform their duty in each theme-based unit. Each action was presented along with the language focus, vocabulary, worksheet, and scripted or non-scripted activities depending on the group of the students.

To measure individual speaking proficiency before and after the experiment, each student is required to interact with a native speaker in a pre-test and a post-test. This interaction hereafter is called 'actual interaction'. The context of the interaction was related to the students' daily job. There were two native speakers participating in the actual interaction. The first native speaker was the students' head of department. He was the interlocutor for the students in the interaction and, at the same time, scored their speaking proficiency. Another native speaker observed each interaction and rated speaking proficiency of each student. These two native speakers were given an orientation on the criteria used in scoring before the interaction took place.

### **Pre-Test**

Before the experiment, the actual interaction between the students and the native speakers was recorded. In the interaction, a native speaker who was the students' head of the department interacted with the students one by one. Another native speaker observed every conversation between

the students and their head of department. During the interaction, the head of department and another native speaker both scored the speaking proficiency of each student. Before the interaction took place, these native speakers were explained the rubric used in scoring speaking proficiency. The rubric was developed from the checklist of conversation performance by Tsang & Wong (2002). The score of each student was compared with the score from the actual interaction after the experiment in order to see if their speaking proficiency is improved after studying the provided lesson with scripted and non-scripted role-plays activities.

#### Experiment

During the experiment, the student received the lessons and carried out the activities as previously mentioned. At the end of each unit they were paired up and assigned to perform the scripted and non-scripted role plays separately.

#### Post-Test

Once the students completed 15 lessons of English for Engineering Staff, each student was required to interact with the native speaker head of department again. The

same native speaker observer observed the interaction between each student and the head of department. Similar to the pre-test, the head of department and the native speaker observer used the given rubric to measure speaking proficiency of each student after the experiment. The score from this interaction of each student was compared with their score of the interaction before the experiment in order to see if their speaking proficiency has been improved after the experiment.

#### Data Analysis

To answer research questions 1 and 2, t-test was used to analyze and interpret the results from the pre and post tests of each participant.

#### Results

##### Participants' Speaking Proficiency Before and After the Experiment

The following table presents the result of the analysis of the 12 participants' scores on the speaking proficiency test before and after being trained in the English for Engineering Staff course with scripted and non-scripted role-play activities.

**Table 1:** Participants' Overall Scores on Different Aspects of Speaking Performance Before and After Receiving Training with Scripted and Non-Scripted Role-Plays in English for Engineering Staff Course

Groups	Pre-test		Post-test		Paired-sample t-test		
	x	SD.	x	SD.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Scripted (n=6)	10.83	2.42	12.33	2.07	-5.809	5	0.01
Non-Scripted (n=6)	10.42	1.99	13.92	1.93	-9.037	5	0.01
Overall (n=12)	10.63	2.12	13.13	2.08	-6.67	11	0.01

As presented in Table 1, the result of t-test shows that the 12 participants' post-test scores were significantly higher than their pre-test scores at a level of 0.01. This significant difference indicates that both scripted and non-scripted role-play activities helped the participants to improve their speaking performance.

### Performance Differences between Participants Trained with Scripted and Non-scripted Role-play

The tables below present the results of the speaking performance improvement in different respects of the two groups of participants assigned to perform different types of role-play.

**Table 2:** Participants' Speaking Performance Scores Before and After Receiving Training with Scripted Role-Plays

Speaking Performance in Scripted Role-play (n=6)	Pre-test		Post-test		Paired-sample t-test		
	x	SD.	x	SD.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Accent	2.92	.58	3.25	.42	-2.000	5	.10
Vocabulary	2.75	.69	3.42	.49	-6.325**	5	.01
Fluency	2.83	.82	3.00	.84	-1.581	5	.18
Comprehension	2.33	.52	2.67	.75	-2.000	5	.10

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

As shown in Table 2, the t-test result shows that speaking performance of the six participants who were assigned to perform scripted role-plays at the end of the lessons

was not significantly improved as far as accent, fluency, and comprehension are concerned. Vocabulary was the only respect found to significantly improve at the level of 0.01.

**Table 3:** Participants' Speaking Performance Scores Before and After Receiving Training with Non-Scripted Role-Plays

Speaking Performance in Non-Scripted Role-play (n=6)	Pre-test		Post-test		Paired-sample t-test		
	x	SD.	x	SD.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Accent	3.00	.71	3.50	.71	-2.739*	5	.04
Vocabulary	2.58	.58	3.58	.38	-7.746**	5	.01
Fluency	2.42	.49	3.50	.63	-7.050**	5	.01
Comprehension	2.42	.66	3.33	.41	-3.841*	5	.01

\*Significant at 0.05 level

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

The result of the t-test in Table 3 shows that the speaking performance of the six participants assigned to practice non-scripted role-plays at the end of the lessons improved significantly in terms of accent and comprehension at the level of 0.01. Their performance scores in the post-test were higher in terms of vocabulary and fluency than in the pre-test score at a significant level of 0.05.

The pre-test and post-test results of the participants assigned to perform scripted and non-scripted role plays shown in Tables 2 and 3 indicates that non-scripted role-play better contributed to the improvement of the participants speaking performance than the scripted ones.

### Conclusion

The results of the current study show that having the participants practice both scripted and non-scripted role-plays did help to develop their overall speaking performance significantly. However, as far as discrete aspects of speaking performances such as accent, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension are concerned, non-scripted role-plays apparently produced significantly better results whereas scripted ones improved only the participants' vocabulary to a significant degree.

This may be due to the fact that both types of role-play allow the participants opportunity to communicate in meaningful situations over the period of the study. Additionally, while non-scripted role-plays provide students more opportunity to practice holistic features of language use in naturally occurring conversation, as also shown in Chotirat (2010), scripted ones are mainly

concerned with preparing what to say, thus helping them noticeably improve their vocabulary or word choice.

### Recommendations

Further studies should explore the use of the two types of role-play with different groups of learners, particularly those with higher levels of proficiency. They should also attempt to find effective ways of using role-play to improve different aspects of the learners' speaking performance.

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