



The Effects of Role-Playing Simulation Activities on the Improvement of EFL Students' Business English Oral Communication

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The current study investigated the effects of role-playing simulation activities in the improvement of 45 Thai EFL university students' business English oral communication. Firstly, a pre-speaking test was administered in order to get data on the students' business oral communication skills. After the completion of each unit, the participants were asked to perform role-playing simulations according to the given scenarios in the course. A post-speaking test was used at the end of the 15-week instructional period as well as a questionnaire that investigated the students' attitudes towards activities. The results showed that the teaching method had positive effects on the improvement of students' oral communication skills. Furthermore, there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the pre- and post-tests. The students improved most in acting confident, whereas problem solving appeared to be less successfully improved through these activities. The data gained from the questionnaire revealed the students' positive attitudes towards learning through role-playing simulation activities. It is suggested that for more sustainably effective oral communication in business English contexts, teachers should give more sufficient practice with problem solving and fluency building.

Keywords: role-playing simulation activities, oral English performance, business English communication

Introduction

It is clear that English is the primary lingua franca, widely used as a communicative device by billions of people across the globe (Pakir, 2000). In the globalized world, it is helpful for people to have a good command of English to interact with world communities in various sections of the society, such as in trade, business, education, and industry. In Thailand, English is used as the tool by Thais to communicate with foreigners, especially in the tourism industry (Todd, 2006). Moreover, the establishment of the ASEAN Community—in which English is the official language for communication purposes among the ASEAN member countries—has played a very important role for English to become extremely essential for ASEAN citizens (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Pipattarasakul & Singhasiri, 2018). Hence, the ability to use English for communication has become the most important concern for programs at every educational level in Thailand.

English is the first foreign language taught in every level of the Thai education system, and it is especially important at the university level. The main goal of courses taught in Thai universities focus on

the development of English for competence in spoken and written communication (Teo, 2006). However, although Thai university EFL students start studying English from primary school, they still have difficulties in using English as a communication tool in their daily lives. According to previous studies, Thai university students have limited abilities to use English, not only in social environments, but also in classroom activities (Teo, 2006; Tipmontree, 2015). Moreover, a study carried out by Khamkhien (2010) shows that the English speaking skills of graduate students is lower than the expected standards considered by employers. From the research mentioned above, it can be concluded that Thai universities, when considering English teaching, are not productive and process-oriented enough to train students who can meet the requirements of the current labor market. To address this problem, effective and supportive English instruction must be urgently implemented to promote Thai university EFL students' English ability.

According to prior research conducted with Thai EFL university students, the speaking skills of the students are the lowest in comparison with their reading, writing, and listening skills (Khamkhien, 2010; Teo, 2006; Tipmontree, 2015). Several causes have been identified in regard to Thai university EFL students' poor English speaking skills, including issues with teaching activities, teaching styles, learning environments, and students' attitudes. Most teaching activities take place only in the classroom, which means that students learn through their books or the materials that teachers prepare (Noom-Ura, 2013; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008). Moreover, the contents chosen in classroom teaching are inappropriate for their lifelong learning for coping with real world experiences. Teaching styles is the second factor that needs to be mentioned. Most English language teachers employ traditional methods of language teaching based on teacher-oriented teaching techniques, giving students less opportunities to take part in classroom activities (Khamkhien, 2010; Radić-Bojanić, Topalov, & Sinwongsuwat, 2015). Regarding the environments, there are limited opportunities for Thai students to use English for communication in real-life situations. The last factor is the Thai EFL students' attitudes towards English language learning. Much research shows that the majority of Thai EFL students have negative motivation in studying English due to, not only the classroom activities, but also a lack of self-confidence on account of insufficient language knowledge in using English (Noom-Ura, 2013; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008). Therefore, in order to improve students speaking skills, teachers should use appropriate teaching techniques through which students can actively take part in the learning process as well as increasing their motivation and self-confidence in using English in real-life situations.

Role-playing simulation is one of the teaching techniques highly recommended by many educators which causes students to improve their own language abilities, helping them get over the difficulties they face regarding their communicative competence by providing exercises based on authentic situations and communication (Harmer, 2003; Oradee, 2012; Tipmontree, 2015). This technique is a very suitable teaching method for teachers to improve students' speaking competence as well as strengthening their self-confidence in speaking English with their teacher and classmates. This technique not only requires students to use the knowledge of language in dealing with realistic situation tasks given by the teachers, but it also encourages students to use their interpersonal skills to collaborate effectively in group work, which is one of the necessary skills of the 21st century. Thus, role-playing simulation has been found to be one of the effective solutions for the students' English communicative speaking skill problems. This present study attempted to investigate the effects of using role-playing simulation in developing students' English speaking skills, and their attitudes, including their self-confidence in speaking English in business contexts, were also explored.

Literature Review

Role-playing simulation is one of the most effective language communication activities that is used by educators. Role-playing simulation has been described in several ways. According to Qing (2011), role-playing simulation is composed of activities producing artificial environments that provide experiences

for learners. Ments (1999) points out that role-playing simulation includes both playing roles and real-life situations in which learners are put through a certain set of communication tasks as well as problems and interactions with other people in a group. As can be seen from the statements above, role-playing simulation enables learners to act out roles, not only providing them opportunities for using their English language skills, but also giving them experiences based on real-life situations.

Over the past couple of decades, role-playing simulation has been considered as a teaching technique that is widely used to improve students' English communicative speaking skills, and a considerable number of studies have shown a positive effect on using it in EFL classrooms (Qing, 2011; Tipmontree, 2015). There are several reasons why there is an increasing popularity of role-playing simulation use for language learners. For instance, Hyland (1993), provided three main reasons showing the importance of applying role-playing simulation activities into English language teaching. The first reason is that this activity can increase students' motivation in learning English, encouraging them to discover their knowledge through scenarios based on participating in real-life situations, through which they learn unconsciously without realizing what they retain through their learning process. Secondly, by focusing on the influence of playful experience, these activities create a supportive, non-threatening environment for learners to freely use their English skills. Thirdly, role-playing simulation activities give learners the impetus for purposeful communication, encouraging them to build up structures, vocabulary, and strategies based on real-life situations.

There are some further advantages to be obtained from employing role-playing simulation activities into the English learning process, which are as follows:

1. Role-playing simulation activities can provide learners of English with a set of tasks and problems through which react based on real life situations. This will in turn create positive impacts on the social and intellectual development of learners (Jenkins & Gibson, 1999).

2. Learners of English who participate in role-playing simulation activities can have the opportunity to interact with one another sharing their ideas and thoughts as they play out their roles in order to complete their duty in a given scenario. Through these activities, a student-centered learning environment is built because they actively participate in the classroom, focusing on their own specific language learning needs (Kim, 2018). Moreover, they can be motivated to speak in a relaxing environment which can also increase their speaking self-confidence (Harmer, 2003).

3. As role-playing simulation activities involve various aspects of skills such as communication, interaction, and social skills (Bygate, 1991), learners who play out their roles in a scenario can have an opportunity to experience and analyze the behaviors of others communicating in a suitable context based on real life situations, for example, how to interact in a post office or a bank.

Implementing Role-Playing Simulation

According to Hyland (1993), to be successful in implementing role-playing simulation activities in the EFL classroom, teachers should follow the following four stages: preparation for the activity, introduction to the activity, doing the activity, and a debriefing stage. Similarly, Jones (1983) and Sturtridge (1977) proposed three main stages for using role-playing simulation activities in ELT classrooms:

Phase 1. The main aim of this stage is to assist students in becoming familiar with the core structure of simulation activities and to make them comprehend their roles and responsibilities before the activity starts. First off, students are briefed about the problems, situations, and context with regard to the scenario. Then, each student is assigned to a role card specifying a certain position or a social role both through speaking and listening, intending to provide them with knowledge about the situations in the scenario. At this stage, both Jones and Sturtridge suggest that students should be backed up with linguistic input and exercises that would assist them in practicing and preparing to enact the situations in the scenario.

However, Sturtridge (1977) points out an alternative order, in which students are provided with

linguistic input after the activity is completed. At this stage, Sturtridge states that the linguistic input might be more profitable since the students would have an opportunity to try and make the best of their own language knowledge.

Phase 2. At this stage, the students are required to enact the simulation in groups. Interacting with one another, as though in real life, talk is performed without advance preparation and is responsive to the situation. The core context, as well as role characters are placed in, provides the motivation to focus on resolving the issues in the scenario. To achieve the goal, each student finds himself/herself attempting to discuss, argue with the others, and giving out reasons, for example, and when completed, the output that is obtained from what they have carried out is presented. It can be clearly understood that during this stage, when the students interact with one another, a communicative context based on real-life situations is created.

Phase 3. This phase is called the debriefing period, during which the students would have an opportunity to think through their use of language and content. During this period, students are encouraged to ask any questions they may desire on points developing from the previous conversation created during the simulation activity. Some of these questions could comprise grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. The teacher could encourage the participants to focus on vocabulary, phrases, and sentence structures they have used in the target language, giving them alternative suggestions and explaining the essential points in terms of the core content. Additionally, the teacher could supply the students with various kinds of exercises related to the language problems that they have confronted while enacting the simulation, regarding which, some tactics or discussion strategies are needed, for they will be of great assistance to them in subsequent situations they may encounter in real life. Briefly, this stage is helpful for reinforcing students' prior knowledge.

Group Work as Patterns of Classroom Interaction in Role-Playing Simulation Activities

According to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), there is a gap between students' ability to solve problems independently and their ability to solve them with the help of others. The importance of support from peers and teachers is emphasized. That is to say, students can develop their knowledge under the guidance from teachers or the interaction with their peers, especially for the less capable students. Additionally, in EFL classrooms, group work is an effective technique to provide opportunities for those who have a low level of English proficiency to interact and learn from the more capable students.

In group-based learning, the interactional dynamics in the classrooms are changed from teacher to students, thus students are given more time to share their ideas among their peers in the group, which in turn prevents them from getting bored from working alone (Harmer, 2003). This technique causes a shift from students as passive recipients of language forms to active participants who collaboratively interact with other members in the group to construct their own knowledge and negotiate meaning.

Regarding role-playing simulation activities, after students are assigned a situation to role play in, they must brainstorm ideas among members of their group, thinking up the language that can be used to create the appropriate dialogue and then expressing their views and thoughts during the activity. In addition, teachers' roles are repositioned from being instructors to being facilitators and observers in order to help students develop their own learning. This also fosters life-long learning skills, which, as many educators state, is the main goal in language education.

Due to the wide range of applying role-playing simulation activities in EFL classrooms, there have been several studies discovering the effectiveness of using role-playing simulation activities to enhance students' communicative competence. Among these, Javid (2013) compared 88 freshman students' oral skills development from 2 groups at Taif University, Saudi Arabia. One group was randomly assigned as

the control group, studying under a conventional condition, and the other group was the experimental group learning through role-playing simulation activities. Research instruments included speaking tests and a questionnaire. It was found that after ten weeks of studying through role-playing simulation, the oral communication skills of the experimental group were higher than that of the control group.

Similarly, Tipmontree (2015) investigated the speaking skills of 45 Thai EFL students learning through role-playing simulation activities, as well as their attitudes towards learning through these techniques. The students were divided up into five groups and were assigned to perform their role-plays after the completion of each unit. The findings showed the positive effects of role-playing simulation in enhancing students' speaking performance. The resulting t-test indicated a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$). The participants in this study performed better in the post-test compared to the pre-test after 15 weeks of the treatment. Moreover, the data gained from the participants' diaries showed positive attitudes towards role-playing simulation activities.

In conclusion, role-playing simulation activities have been found to be an effective solution for improving students' oral performance in English, for not only do they urge students to create a supportive collaborative learning environment, but also give them an opportunity to practice communicating effectively and to think critically to solve problems that may occur in real-life situations.

Although several studies have proven the effectiveness of implementing role-playing simulation activities in improving students' oral English proficiency, few studies, if any, have aimed to investigate the use of role-playing simulation in Thai EFL university students, whose levels of English proficiency generally vary from medium to low. This research, therefore, aims to fill the gap by investigating if role-playing simulation activities can enhance the oral English proficiency of Thai EFL university students studying English for specific purposes.

Method

This study was quasi-experimental, using a single-group pre-test and post-test design to investigate the effects of role-playing simulation activities on students' oral communication ability. Although it was considered a weak design due to the limited number of participants, it was chosen because with a single-group, the researcher can learn whether any change has occurred after the implementation of the treatment (Wasanasomsithi, 2004). In this current study, qualitative methods were also employed. This included data from teacher and student diaries. An attitudes questionnaire was also conducted to increase the breadth and depth of the quantitative findings.

Participants

For the purpose of convenience, one class of 45 third-year Thai EFL university students studying Business English Communication at a public university in southern Thailand was asked to participate in this study. The course was delivered through role-playing simulation activities. The reason why these participants were chosen is that some research had shown that the students who graduated from this university had very low proficiencies in oral English and that their English communicative competence was lower than employer satisfactory levels. All the participants joined voluntary in this study and were informed about the objectives.

Data Collection Instruments

The scenarios and the pre-and post-speaking tests. There were six simulation scenarios, each of which consisted of five role-play characters. The students were divided up into nine groups, and each group consisted of five people. Each group was given a simulation scenario, and each member in the group was assigned to a role character. They were given twenty minutes for preparation before

performing it in front of the three examiners (two Thai lecturers and a native English-speaking lecturer who taught English). The pre-test was administered in the classroom, whereas the post-test was administered off-campus after the final activity. The environment created in the classroom was similar to real-life situations. The six scenarios were as follows:

Scenario 1. Emphasis on applying for a job. At an interview for a job at the Le Meridien Hotels & Resorts, the company president and the customer service manager are interviewing an applicant for a position of customer service advisor. The other two applicants are talking about a perfect resume and cover letter while waiting for the interview.

Scenario 2. Emphasis on delegating and giving feedback. In the studio at Channel 3, the managing director of The Voice Thailand program is delegating tasks to a project manager and a marketing manager. At the end of the season, the executive director and the company president give some feedback to the project manager and the marketing manager.

Scenario 3. Emphasis on making arrangements. In the offices of Nitipon and Victoria's Secret Beauty Company, some staff are making arrangements by telephone.

Scenario 4. Emphasis on socializing. At the registration area of the International Customer Service seminar, the managing director of Healthzone Solutions is welcoming a new business partner. The other three people are networking. They make contact and build a relationship.

Scenario 5. Emphasis on running a business meeting. In the company boardroom of S&P Syndicate Public Company, the chairperson is holding a business meeting which will share ideas for marketing activities to solve the problem that sales of coffee cookies are falling. Participants are the marketing managers in different countries.

Scenario 6. Emphasis on sightseeing. At the business meeting of the Jubilee Diamond international sales teams at the Racha Kiri Resort and Spa, Khanom, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, some participants are discussing about changing some meeting schedules, asking about a city tour, and booking a car for travelling around Khanom.

To validate both tests, three experienced English lecturers checked over the contents for errors. The test was administered to a trial group of fourth-year students, who were not part of the study, prior to data collection. The English experts took into consideration their observations to revise the content of the test. Along with the consensus of the three English lecturers, the final draft of the test was considered applicable to the study. The rubric of the test was adapted from a study by Tipmontree (2015). The five-point scale ranged from 1, which was the lowest score, to 5, which was the highest. The criteria involved six aspects of communicative competence in business contexts: Fluency, Giving Information, Selecting Language, Pronunciation, Confident Acting, and Problem Solving.

A proto-syllabus of English for business course. The syllabus composed of lesson plans, a compiled book, as well as scenarios for everyday practice. There were six chapters, which are as follows:

- Chapter 1. Applying for a job
- Chapter 2. Working with others
- Chapter 3. Making arrangements
- Chapter 4. Socializing
- Chapter 5. Meetings
- Chapter 6. Sightseeing

There were five topics in each chapter: Vocabulary Preview, Reading, Listening and Speaking, and Writing. The study was carried out over 15 weeks, 3 hours per week. Each chapter was taught for two weeks, and students were given two weeks for preparation and practice before joining the Role-Playing Simulation on Stage Contest in the last week. Each class started off by explaining to the students how to

study by using role-playing simulation activities, and then the students were divided up into the nine groups. Each chapter consisted of five stages: preparation, practice, language production, performance, discussion and evaluation.

A questionnaire representing students' opinions on learning oral business English communication skills through role-playing simulations. A set of questionnaire elements were designed by the research team in order to find the students' attitudes towards learning through role-playing simulation activities. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions in total, asking the students about their attitudes on the contents, teaching techniques, classroom activities, significance, and usefulness of role-playing simulation activities.

Teacher and students' diaries. After performing the simulation, the students were asked to report on what they did in the class, including what problems they had and how to solve those problems. The purpose of the students' diaries was to obtain students' opinions about two key issues: firstly, to know how the students evaluated their performance in each simulation activity, secondly, to investigate the usefulness of role-playing simulation activities in which they took part. The teacher's diary was used to collect the data from the teacher's views regarding the students' performances while engaging in the role-playing simulation activities.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was carried out over 17 weeks, beginning with a pre-speaking test on oral competence in business English communication, which was administered before the English for Business Communication course had started. The teaching activities were conducted for 3 hours per week over 12 weeks. In each lesson, the same teaching method was delivered following the sequences of the materials: Vocabulary Preview, Reading, Listening and Speaking, and Writing. In the first week, the students were asked to form groups of five people, then the objectives of the research and the process of role-playing simulation activities were explained to them. In this study, there were five stages of instruction through role-playing simulation activities, which were adapted from the studies by Tipmontree (2015). The sequences of teaching process were as follows:

Preparation stage. It was an hour introduction stage of the course. The students were informed about the course objectives, which was essential to helping the students achieve the goal of oral communication in business English contexts. Then, the topics of Vocabulary Preview, Listening and Speaking, and Writing of each chapter were taught by the teacher to prepare them to produce the accurate language.

Practice stage. The topics of Listening and Speaking of each chapter were used to prepare the students in delivering the conversation as well as enabling them to use the correct pronunciation. In this stage, an uncontrolled practice technique was employed for the students to practice the conversations in pairs. The teacher observed them and gave feedback at the end of this stage which lasted one hour.

Language production stage. The students had to work in groups to create the dialogues and the stories in accordance with the scenario given by teacher. Through this stage, they had to interact with each member in their groups to share their own ideas and to make decisions on what to do within one hour.

Performance stage. This stage occurred in the second week of teaching each chapter. In this stage, each group of the students performed the simulation in front of the class. Each group was given 15 minutes to perform the simulation that their group had created, which lasted 2 hours.

Discussion and evaluation stage. In this last stage, the teacher and the students discussed their performances. The main objective of this stage was to give feedback to the students to develop their next performance. The students were asked to take notes to evaluate their own performance and their perceptions towards the benefits of role-playing simulation activities. This stage lasted one hour.

In weeks 13-14, the students were given time to prepare their group simulation scenario and were asked to practice for the Role-Playing Simulation on Stage Contest which was held in week 15 in the university hall. In week 16, the post-speaking test was conducted. After the post test, a questionnaire was given to the students to obtain more information on their attitudes towards learning through role-playing simulation activities.

Data Analysis

The students' scores from the pre-and post-speaking tests on oral competence in business English communication were rated and averaged. The means, standard deviations, and t-tests were used for quantitative data analysis. Then the mean scores of both tests were compared with one another to answer whether or not role-playing simulation activities improved oral competence in business English communication of the university EFL students. Data obtained from the students' dairies were grouped in accordance with themes and were presented in percentages according to the students' reported attitudes towards learning through role-playing simulation activities.

Finding and Discussion

Effectiveness of Role-Playing Simulation in Improving Students' Oral English Competence

To answer how effectively role-playing simulation enhanced students' oral English performance, the researcher analyzed the mean scores of the pre-and post-speaking test on oral competence in business English communication. The results are illustrated in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Speaking Pre-test and Post-test Scores

<i>Test</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
pre-test	2.40	.605	45	1.95	3.96	-19.454*	.000
post-test	4.35	.331					

*Significant at 0.05 level.

With respect to the data in Table 1, it was found that, on average, the mean score of the post-test (4.35) was statistically significantly higher than that of the pre-test (2.40) at 0.05 confidence level.

According to the data in the table, the difference between the means of pre-test and the post-test was 19.454. When the two sets of scores were compared, it was found that they were significantly different ($t = -19.454$, $p < 0.05$). Further calculation of the effect size utilizing Hedges' g formula (Ellis, 2009) to measure the magnitude of the treatment indicated that the effect size was large ($g = 3.96$). Based on such findings, it could be claimed that role-playing simulation activities were effective in enhancing students' oral achievement in English.

Aspects of Communicative Competence Improvement in Business English through Role-Playing Simulation

To further explore the aspects of communicative competence in business English, the mean scores from pre-and post-speaking tests were compared using a paired-sample t-test to determine the differences of the students speaking achievement. The findings are presented in Table 2 below.

TABLE2
Comparison of Each Communicative Competence in Business English Aspect Pre-test and Post-test Scores

<i>Aspects</i>	<i>Test</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Fluency	pre-test	2.41	.922	45	1.91	2.43	-12.153*	.000
	post-test	4.32	.604					
Giving Information	pre-test	2.37	.751	45	2.02	2.98	-13.637*	.000
	post-test	4.39	.583					
Selecting Language	pre-test	2.36	.671	45	1.97	3.11	-14.880*	.000
	post-test	4.33	.584					
Pronunciation	pre-test	2.43	.780	45	1.93	2.93	-16.468*	.000
	post-test	4.36	.496					
Confidence Acting	pre-test	2.29	.678	45	2.19	3.62	-19.049*	.000
	post-test	4.48	.510					
Problem Solving	pre-test	2.57	.788	45	1.67	2.29	-11.867*	.000
	post-test	4.24	.654					

*Significant at 0.05 level.

As shown in Table 2, regarding each aspect of communicative competence in business English, the statistical results show significant improvements at the level of 0.05 in all the aspects assessed. However, as indicated by the pre-and post-test scores differences, the degree of improvement varies among the aspects. The students could improve their Confidence Acting skills the most when compared to other aspects, followed by Giving Information, Selecting Language, Pronunciation, Fluency, and Problem Solving, respectively. In addition to this, Problem Solving and Fluency appear to be the most challenging aspects to improve, whereas Confidence Acting and Giving Information are more readily enhanceable through role-playing simulation activities.

Students' Attitudes towards Participating in Role-Playing Simulation Activities and Its Usefulness

More findings on the students' attitudes towards participating in role-playing simulation activities in terms of its usefulness and the students' level of preferences for the method were collected by using the questionnaire. Generally, the results from the semi-structured interview revealed that the students' attitudes towards the instruction of role-playing simulation activities were positive. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
Students' Attitudes towards Participating in Role-Playing Simulation Activities and Its Usefulness

Questions	N=45	%
1 In what point, do you think these role-playing simulation activities serve you beneficially?		
• speak more fluently	3	16.67
• give information more appropriately	20	44.44
• acquire more vocabulary and grammar	5	11.10
• pronounce more intelligibly	3	6.67
• carry more intelligent conversations	7	15.56
• build more self-esteem and courage to speak in front of many people	7	15.56
2 In which point do you see the usefulness of role-playing simulation activities?		
• I can improve proficiency in oral Business English.	7	15.56
• It provides me opportunities to practice speaking English.	17	37.78
• I can produce my own language and control the content of the speech.	1	2.22
• I can use language in a meaningful way.	2	4.44
• It prepares me to participate in the broader international community.	6	13.33
• I can adapt my knowledge to the real-life situation.	9	20
• I don't think these activities are useful for learning	3	6.67
3 Are you satisfied with practicing spoken English through role-playing simulation?		
• extremely satisfied	10	22.22
• satisfied	30	66.67
• neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	5	11.10
4 Do you find this activity interesting?		
• extremely satisfied	14	31.11
• satisfied	30	66.67
• neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	0	0
• unsatisfied	0	0
• extremely unsatisfied	1	2.22
• nothing in particular	0	0
5 Do you think that everyday practice in role-playing simulation helps you gain more self-confidence in speaking English?		
• strongly agree	26	57.78
• agree	14	31.11
• neither agree nor disagree	5	11.10
6 Do you think that using English actively as in this activity will be beneficial to you for		
• strongly agree	25	55.56
• agree	19	42.22
• neither agree nor disagree	1	2.22

As shown in Table 3, the majority of the students (44%) reported that role-playing simulation activities helped them in giving information appropriately. Around 7% of the respondents revealed that these activities helped them in producing more intelligent conversations and building more self-confidence as well as encouraging them to speak in front of other people. Only 6% (3 students) of them stated that role-playing simulation activities helped them speak more fluently. Another 3% reported that learning through these activities could help them pronounce words correctly.

Regarding the usefulness of role-playing simulation activities, about 38% of the participants stated that these activities provided them with more opportunities to speak English, whereas 16% reported that their oral business communications were increased through using role-playing simulation activities. About 20% of the students stated that they could adapt their knowledge into real-life situations. Only a few students (4%) pointed out that these activities would be useful for them because they could use the language in a meaningful way. Interestingly, about 7% of the students (3 participants) stated that they learned nothing from these activities.

Concerning the students' satisfaction and their interest in role-playing simulation activities, quite a few subjects had positive attitudes towards these activities. About 67% were satisfied with these activities and were interested in learning by using role-playing simulation activities. Interestingly, only 2% of the students reported that these activities were not interesting, whereas 11% of the students were neither

satisfied nor unsatisfied with practicing spoken English through role-playing simulation activities.

For the benefits of these activities, to increase their speaking self-confidence and to help them for their future careers, more than half of the students (58%) rated their attitudes towards self-confidence improvement as strongly agree, whereas about 31% of the students rated as agree, and 11% rated neither agree nor disagree. Regarding the benefits for their future careers, just less than half the students agreed (42%) and more than half of the students (58%) strongly agreed, whereas 2% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of role-playing simulation activities for improving Thai University EFL students' oral performance. The oral performance was evaluated through pre- and post-speaking tests, including six distinct aspects on oral competence in business English communication. The findings showed that role-playing simulation activities could be of assistance to Thai University EFL students' in improving their speaking abilities in all the aspects of business English communication that were measured. Additionally, the results indicated that the students' opinions in terms of the activities usefulness and the degree of preferences for the activities were positive.

Regarding the results obtained from the study, it can be stated that the teaching method delivered through the role-playing simulation activities capitalized on the oral English performance for students. It is clear that the scores in the post-test were on average significantly higher than those on the pre-test. This finding is in agreement with the study conducted by Tipmontree (2015) in which it was found that the oral English performance of the participants considerably improved through role playing and simulation activities.

The findings were confirmed by data from the teacher and student diaries. The oral performance of the students noticeably improved after the first week of activities. This is because all the teaching stages that had been created in role-playing simulation activities facilitated the students' perceived competence in learning English. At the beginning stage of the activities, the students were prepared to perform the simulation by learning the related vocabulary and expressions that increased their linguistic accuracy and fluency in the given situations, paving the way for the students to get involved more actively in the learning process. During the communication stage, the students were assigned to work in groups and consult with the teacher. Through this they had more opportunities to share their ideas by interacting with their peers and the teacher. In this process, the role of the teacher was changed to be a facilitator who observed and evaluated the students' performance. Again, in this stage, the students could apply their language knowledge to construct dialogues of their own and solve their oral communication problems related to the situations given by the teacher. The last stage is the stage of evaluation in which the teacher gave them feedback through which they could improve themselves and get prepared for the next simulation. To sum up, the students were given equal and abundant opportunities to take part in all the teaching stages which, as seen in the tables above, helped them improve their oral competency.

Regarding the aspects of communicative competence in business English, it was not at all surprising that the most noticeable difficulty faced by the participants was regarding problem solving skills, which is a problematic skill for Thai students (Varakamin, 2016). According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (2015), the results of academic evaluation scores which required students to use their problem-solving skills in a test based on real-world contexts were noticeably low: Thai students placed at the 55th ranking out of a total of 70 countries, which was far behind from neighboring countries. Moreover, according to the research conducted by Varakamin (2016), which evaluated Thai students at every level of education on problem solving, logical thinking, and analytical skills, only 2.09 percent of Thai participants passed the exam. This is because of traditional Thai teaching methods that emphasize learning by rote, which gives no chance for students to think critically (Noom-ura, 2013). Thus, it is hard for them to develop their problem solving skills if they are used to being spoon-fed knowledge. In

addition, the students' lack of motivation makes it difficult for them to complete critical thinking tasks (Nomnian, 2002). Thus, to help them out with enhancing their problem-solving skills, active-learning techniques requiring students to construct their own learning methods by using problem solving, logical thinking, and analytical skills should be employed in Thai classrooms.

Fluency is another aspect which showed lower improvement by the students in this study. The findings from the students' journals and the open-ended questions of the questionnaire revealed that the students had difficulties in delivering the dialogues while performing the role-plays due to their anxiety in speaking in front of other people. Some of the participants were afraid of losing face, as reported by Student 44:

It was my first time in performing in front of many people, I felt very anxious. I was afraid that I might do something wrong and people would laugh at me.

Moreover, some students reported that they were worried about their pronunciation, so they could not concentrate on what they were saying, as reported by two respondents below:

I was not sure how to pronounce the word '*satisfaction*' so I paused for a while and tried to pronounce it correctly. (Student 8)

It is hard for me to pronounce some words so sometimes I could not talk fluently. (Student 9)

Learning by memorizing was another problem affecting the students' fluency in this study. Some of the students tried to remember the scripts that their group had created without understanding them. When they felt anxious, the anxiety prevented them from recalling their previously-memorized sentence patterns. Student 39 noted the following, for instance:

When I looked at the audiences, I felt nervous. I could not remember anything so I kept saying the same sentence over again and my friend thought that I had finished my sentence so she thought it was over to her to speak.

According to Wang (2014), EFL learners may not be able to speak fluently while trying to perform in the target language because linguistic and emotional factors may affect their oral competences. To prevent this, students should be backed up with knowledge, vocabulary, as well as strategies to minimize their fear, excitement, and stress. Learners, before their speaking performance, need to be given a sufficient period of time and a number of appropriate tasks to promote their fluency. Additionally, timely training, extension activities, and teacher's guidance are important for learners' language use because these assist them to improve their fluency in speaking English.

On the other hand, both Confidence Acting and Giving Information, as can be seen from the biggest pre- and post-test score differences, were much easier for the participants to improve. Through a number of rehearsal and performance processes, the students' self-confidence increased, and they learned how to give information appropriately. These findings were congruent with the study by Tipmontree (2015) in which the speaking confidence of the participants gradually increased during through simulation activities. Additionally, in this study, the students were urged to use their knowledge of language to express their ideas effectively and simultaneously in giving information related to the situations given by the teacher.

Concerning the students' attitudes towards learning through role-plays, the results obtained from the questionnaire and the teacher and student diaries showed that the students had positive perceptions towards role-playing simulation activities, as had been frequently mentioned in many previous research studies (Ments, 1999; Oradee, 2012; Tipmontree, (2015).

With regard to the findings of this study, it could be concluded that role-play simulation activities sustainably have significant effects on the improvement of the communicative competence of university

EFL students in business English. The statistically significant differences between the mean pre- and post-test scores suggested that students benefited from role-playing simulation activities. In addition, the participants' positive attitudes towards learning through role-playing simulation activities gave further support to the effectiveness of these activities. For this reason, role-playing simulation activities may be considered to highly helpful in EFL learning contexts, especially in English for specific purpose classrooms with the aim to enhance students' oral competence.

In this study, it was seen that the more time the students spent practicing in role-playing simulation activities, the better gradual progress they made in the improvement of their oral competency in business English communication. Through these activities, students get involved actively in the learning process, and they can choose the appropriate expressions and improve language speaking accuracy while performing an assigned role in a scenario. Role-playing simulation activities not only boost students' language accuracy, but also create sustainable oral interaction among them, making positive effects on their attitudes towards learning English. It can be said that through role-playing simulation activities, students learn both vocabulary and basic sentence patterns representing real-life situations in a communicative way.

Much as the results of this study may be helpful for designing role-playing activities to improve the oral competencies of Thai university EFL students. However, there are other aspects that need to be taken into consideration when it comes to employing these activities into classrooms. During role-plays in large classrooms, performers sometimes forget their dialogues or feel excited and stressful, which gives rise to embarrassment and losing self-confidence. In order to prevent this, students should be assisted by the teacher with prompt feedback. Again, it was seen that through the implementation of role-playing simulation activities, providing students with appropriate time in practicing would be of assistance to them in successfully improving their fluency and language competency while performing. Therefore, teachers, when they create role playing activities, should provide students, especially the Thai EFL learners, with more time to rehearse their dialogues fully.

Due to certain limitations, some issues were not examined in this study. The following recommendations for further studies in this area are therefore given. Firstly, as the number of participants in the current study was rather small, the findings must not be overgeneralized. A study should be conducted with a larger sample size with different education levels to increase the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the rubric used for evaluating students' oral performance should be more interaction-oriented, including communicative aspects related to naturally-occurring situations. Thirdly, the grammatical errors produced by students during performing role-playing situations should be investigated in future research. Lastly, the present study was carried out within a semester. It would be worth conducting a longitudinal study to observe students' performance over a longer period.

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