



Revisit Role-Playing Activities in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Remodeling Learners' Cultural Identity?

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Abstract

Role-playing activities are very common teaching activities used by teachers in the foreign language teaching field. Issues concerning role-playing activities are not new topics in the literature of foreign language teaching, however in an observation teachers have two extreme views on the effectiveness of role-playing activities. One is that such kind of activities is useful in foreign language teaching especially in speaking classes. On the other hand, there are opposite views saying that such kind of activities shows very little effect on language teaching, particularly when there lacks skillful facilitation on the part of the teachers. The observation shows that there is still some room to study role-playing activities in language classroom. By adopting research methodologies such as focus group study of language teachers and classroom observations, this paper presents a study on role-playing in language teaching using data and examples from teaching Chinese as a Second Language (CSL). This paper attempts to analyze role-playing activities design and the cultural identity of the roles assigned in the activities.

1 Introduction

This paper discusses role-playing activities in language classrooms. The idea of this paper developed when I observed and talked with teachers teaching Chinese as a second language (CSL) in universities in Hong Kong. CSL teachers teaching Cantonese as a second language and teachers teaching Putonghua as a second language were observed and group discussions were organized to understand the actual practice of CSL teachers in language classrooms. Teachers reported that they used role-playing activities in their speaking classes with an intention to create simulated language situations for students to practice their target language. In this observation, there are two extreme experiences as reported by the teachers. One is that role-playing activities are very useful in speaking classes, because teachers can successfully teach the target language through interactive plays and students can learn the language with its culture and practice language in a communicative way. However, there are opposing views showing that the experience of using role-playing activities cannot achieve the designated result as the activities lack students' participation and students have nothing to say in the tasks and the activities turned out to be a failure. The two contrasting views evoked my interest to further investigate the design of various role-playing activities and study how the design affects the teaching and learning of a foreign language. In this paper, I look particularly at learners' cultural identity and assignment of roles in role-playing language activities in speaking classes.

2 Literature review

2.1 *Language teaching aiming at communicative use of the target language*

In recent years, the pendulum of language pedagogy has swung from linguistic competence to sociolinguistic or communicative competence. Traditional structuralists' views on language teaching focus on teaching linguistic knowledge. The role of language learners is basically a student role similar to the role they take while learning content subjects, such as history, geography, economics, and so on. In this teaching model, language learners mainly repeat and recite to acquire linguistic knowledge and forms. In recently years, when language teaching started focusing on sociolinguistic competence and communicative use of language (Hymes, 1966; Widdowson, 1978; Zhao, 2009), language teaching not only concerns the content of the speech, but also takes into account questions such as "who is speaking," "to whom," "when" and "where" as important factors in language teaching methodology (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997; Zhao, 2009) and in assessment (Bachman, 1990). Scholars started taking a sociolinguistic approach (Searle, 1969; Hymes, 1972; Gumperz, 1972; Widdowson, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986) and shaped language teaching and learning with a communicative end. Teaching a new language to learners "focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form" (Nunan, 2004, p. 3). Language learners are encouraged to interact with each other inside language classrooms as well as to communicate with speakers of the target language in the real world outside the classroom.

2.2 *Language learning, social identity and practical competence*

Adopting sociolinguistic views, language learners interact with their teachers and with their peers in the language classroom as well as with the speech communities that are using the target language either as a native language or as a second/foreign language outside the classroom. With this kind of interactions, identity or a series of identities will be formed by continuous negotiation in the social context. Scholars studying language learners' identity (Kodotchigova, 2002; Lin, 2009; Norton, 1997, 2000, 2010) suggested that the construction of identity cannot be separated from identity negotiation in which an individual seeks the answer to the question, "who am I?", and his/her relationship to the world.

Identity formation is a complicated process and is gradually developed in a social context. (Lin, 2009, p. 44)

There were in-depth studies concerning language learners' identity with respect to the speech community. Bonny Norton has done research on the social identity of language learners (Norton, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2010). She suggested that the identity of language learners continues to change as they interact with native speakers through continuous negotiation with them in real world situations. She suggested that engaging or, in her term, "investing" in social identity, will help students improve their language learning outside the classroom and claim the right to speak.

Individual learner [...] has a complex and sometimes contradictory social identity, changing across time and space. [...] when learners have a high affective filter, it is their investment in the target language that will lead them to speak. [...] engage the social identities of students in ways that will improve their language learning outside the classroom and help them claim the right to speak. It may help students understand how opportunities to speak are socially structured and how they might create possibilities for social interaction with target language speakers. (Norton, 1995, p. 26)

Apart from its sociological significance, Norton's (1995, 1997, 2000, 2010) research threw lights on language teaching methodology. Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1991) wrote about language in social contexts and criticized the structuralists' model in linguistic study. He argued that human beings biologically possess the capacity to generate grammatical sentences. However linguistic

competence cannot fully describe the competence and creativity that actual speakers possess. He suggested using the term “practical competence” to describe the competence of “actual speakers.” Practical competence requires not only that speakers produce grammatical sentences, but also that they produce utterances appropriate to the contexts of their utterances. Sealey & Carter (2004) further discussed that speaking “is not only to produce sentences that make sense in the obvious linguistic sense; it is also to recognize who has the right to speak and in what sorts of terms one is likely to be listened to” (Sealey & Carter, 2004, p. 53). Practical competence has sociological implications and deals with the questions concerning forms of power and authority implicit in all communicative situations. Bourdieu (1977) suggested that practical competence “is learnt *in situations*, in practice: what is learnt is, inextricably, the practical mastery of language and the practical mastery of situations which enable one to produce the adequate speech in a given situation” (p. 4). Structuralist approaches in language teaching focusing on language structures, grammaticality and accuracy are insufficient to account for this kind of competence and creativity that actual speakers possess (Bourdieu, 1991; Sealey & Carter, 2004). Teaching methodologies adopting sociolinguistic views, which encourage learners to use the target language in a communicative way with meaningful communicative tasks inside the language classroom, serve the need of this “practical” notion.

There are extensive studies of the use of communicative tasks in the foreign language teaching (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Widdowson, 1978; Willis, 1996) and in CSL literature (Jin, 2006). Role-playing activities in the language classroom are teaching activities which can function as a practice or simulation of interaction with different interlocutors in the real world and which echo Bourdieu’s notion of “learning in situations and learning in practice.” Role-playing activities can encourage learners to interact with different interlocutors in the real world by rehearsing language situations which they will come across outside language classrooms and have a positive effect on second language learners’ social identity development in the community speaking the target language.

2.3 *Role-playing activities in language classroom*

Looking at the classroom teaching literature, the term “role-playing” is not easy to define. There are many terms used in the literature, such as “simulations,” “role-play,” “simulation-game,” “role-playing simulation” and “drama” (Jones, 1982; Greenblat, 1988; Livingston, 1983; Milroy, 1982; Tompkins, 1998). Different teachers and scholars have different definitions. Literature concerning task-based approaches in the CSL field also made some distinctions between different types of “role-playing” activities (Jin, 2006).

Piper (1984) has summarized some of the early thoughts and definitions (Dobson, 1974; Paulston, 1977; Jones, 1982). In Piper’s summary, the following two terms are important in describing and discussing “role-playing” activities.

1. Improvisation
2. Role-plays

Improvisation “is a dramatic hypothetical situation in which two speakers interact without any special preparation” (Dobson, 1974, p. 41). *Role-plays* “are exercises where the student has been assigned a fictitious role from which he has to improvise some kind of behaviour towards the other role characters in the exercise [...] In some role plays ... the student may simply be assigned the role of playing himself, but then you have a simulated situation rather than real role-play. The two basic requirements for role-play ... are improvisation and fictitious roles” (Paulston, 1977, p. 32)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines role-playing as “the changing of one’s behavior to fulfill a social role.” In communicative classrooms, the individual learner is negotiating his/her identity with peer learners as well as with language teachers. As a result, there is a paradigm shift in learners’ role in language learning from passive receivers in the structuralist learning model to active participants with communicative needs. The teachers’ role also shifts from lecturers conveying knowledge to facilitators coaching the learning process. But there still remains room to research the simulated social contexts of role-playing activities inside language classrooms.

3 The present study

3.1 Methodology

The current research consists of two parts. The first part is a focus group study. The second part is classroom observation. Focus group research was carried out by inviting teachers to join a focus group discussion on “role-playing” language activities and their implementation as well as the effectiveness of such activities. Eight CSL teachers accepted the invitation. The eight participants included three teachers teaching Cantonese for non-local undergraduates and five teachers teaching Putonghua to local Hong Kong undergraduates. The focus group discussion has 3 targets:

1. To elicit teachers’ understanding of “role-playing” activities and the implementation of “role-playing” activities in their classrooms;
2. To collect sample tasks and topics that teachers have used in their classroom “role-playing” activities; and
3. To look at teachers’ reflections on the success of using “role-playing” activities in the language classroom.

After the focus group discussion meeting, teachers were invited to participate in the classroom observation phase. Classroom observation was carried out to verify the data and collect additional data on what is actually happening inside the language classroom. Six out of the eight teacher-participants accepted the invitation. Two intermediate classes (with students who had completed about 300 hours of instruction) were selected from each teacher-participant for classroom observation. Each class had 15–20 students with intermediate proficiency or higher. Intermediate language proficiency here is equivalent to I (Intermediate) or IH (Intermediate-high) on the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Oral Proficiency Scale (ACTFL, 2012). Each observation session lasted 50 minutes. The author acted as a silent observer and took notes during the observation sessions.

3.2 Types of “role-playing” activities adopted by teachers

The eight teachers participating in the focus group were asked to do a short survey by writing down the “role-playing” activities topics and brief explanations of the topics before the focus group discussion meeting. A total of 258 “role-playing” topics were collected from the survey. The “role-playing” topics collected were put in a database for analysis. During the focus group meeting, issues concerning the “role-playing” activities were shared and discussed by the teachers. Issues included the implementation and success of and major concerns about the “role-playing” activities. If we analyze the 258 “role-playing” topics, we can categorize them into 3 main types.

1. Role plays where students assume their own social roles. Using Piper’s (1984) definition, learners assume their own identities in real life in the language activities. An example is “this is the first day of school, tell your classmates where you are from and tell them something about your country/home town.”
2. Role plays or simulations where students assume fictitious roles. This type of role play has students assuming roles which do not usually overlap with their real lives. For example, “you are a property agent and sell the property to your customers.” If we further analyze the roles of this type, there will be different degrees of authenticity. There are roles which exist in real life, for example, those of a property agent, a doctor, a police, a businessperson, and so on. These roles are more authentic to the students, since these are roles that the students may have come across or assumed. Examples at the other end of the authenticity spectrum less likely to be assumed by the students, such as the King of the British Empire, Chairperson of the United Nations, an astronaut, and so on.
3. Other activities containing debates and monologues. For examples, “you are a university student talking to the media about your views concerning the current educational policies. Please express your views.” In the focus group discussions, some teachers think that this group belongs to “role-playing” activities, but this kind of activities does not fall under Pip-

er's (1984) definitions and categorizations of role plays and there is no or limited simultaneous student-student and student-teacher interaction.

Tables 1 and 2 below show the types of "role-playing" activities teachers used when teaching Cantonese and Putonghua as a second language. There are in total 158 task samples from teachers teaching Cantonese as a second language (Table 1) and 100 samples from teachers teaching Putonghua as a second language (Table 2). There is apparently a tendency to have more simulations (with fictitious roles), especially after the students have reached the intermediate level of proficiency.

Table 1. Topics of "role-playing" activities for Cantonese classes for non-local undergraduates collected from the focus group (N=158)

Activity types	Beginning level	Intermediate level+
1. Role plays (own identity)	22 (44%)	7 (6%)
2. Simulations (fictitious roles)	11 (22%)	63 (58%)
3. Other activities (debates & monologue, etc.)	17 (34%)	38 (35%)
Total	50 (100%)	108 (100%)

Table 2. Topics of "role-playing" activities for Putonghua classes for Hong Kong undergraduates collected from the focus group (N=100)

Activity types	Beginning level	Intermediate level+
1. Role plays (own identity)	8 (22%)	7 (11%)
2. Simulations (fictitious roles)	18 (49%)	42 (67%)
3. Other activities (debates & monologue, etc.)	11 (29%)	14 (22%)
Total	37 (100%)	63 (100%)

In its discussion and analysis, this paper focuses on the first two types shown in Tables 1 and 2, that is, (1) role plays where students assume their own social roles and (2) role plays or simulations where students assume fictitious roles. After we filtered out the "other activities" group, there are 178 topics in the database for analysis. Tables 3 and 4 show the number of topics after filtering. Tables 3 and 4 show that the majority of the samples (more than 85 percent) of the "role-playing" activities at the intermediate level and higher are simulations with fictitious roles (90% in the samples from teachers teaching Cantonese as second language and 85.7% from teachers teaching Putonghua as a second language). There are quite a number of samples of simulations (with fictitious roles) used at the beginning level. There are 33.3% samples from teachers teaching Cantonese as a second language and 69.2% samples from teachers teaching Putonghua as a second language.

Table 3. Role play topics for Cantonese classes for non-local undergraduates classes collected from the focus group (after filtering; N=103)

Activity types	Beginning level	Intermediate level+
Role plays (own identity)	22 (66.7%)	7 (10%)
Simulations (fictitious roles)	11 (33.3%)	63 (90%)
Total	33 (100%)	70 (100%)

Table 4. Role plays topics for Putonghua classes for Hong Kong undergraduates collected from the focus group (after filtering; N=75)

Activity types	Beginning level	Intermediate level+
Role plays (own identity)	8 (30.8%)	7 (14.3%)
Simulations (fictitious roles)	18 (69.2%)	42 (85.7%)
Total	26 (100%)	49 (100%)

4 Results: Design of role plays and classroom observation

In the focus group discussions, teachers' expressed thoughts about the concept of "role-playing" language activities that echo with Piper's (1984) summary, which states that "role-playing" language activities should allow students to improvise some kind of language behavior towards some role characters in the exercises. Teachers think that improvisation and simulated situations are important elements of "role-playing" activities and that students should actively and collaboratively create stories according to various language situations.

If we analyze the role play topics collected, the structure of a role play includes 3 essential elements, namely,

- (1) learners' roles to (who & to/with whom);
- (2) venue (where the conversation takes place); and
- (3) content (what to talk about).

4.1 Role plays where students assume own social roles

The roles are students or language learners or student helpers. The venues are familiar locations, such as at school, on the street, in a shop or at home. The content to talk about includes personal needs, own opinions and views or current affairs. Role plays with learners' assuming their own identities will have the following structure:

- (1) Learners' role (who & whom)
- *students, language learners, ...*
- (2) Venue (where the conversation takes place)
- *familiar locations, e.g. school settings, street settings, shops, home party, ...*
- (3) Content (what to talk about)
- *personal needs, own opinion, current affairs*

Samples 1 & 2 below show examples of role play designs with learners assuming their own identities in real life. The role-playing tasks are shown in **bold type** and the structure is shown in *italics*.

Sample 1 (Role play: learners' assuming own identities)

This is the first week of school. Please introduce yourself to your fellow classmates and teachers in class. You are talking to them and you could talk about your name, what do you like, where are you from and your home country/town.

Learners' role (who & whom): students, (teacher as moderator)

Venue (where): classroom

Content (what to talk about): about oneself, family, home town/country, hobbies

Sample 2 (Role play: learners' assuming own identities)

You invite your friends to visit you. Some of them arrived but some of them cannot find the way to your apartment. Some of them call you and please tell them how to go to your place.

Learners' role (who & whom): students, friends, (teacher as observer)

Venue (where): on the street, at home

Content (what to talk about): telling the location

Classroom observation data were collected to show what is actually happening in the classroom. The data were transcribed in Hanyu Pinyin or in Cantonese Romanization. The transcriptions are translated into English and the English translations are shown under the original romanized scripts in brackets, as presented in Table 5.

The classroom observation data shown in Table 5 demonstrate the successful completion of a task (Sample 2) as reflected by the teachers.

Table 5. Classroom observation data sample (Type 1 - role plays where learners' assume own identities – Sample 2)

Lesson topic: Finding the way		
Scenario: Student 2 is going to visit Student 1 but does not know the way and call up Student 1		
Turn 1:	Student 1:	Wái! (Hello!)
Turn 2:	Student 2:	ā wái,... [laugh] (Hello), ... [laugh]
Turn 3:	Student 1:	Wòhng siujé, néih yìhgā hái bīndouh a? haih mhaih hái deihitit,... deihitit jaahm a? (Ms Wong, where are you now? Are you at the train station?)
Turn 4:	Student 2:	haih la! Ngóh yìhgīng hái deihitit jaahm. (Yes, I am already at the train station.)
Turn 5:	Student 1:	óh, chíng néih heui Exit B. (then, please go to Exit B.)
Turn 6:	Student 2:	nīdouh yìhgīng haih Exit B a, daahnhaih nīdouh yáuh hóudō Exit B, ngóh yiu heui mātýéh exit B a? (It is Exit B here, but there are many Exit Bs, which Exit B should I go to?)
Turn 7:	Student 1:	B sāam, mgōi. (B3, please.)
Turn 8:	Student 2:	ngóh hóu lucky, yānwaih ngóh hái B sāam fuhgahn. (I am very lucky, because I am near B3.)
Turn 9:	Student 1:	hóu! Néih yiu daap dihtāi, <i>escalator</i> , séuhngheui deihitit jaahm noihbihn. néih yiu gwo máhlouh, cross the road, gám singtóng yauhgihn yáuh yātḡāan hóudaaih ge sēungchèuhng. (Good! You need to take the escalator, [in English] <i>it means escalator</i> , go up and go out of the train station. You need to cross the road, cross the road, then to the right of the church there is a big shopping mall.)
Turn 10:	Student 2:	ngóh gindóu la, ngóh gindóu “waihōng”, <i>means “Wellcome shop”</i> . ngóh gin hóudō poutáu hái néih ũkkéi fuhgahn, néih hóu hōisām haih mmhaih a? (I can see. I can see “Wellcome shop”, [in English] <i>means “Wellcome shop”</i> . I see many shops near your home, you should be very happy, right?)

4.2 Role plays or simulations where learners assume fictitious roles

In comparison with role plays where learners assume their own identities, role plays with fictitious roles have the following structure. The roles in the role plays may not be the roles that the students are currently taking in their real lives. The venues are locations that students are not necessarily familiar with. The content includes personal opinions, suggestions, complaints, and so on, from the views and standpoints of the fictitious role characters.

(1) Learners' role (who & whom)

- e.g. doctors & patients, taxi drivers & passengers, employers & employees ...

- (2) Venue (where the conversation takes place)
 - e.g. *hospital, inside taxi, police station, office ...*
- (3) Content (what to talk about)
 - e.g. *personal opinion, suggestion, complaint, order ...*

Samples 3 & 4 below show examples of role plays designed with the learners taking fictitious roles. The role-playing tasks are shown in **bold type** and the structure is shown in *italics*.

Sample 3 (Role play – assuming fictitious roles)

You are a medical doctor in a clinic. With the help of your nurse, you are handling a few patients, who suffer from flu, diarrhea and headache.

Learners' role (who & whom): medical doctor, nurse, patients

Venue (where): in a clinic

Content (what to talk about): medical consultation

Sample 4 (Role play – assuming fictitious role)

You are taking a taxi and seeing that the taxi driver is going to different direction. You suspect that the taxi driver tries to charge you more money by taking a longer route. You talk with the taxi driver. The taxi driver explains that he does not know the way. At the same time, some policemen walk pass and you ask the police to help.

Learners' role (who & whom): student, taxi driver, police

Venue (where): on the street

Content (what to talk about): talking about the taxi route and complain about the taxi driver

The classroom observation data (for Samples 3 & 4) shown in Tables 6 and 7 were commented by teachers that they had doubts about the effectiveness and success of role plays in language classroom. The comments from teachers in the focus group discussion echo with Piper's (1984) suggestions that "fictitious roles and situations, particularly if too far removed from the students' experience, contribute to the failure of these activities" (Piper 1984, p. 29). In order to make it easier to read, only the English translations of the scripts are shown in Tables 6 and 7.

In Sample 3 shown in Table 6, the student playing the doctor's role can only respond after listening to the patients' description of their illnesses, "Take some medicine and have some rest. You don't need an injection and you don't need to stay in hospital" (Turns 8 & 16). In the focus group discussion, the teacher reflected that he had some doubts about this task. The teachers reported that the students playing the patients' roles just repeated the story text in the textbook, that the student playing the doctor's role just tried his best to practice the newly learnt vocabulary items (such as "injection," "stay in hospital") and that the task lacked interaction and improvisation.

Similar to Sample 3, the classroom observation data in Sample 4 in Table 7 show that the student taking the taxi driver's role cannot find much to say except, "I don't know the way" (Turns 4, 6, 8, 12). This is one reason why the teacher expressed doubts in the focus group discussion about this task. In addition, teachers commented that if we look at the student taking a policeman's role, the student actually cannot act similarly to what a policeman would do in this situation, and responded instead "Don't be angry. Let me buy you dinner. We are good friend" (Turn 13). Regardless of whether the student intentionally or unintentionally made this response, teachers in the focus group discussion stated that the response was far from the teachers' expectation and this was another reason why the teacher questioned about the effectiveness of the task, if it is to end in this manner.

Table 6. Classroom observation data sample (Type 2 - role plays assuming fictitious roles – Sample 3)

Lesson topic: Seeing doctor in a hospital		
Scenario: Students 1 & 2 both are not feeling well. They go to a nearby hospital to see the doctor. The nurse (played by Student 3) greets them. After waiting for a while they can see the doctor (played by Student 4) and tell the doctor about their situations.		
Turn 1:	Patient 1: (Student 1)	Nurse, I want to see doctor. I don't feel well.
Turn 2:	Nurse: (Student 2)	What is your name? Your phone number? There are many patients today, please wait there and I will call your name.
Turn 3:	Patient 1:	Ok...
Turn 4:	Nurse:	Peter Wong!
Turn 5:	Patient 1:	Yes!
Turn 6:	Doctor: (Student 3)	What happened to you?
Turn 7:	Patient 1:	I don't feel well. I have fever and a running nose. I cough the whole day. My body feels pain and cannot sleep well. But I don't have diarrhea and I didn't vomit.
Turn 8:	Doctor:	You got influenza. Take some medicine and take some rest. You don't need an injection and you don't need to stay in hospital.
Turn 9:	Patient 1:	Good! Bye bye!
Turn 10:	Nurse:	David Lee!
Turn 11:	Patient 2: (Student 2)	Yes! Is it my turn, I have waited for a long time?
Turn 12:	Doctor:	What happened to you?
Turn 13:	Patient 2:	I don't feel well. I have diarrhea and vomit.
Turn 14:	Doctor:	What did you eat last night?
Turn 15:	Patient 2:	I went barbeque with my friends.
Turn 16:	Doctor:	You have eaten dirty food. Take some medicine and have some rest. You don't need an injection and you don't need to stay in hospital.

Table 7. Classroom observation data sample (Type 2 - role plays assuming fictitious roles – Sample 4)

Lesson topic: Complaining in a taxi		
Scenario: Student 1 is taking a taxi and finds out that the taxi driver is not taking a direct route to the place he/she wants to go but is taking a longer route. Student 1 is complaining to the taxi driver (played by Student 2) and finally a police officer (played by Student 3) comes and handles the issue.		
Turn 1:	Student 1:	Hey, driver. I am going to Tsim Sha Tsui (Place name), why are you going this way
Turn 2:	Student 2 (Taxi driver):	...
Turn 3:	Student 1:	I am going to Tsim Sha Tsui, you are now going to the New Territories (Place name)
Turn 4:	Taxi driver:	Really, I don't know the way.
Turn 5:	Student 1:	Are you taking a longer way and charging me more?
Turn 6:	Taxi driver:	No... I told you I don't know the way.
Turn 7:	Student 1:	Why didn't you tell me you don't know the way. I will complain you.
Turn 8:	Taxi driver:	... I don't know the way.
Turn 9:	Student 1:	I don't believe. I will complain. Oh, right! There is a police here. Let me talk to him. Hi, Sir.
Turn 10:	Student 3 (Police):	What happened?
Turn 11:	Student 1:	I want to complain. I want to go to Tsim Sha Tsui, but the taxi driver is going to another direction. He wants to charge me more money.
Turn 12:	Taxi driver:	No, I didn't. I don't know the way.
Turn 13:	Police:	Maybe the taxi driver really does not know the way. Don't be angry. Let me buy you dinner. We are good friend.
Turn 14:	Student 1:	You buy me dinner. Ok, no problem then. Let's go.
Turn 15:	Taxi driver:	Let's go together.

However, this in-class role-playing activity shows that teachers' facilitation is important for the scenario to make sense. In this case, if the teachers can make suggestions to students, such as to encourage students to think further and think critically about a more realistic and interesting ending, the effect of this role play can be totally different. Possible endings for Sample 4 could be: (a) it turns out that the passenger and the policeman suddenly realized they were old friends; or (b) the taxi driver and the policeman suddenly realize they were old friends; or (3) the passenger, the taxi driver and the policeman have all met before and finally become friends. Teachers should provide cultural guidance and information to their learners concerning the fictitious roles that they are to play in such activities. To ensure smooth improvisation and more "realistic" conversation content, teachers' role in role plays assuming fictitious roles should be much beyond a language-coach who corrects linguistic errors and extended to a guide who explains the cultural identities of the unfam-

miliar roles that the learners are expected to play in these activities. Teachers' facilitation in role-plays is necessary to help students model the cultural identities of the roles they are playing in such activities.

5 Discussion

5.1 *Design of role-playing activities and teachers' reflections on teaching effectiveness*

There are different views concerning teachers' reflections on the effectiveness of using role plays in language classroom, but the views are basically similar to the initial observations. Teachers basically have two contradicting views. One is that role-playing activities are very useful teaching and learning activities in speaking classes, because it can teach the target language through interactive plays and students can learn the language with its culture and practice language in a communicative way collaboratively. The opposing views are that the use of role-playing activities cannot achieve the intended result as the activities lack student participation, that students have nothing to say in the tasks and that the activities thus turn out to be a failure. This result echoes with some literature in teaching English as a second language (ESL). Although teachers are well-prepared, role play activities fail.

Many ESL teachers have had the experience of preparing students very thoroughly for a role play activity and then having that activity fail miserably. [...] In our attempts to release students' creativity in language by permitting them to wear the mask of another person, we sometimes actually inhibit that creativity precisely because that other identity and the situations which may be appropriate to it are alien to the students' experience and their needs. [...] they are just as likely to fail as to succeed as long as we insist that their "roles" be fictitious and, very probably, foreign to their experience. (Piper, 1984, pp. 30–31)

There are suggestions that if the role plays are closer to everyday life and if teachers let students assume roles within the range of their own identities, they are more likely to be successful.

Greater success in using these techniques will occur if we exploit the fact that role playing and presence are part of everyday living. [...] if we let students assume roles within their own identities. (Piper, 1984, p. 31)

When designing role plays in the language classroom, the 3 essential elements, namely (1) learners' role (who & whom), (2) the venue (where the conversation takes place), and (3) the content (what to talk about), need to be prudently designed and controlled. The result of this research echo with the literature that role plays will be effective if the role and language situations are closer to learners' experiences and needs, and take into account learners' own social roles and identities in everyday life.

However, are foreign language teachers totally satisfied with role plays learners assume their own identities and social roles? Literature discussing role-playing activities in second language learning and applied linguistics tells us that both teachers and learners, especially adult language learners and especially in EAP settings, attempt to go beyond this level. Role-playing activities in language classrooms are used to help students become familiar with realistic linguistic scenarios and "communicate, express their feelings, enrich their vocabulary and appraise their existing knowledge" in a "safe environment where learners are relaxed, creative and inventive" (Magos & Politi, 2008, pp. 101–102). The high percentage of role-playing activities with fictitious roles in use by language teachers in intermediate classes or above in this research shows that teachers are trying to design role plays with fictitious roles to train learners for their future careers and to prepare learners as immigrants to communicate smoothly in culturally and linguistically unfamiliar communities (Kodotchigova, 2002; Lin, 2009; Norton, 1997, 2000, 2010).

5.2 *Teachers' understanding of role plays and importance of teachers' facilitations*

On one hand, teachers expected that the use of role plays, especially role plays with fictitious roles, can facilitate deeper thinking and critical understanding of course materials and provide simulated scenarios to train learners to apply their linguistic and cultural knowledge in controlled classroom settings. On the other hand, they complained that role plays with fictitious roles and venues are difficult to use and doubted their effectiveness, because students have nothing to say and/or because the conversations are unrealistic from the teachers' perspectives.

One strategy language teachers can apply in role plays with fictitious roles and virtual venues is to teach scripted role-plays, pre-teach vocabulary and specialized jargon in the activities, so that students can follow a structured story plot and pre-set vocabulary and sentence patterns. Structured scripted role-play or drama plays can be used as an alternative to organize role plays with fully improvised fictitious roles and virtual venues inside language classrooms. Although innovative ideas have been given up as in fully improvised role plays, teachers can guide students to adopt the way of thinking and cultural roles of the fictitious roles by using scripted role plays and help students to build up the cultural knowledge and identities of the targeted fictitious roles. Scripted role plays, which are highly structured in linguistic form and cultural manifestation, are useful in language training for specific purposes, such as in language trainings for medical professionals, for legal professionals as well as in staff language courses for various service industries. Mainland China has national education projects to build national identity through historical drama (Sun, 2009). This concept can be turned into language tasks to model learners' cultural identities by carrying out role-playing tasks with various fictitious but related real life scenarios and cultural roles in classroom settings.

If language teachers conduct role plays with fictitious roles as highly improvised classroom activities, they need to bear in mind that students may encounter problems and need help for fictitious roles. The problems arise not only because of a lack of linguistic knowledge, but also because of an insufficient understanding of the cultural knowledge behind the fictitious roles they are playing in the activities. Students can only use their existing social roles, such as the language learner, university student and teenager roles, to play the fictitious roles. There will be some gaps between the roles of a student and a medical doctor, as well as between those of a teenager and a Prime Minister, and so on. Teachers should take into account the multiple identities of students in class, both their existing social identities and the fictitious roles in the role plays, and assist students to employ the target language with the target cultural roles in the speech community in order to develop their "practical competence" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Sealy & Carter, 2004).

Language teaching is most effective when the teacher recognizes the multiple identities of students in the class, and develops pedagogical practices that enhance students' investment in the language practices of the classroom. (Norton, 2010, p. 179)

Effective teaching in role plays with fictitious roles require participants, both teachers and students, to employ high-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation and metacognition. Language teachers employing this kind of role play in language classrooms should give students enough time and guidance to research the targeted roles in the pre-task stage. Teachers need to provide specific jargon and cultural knowledge if they are aiming at "realistic" conversations. When students are working out the role plays, teachers should not only coach the students by correcting linguistic errors, but also guide the students to think critically about the cultural identities of the fictitious roles and encourage divergent perspectives. Teaching in this kind of improvised role plays with fictitious roles aims at remodeling students' cultural identities to fit the roles of the target culture in order to communicate successfully and negotiate social identity with actual speakers of the target language.

6 Conclusion

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) pointed out that linguistic competence in the linguistic field, which focuses on the ability to generate an infinite number of grammatically coherent sentences, is not enough in real life situations. However, language users need to be able to use an infinite number of sentences in an infinite number of situations coherently and appropriately in order to turn linguistic competence into linguistic capital and attain social power in negotiating social identity in real life with actual speakers of the target language.

By competence, linguistics implicitly means a specifically linguistic competence in the sense of the capacity for infinite generation of grammatically regular discourse. [...] What is problematic is not the possibility of producing an infinite number of grammatically coherent sentences but the possibility of using an infinite number of sentences in an infinite number of situations, coherently and pertinently. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 646)

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of "practical competence" is highly related to foreign language teaching for specific purposes, such as English for specific purposes, Chinese for specific purposes, or for professional training. For these types of language training, role plays can in fact be used effectively as teaching and learning activities with prudently selected roles, venues, and conversational contents in appropriate language situations under the guidance of teachers.

To conclude, although there are many factors affecting the effectiveness of role-playing activities, both on the learners' side and on teachers' side, I would like to highlight that the design of role plays, language teachers' understanding of the nature of role plays and their facilitation of the activities affect the success of the role play activities/tasks undertaken in the language classroom. Language teachers' understanding of the different designs of role plays and their facilitation in the pre-task and while-task phases are important for the smooth conduct of the role-playing activities, which will in turn affect the effectiveness of such activities. Systematic inputs for identity modeling or remodeling, which include linguistic knowledge, sociolinguistic appropriateness and intercultural communication skills, would be important for advanced level or professional language training. This is an early study concerning the use of role-playing classroom activities from language teachers' perspectives and its effect on modeling or remodeling the cultural identities of language learners. Further research, such as experimental studies of the effectiveness of different types of role-playing activities, studies on the effects of role-playing activities from learners' perspectives and research on teachers' training with specific reference to role-playing activities, can be carried out to look at these issues in more detail.

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