



Task-Based Language Teaching and Theme-Based Role-Play: Developing EFL Learners' Communicative Competence

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Abstract

While task-based language teaching has received considerable attention from both researchers and educational policy makers, the effective implementation in the classroom is still a matter of question. Thus, this classroom-based research attempts to contribute to the practice of task-based teaching in actual classrooms. It proposes theme-based role-play as an alternative in developing EFL learners' communicative competence in task-based teaching. This study explores student progress (N = 782) in theme-based role-play performances throughout one academic term – 12 weeks – and examines the impact on student achievement in the final speaking exam. The findings confirm the hypothesis that students' performances in theme-based role-play predict the development of their communicative competence. However, topics and contents of role-play activities, roles of students and teachers as an individual and a group, and teachers' provision of support may play key roles in implementation.

1 Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been widely discussed in the past thirty years and a significant body of literature has appeared around it (Comer, 2007). The growing interest in TBLT is primarily influenced by the opportunities it can provide for promoting oral language production and facilitating meaning-negotiation through tasks (Winnefeld, 2013). TBLT is essentially part of communicative language teaching (CLT) and considered as the strongest version of CLT, since it lays importance on developing learners' communicative competence, which is the primary goal of language teaching (Richards, 2005). The success of the application of CLT depends on the variety of language activities provided by classroom teachers, which may involve communication, interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning; this, therefore, leads to discussions of selecting meaningful, appropriate tasks that can generate language activities and facilitate the development of communicative competence, thereby bringing more interest in the exploration of task-based approach within CLT (Littlewood, 2004; Savignon, 1991). In education policies, especially in Asian countries, where teachers are required to implement a communicative approach in teaching English, tasks are often recommended to be used as a means of realizing meaningful classroom language practice (Adams & Newton, 2009).

In the EFL context, TBLT is ideal, for its task feature enables teachers to create interactive group learning with more exposure to target language utilization, which eventually facilitates the develop-

ment of learner's communicative and interactive skills (Xiongyong & Moses, 2011). Besides, learners in countries where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) usually do not have much contact with native speakers; therefore, frequent use of the target language in active group learning is believed to be crucial in foreign language acquisition (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). TBLT is an ideal medium to draw learners' attention to the use of target language in real life situations and foster independent learning (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). However, despite the benefits potentially obtained through the implementation of tasks, it is important to note that teachers may have vague concepts regarding what constitutes a task and what the focal elements of task-based teaching are (Comer, 2007; Pei, 2008), and further investigations are still needed on potential, meaningful tasks that can enhance learners' communicative competence in task-based teaching (Carless, 2003).

Various empirical studies have been conducted with regard to the implementation of TBLT in different countries across the globe. In Thailand, task-based EFL courses are favored by teachers and students for meeting the immediate academic needs of being able to communicate in and outside classroom (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). Task-based learning and activities facilitating language use are adopted in the English textbooks of Korean high schools (Jeon, 2005). Teachers' attitudes toward task-based approach are positive, but the size of the class and the evaluation of task-based performance remain challenging in China (Xiongyong & Moses, 2011). TBLT has the potential of facilitating the integration of the four skills in EFL in Columbia (Córdoba Zúñiga, 2016). This approach is well accepted by teachers across Canada for its benefits of practicality, effectiveness, and learner-centeredness (Douglas & Kim, 2015). Nevertheless, the use of the mother tongue, classroom management, and the production of the target language appears to be problematic in the implementation of a task-based approach at primary schools in Hongkong (Carless, 2004); additionally, such factors as teacher beliefs, teacher understandings, the language proficiency of students, available resources, and textbooks also play substantial roles in the classroom application of task-based teaching (Carless, 2003).

Besides, there are also studies that compare TBLT with other English teaching approaches, such as the structural based approach and PPP (presentation, practice, and production), in which the findings suggest the superiority of the task-based approach in advancing learner's fluency and complexity in the target language (Rahimpour, 2008), addressing the needs of different levels of students (Carless, 2009), and enhancing students' motivation in writing (Sabet, Tahriri, & Haghi, 2014). However, despite these positive findings, several studies have also revealed that implementing TBLT in classroom practices is not as easy as discussed in the literature; teachers are faced with obstacles and challenges that might derive from curriculum designers and managers (Yen, 2016), traditional examinations and limited understandings of practical communicative activities (Chunrao & Carless, 2009), limited dissemination of principles and procedures of TBLT (Plews & Zhao, 2010), and the lack of familiarity with task design and restrictions from textbooks (Jasim, 2011).

Drawing on this brief review, one would assume that the interest in the application of TBLT is growing and that this approach is favored by EFL learners; yet teachers are still struggling in their task-based teaching. Thus, this study intends to offer insights regarding the use of theme-based role-play in task-based teaching and the impact on developing learners' communicative competence. Using a quantitative research design, this study explores student progress in theme-based role-play performances throughout one academic term – 12 weeks – and examines the impact on student achievement in the final speaking exam. The detailed implementation of theme-based role-play is also elaborated as follows. This study seeks to contribute to the practice of task-based approach in actual classrooms.

2 Literature review

2.1 Task-based language teaching

The distinctive feature of task-based language teaching (TBLT) is none other than the 'task', which is proposed as the main unit of language design program and individual lesson plan (Ellis,

2009), based on Prabhu's concept, published in 1987, that effective learning happens when learners are fully engaged in a communicative language task (Oxford, 2006). Communicative tasks serve as the basic units of the language curriculum (Lai & Li, 2011), primarily intended to engage learners in a naturalistic learning process that enables them to use the target language frequently (Skehan, 1996). Hence, there are, at least, three essential goals that underlie this approach: 1) accuracy – improving learner's language production that follows the rule system of the target language, 2) complexity – enhancing learners' willingness and capacity in the elaboration of the produced language, 3) fluency – advancing learners' capacity to use language in real time without unnecessary pausing or hesitation (Skehan, Willis, & Willis, 1996); the designed tasks should assist learners to achieve these goals, which eventually lead them to the development of communicative competence.

Nonetheless, what constitutes a task and what are considered as core elements often confuse teachers in the implementation of task-based teaching. Thus, this study specifically refers to Willis (1996), who defines 'task' as a goal-oriented activity where learners use all resources of the target language they have to solve a problem, play a game, do a puzzle, share and compare experiences; it is designed to attain a real outcome in using the target language for interactive communication. In accomplishing a task, learners are involved in the process of semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances, conveying information, expressing an opinion and inferring meaning, yet relying on their own linguistic and non-linguistics resources (Ellis, 2009). At this point, the selected tasks must facilitate learners to communicate through interaction in the target language, involve authentic texts in the learning situation, consider the vital contribution of learner's own personal experiences to classroom learning, and more importantly, form a connection between inside classroom language learning and the use of the target language outside the classroom (Nunan, 1991).

In developing learners' communicative competence, task in language teaching can provide students with increased opportunity and motivation for communication, which enhances metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of the rules in the target language (Savignon, 2018). Task can also be used for acquiring linguistic knowledge of a specific grammar point of the target language and creating situations of negotiated interaction among learners facilitating language acquisition (Fotos & Ellis, 1991). Divergent disagreements exist among those advocating the characteristics of task-based teaching in developing learners' communicative competence (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998), but Swan (2005) contend that agreements occur on the assumption: tasks should emphasize natural language use, meaning rather than language, and learner centeredness rather than teacher centeredness, as well as offer opportunities to focus on the form. Besides, it is also vital to consider the cognitive complexity and sequence of a task, since they have the potential to affect learners' language production and learning of the target language (Robinson, 2005).

Previous empirical studies have explored some areas in which tasks play a key role in developing learner's communicative competence. Rahmani and Alavi (2017) studied the impact of TBLT and content-based language teaching (CBLT) on the speaking improvement of Iranian intermediate learners. It was found that students in the TBLT class had better performance than the CBLT class in the post-test of the speaking test, implying more significant improvement. The findings confirmed the strengths of TBLT in developing learners' speaking abilities through meaningful and interactive communication. Learners who were instructed according to task-based principles were also found to perform better in the final speaking test with focus on proficiency development, but gender was not a determining factor (Khomejani & Khaghaninezhad, 2009). Task-based teaching that involves learner-centeredness and meaning-based instruction in a collaborative setting allows learners not only to fulfill content area needs, but also improve their second language proficiency (Kelch & Yang, 2008). The effective impact of TBLT on developing learners' communicative competence also lies on the opportunities to use the target language contextually and experience it through situational activities (Hasan, 2014).

Aflah, Salam, and Sada (2015) examined the extent of the application of the TBLT framework in speaking class and the influence of TBLT on learners' speaking performance. The findings revealed that TBLT stimulated more active participation, which in turn, increased learners' positive

attitude towards the language learning. Further, TBLT framework helped teachers to manage classroom interactions that put emphasis on the use of the target language. Learners enjoyed their learning experiences in TBLT and significant progress on fluency was noticeable. Task-based learning activities encourage learners to take responsibility and control of their learning, thereby developing learner autonomy and improving their performance in speaking tasks (Ghodrati, Ashraf, & Khalil, 2014). Learner autonomy and English language proficiency were found to have a positive relationship (Sakai & Takagi, 2009). Moreover, the impact of using tasks in language teaching have been confirmed to be encouraging in vocabulary enhancement (Marashi & Hatam, 2009), improving writing performance involving accuracy, fluency, and complexity (Dirgeyasa, 2018; Pourdana, Karimi Behbahani, & Safdari, 2011), teaching grammar (Yildiz & Senel, 2017), and helping learners tackle reading problems (Astika, 2005).

2.2 *Role-play as a task*

Since a task in TBLT is a goal-oriented activity that facilitates learners to communicate in the target language (Ellis, 2009; Nunan, 1991; Willis, 1996), several scholars have recommended role-play as one of the communicative tasks to be used in task-based teaching (e.g. Dorathy & Mahalakshmi, 2011; Patel, 2017). Role-play provides learners with opportunities to use the target language and conversational resources stimulating authentic conversational interactions in different social contexts and social roles (Al-Senaidi, 2010; Richards, 1985). It is a type of communicative activity, in which learners are directed to create useful language exchange fostering a wide range of participation involving aspects of verbal communication (e.g. intonation, stress patterns, and tone of voice) and non-verbal communication (e.g. eye contact, hand gestures, and personal space) (Abidin & Hosseini, 2012; Qing, 2011). However, although role-play seems to fit the framework of TBLT, the success of using role-play as a communicative task can be influenced by the relevance of the role-play topic to learners' learning goals, teacher's elaboration on the appropriate language used in the role-play, schemes of error corrections, and teacher's role in the role-play (Liu & Ding, 2009). It is also important to realize that despite its popularity in the 1980s, interest in role-play has drastically dropped, as critics consider role-play as an artificial activity that does not necessarily reflect real world language needs (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012).

Nevertheless, several recent studies have disclosed some positive findings regarding the impact of role-play in developing learners' communicative competence. At the tertiary level, studies have revealed that role-play enables students to express themselves by using the target language that they have just learned, and increases self-confidence to overcome inhibitions in speaking, which can potentially lead to the improvement of their speaking skills (Ampatuan & San Jose, 2016; Islam & Islam, 2013). Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) investigated the impact of role-play on fostering sixty sophomores Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability by employing the IELTS speaking test as pre- and post-tests; the study found that learners' improved significantly in the speaking post-test. Moreover, in a study involving 26 second-year students majoring in English at the Songkhla Rajabhat University Thailand, Chotirat and Sinwongsuwat (2014) discovered that, compared to scripted role-play, non-scripted role play gives learners better opportunities to cope with conversational issues and practice relevant features of the target language in actual interactions, indicating better chances to improve their communicative competence. Regular practice of non-scripted role play also helps improve speaking performance of Thai EFL learners with low and high levels of English proficiency, especially in turn taking and sequence organizing, the use of turn-holding, reciprocal greeting, and delay devices in conversational practices (Naksevee & Sinwongsuwat, 2014).

For adult learners, Magos and Politi (2008) explored the contribution of the role-play technique in assisting adult immigrants who learn Greek as a second language. The purpose of their study is to identify the extent of role-play in facilitating the second language acquisition of immigrant learners. The results suggest the effectiveness of role-play, but also that the success can be affected by the content of the role-play activity, and the roles and attitudes of teachers and students as an

individual and a group. Teacher's provision of support at all points of role-play, that is, at the preparation, beginning, development, and end of the role-play, is also a determining factor in the success of role-play in teaching a second language. A further study on the implementation of role-play in teaching speaking for vocational high school students by Insani (2016) found that role-play activities increased students' motivation in learning English and helped to create a bridge between theoretical language features and conversational practices.

3 Methods

3.1 Research design and hypothesis

The present study is essentially a classroom-based research with quantitative research design. Task-based language teaching was chosen as the teaching approach with theme-based role-play as one of the tasks. The implementation lasted one term – 12 weeks in English in Cultural Diversity course at Walailak University, Thailand, in the academic year 2017/18. The details of the course are explained in the following sub-sections. This study examines the impact of the implementation of theme-based role-play in task-based language teaching on the development of EFL learners' communicative competence. The research hypothesis is explained below:

H1: Theme-based role-play performances predict the development of communicative competence.

Regression analysis was selected to examine this hypothesis. Besides, differences in means in students' scores were also observed.

3.2 Participants

This study involves first-year students (N = 782; female = 620; and male = 162) who took the English in Cultural Diversity course at Walailak University in the 2017/18 academic year. The students' majors include 29 undergraduate programs, namely, Accountancy, Animal Science, ASEAN Studies, Biotechnology, Business Administration, Chinese Language, Communication Arts, Computer Engineering, Digital Information, Economics, Electrical Engineering, English, Environmental Health, Environmental Science, Fisheries, Food Technology, Information Technology, Interior Design, Marine and Coastal Resource Management, Medical Technology, Medical Technology, Multimedia, Nursing Science, Occupational Health and Safety, Political Science, Polymer Engineering, Software Engineering, Tourism and Hotel, and Industrial Design.

In terms of English proficiency, most of these students are at the beginners' level, then followed by the intermediate and advanced levels, based on the results of the university placement test in 2017 (see Table 1). The proficiency level of some others remain unidentified.

Table 1. The participants' English proficiency levels

Score Range	Level	Number of Students (%)
70 – 100	Advanced	27 (3.5%)
56 – 69	Intermediate	254 (32.5%)
40 – 55	Beginner	420 (53.7%)
	Unidentified	81 (10.4%)

3.3 Details of course design

3.3.1 Course objectives and class schedule

The English in Cultural Diversity course was designed to advance the acquisition of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as well as to help students acquire vocabulary and grammar, emphasizing the use of language and the presentation of the cultural diversity worldwide, with topics such as careers, lifestyles, arts and cultures, differences, tourist attractions, cultural exchanges. All the teaching materials, including the syllabus and textbook, were created by a team consisting of several English lecturers at Walailak University Language Institute (WULI). Theme-based role-play materials were integrated into the syllabus and textbook of the English in Cultural Diversity course. This course involved 12 weeks of classes discussing four topics: Airport, Restaurant, Living Abroad, and Festivals, Arts and Crafts; all these topics were included in the four units prepared in the student textbook. In this course, teachers taught one unit in one meeting, then conducting role-play activities in another meeting; the teaching and learning process followed this pattern from week 2 to 9. In total, students had to perform four role-plays following the four units. The topic of the role-play activities followed the unit's theme; therefore, this course basically adopted a theme-based role-play approach. Then, the students had the final speaking test in weeks 11 and 12. This course applied both in- and out-of-classroom activities that involved various ICT tools to enhance the students' learning. A simple illustration of the class schedule focusing on the materials for role-play activities is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Class schedule

Week	Material
1	1. Introduction: Lecturer and Students 2. Course Introduction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment Summary • Syllabus • Vocabulary Sets and Tests • Weekly learning materials • Assignments in each unit 3. Creating a Facebook Group for the class.
2	Unit 1: Airport
3	Students perform role-plays under the theme of airport
4	Unit 2: Restaurant
5	Students perform role-plays under the theme of restaurant
6	Unit 3: Living Abroad
7	Students perform role-plays under the theme of living abroad
8	Unit 4: Festivals, Arts, and Crafts
9	Students perform role-plays under the theme of festivals, arts, and crafts
10	Review of Lessons
11	Final Speaking Test (cont.)
12	Final Speaking Test

3.3.2 Role-play instructions

The phases involved in the role-play implementation followed the frameworks of TBLT suggested by Ellis (2009), Littlewood (2004), Long (1985), Nunan (1991), Skehan (1996) and Willis (1996). The first phase is called 'pre-task'. In this phase, teachers feed the students with the target language features commonly used under each theme in the textbook. The language features consist of grammar and vocabulary, coupled with other supporting materials that facilitate learners' understandings of the discussed theme, for instance, a conversation at airport, a text that contains the information about airport, pronunciation practice on key words related to airport, and so forth. This phase provides input for the students before they prepare their role play under each theme. In addition, students' role play preparations occur in this first phase outside the classroom, where consultation with their lecturers is feasible.

Then, the second phase consists of students' role-play performance. One group of students consists of 4–5 students and each group must submit their scripts prior to their performance in class. This role play performances last 2 hours, in which one group has up to 10 minutes for its performance. During their performance, students can bring any supporting materials that can enhance their performance, such as hat, dress, plate, spoon, and so forth. Besides, the classroom is equipped with Internet connection, projector, computer, and speaker, so that the students may show pictures or play music as part of their performance. After each group's performance, teachers give feedback regarding the target language used by the students during their role-play; the feedback can focus on pronunciation, choice of word, grammar, and so forth. The last phase is named 'post-task', which comprises discussions of the role-play activities, such as the obstacles that they students face, issues in the student groups, and so forth. Basically, the purpose of this phase is to reflect on what the students have been through and what the students can do to improve their performance in the next role-play.

Table 3. Phases of role-play

Phases of Role-Play	Teacher's role	Details
Pre-Task	Feed the students with the target language features commonly used under each theme in the textbook	1) Vocabulary and pronunciation, e.g. aisle, boarding pass, departure lounge, passport, luggage, etc. (theme: airport) 2) Grammar: preposition, adjective, Wh-questions, etc. 3) Listening and reading, e.g. listening to a conversation between a customer and airport office, reading a text about eating out in America
Role-Play Performance	Facilitate students' role-play performances and ensure the availability of required equipment, such as computer, projector, and speaker.	Students can bring any supporting materials that can enhance their performance, such as hat, dress, plate, spoon, etc.
Post-task	- Give feedback regarding the target language used by the students during their role-play; the feedback can focus on pronunciation, choice of word, grammar, etc. - Feedback or corrections are given after each group's performance	

The specific instructions for each role-play activity are available in each unit of the student's textbook. The instructions provide students with a list of situations that they can perform; yet the students also have the freedom to create their own situations. This theme-based role-play activity attempts to engage students with language practice in 'real-world' situations that people will generally encounter under the theme. For instance, one of the suggested situations under the theme of Airport is contacting the Lost and Found unit at the airport. After performing a role play in this situation, it is expected that the students would be able to communicate by using the target language when they happen to be in such situation. Also, for the students who view the role-play performance, they would get a visualization of how the situation might occur and how to use the target language.

Table 4. Example of one of the role-play instructions included in the student's textbook

Location	Airport
Situations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contacting Lost and Found 2. Missing the flight 3. Booking a ticket online 4. Renting a taxi 5. Filling up an arrival card 6. Complaining about damaged luggage
Preparation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select your team leader, who will lead the discussion. 2. Design the conversations that you will use in your selected situation. 3. Discuss the roles of each member. 4. Choose your script writer and your director(s). 5. Prepare some tools and customs that fit your selected situation.
Script	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Must be submitted 2 days before the class. 2. Made using MyStoryBook.com, so students just need to share the URL link with teacher on Facebook Group. 3. Along with the script, each group submits 10 multiple-choice questions for audience about their role play.
Presentation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present your 10-minute role-play in class. 2. Perform your Role-Play using your own original script. Copied or semi-modified script from other sections or groups shall automatically get 0 POINT if proven. 3. On the performing day, the lecturer would randomly call each group. If the group is not ready, that group would get 0 point. 4. If a member in each group has an accident or severe illness on the performing day, other members in the group must be able to perform without the missing person.

3.3.3 Final speaking test

All four role-play activities under the four themes in the textbook are designed as a form of speaking practice for the students. The development of students' communicative competence is expected to be visible during the final speaking test. The format of the final speaking test is an individual interview, which involves three parts: 1) personal information (general questions and specific questions on the course materials; 2) reading aloud words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, which are taken from the course materials; 3) communicating and expressing ideas spontaneously based on one selected picture, related to the course materials.

3.3.4 Research data and assessment rubrics

Students' role-play performances and the final speaking test are assessed using scoring rubrics. The students' scores obtained through these scoring rubrics are the primary data used in the present study. First, the scoring rubric for role-play consists of five criteria: vocabulary use, fluency, accuracy, interaction, and creativity, preparedness, and prompts. The score range includes .5, 1, 1.5, and 2, which means that in total, the lowest score is 2.5 and 10 is the highest score. In the assessment rubric, each point has detailed descriptions. Then, for the final speaking test, the scoring rubric also contains five criteria: content, vocal expression, presentation, fluency and accuracy, and listening skill (in conversational situations). The score range also starts from .5, followed by 1, 1.5, and 2. So, the lowest score is also 2.5 and 10 is the highest score. The details of the assessment rubrics are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. The assessment rubric of student's role-play performance

Criteria	0.5	1	1.5	2
Vocabulary Use	Inadequate use of vocabulary	The students make use of an adequate range of vocabulary	The students make use of a wide range of vocabulary and a limited number of language expressions	The students make use of a wide range of vocabulary and a wide number of language expressions
Fluency	Hesitation, repetition, and self-correction are frequent and hinder effective communication	Hesitation, repetition, and self-correction are often, but the messages are generally understandable	The student only shows occasional hesitation, repetition, and self-correction	The students only show occasional hesitation, repetition, and self-correction
Accuracy	The students make many grammatical errors which make the message non-comprehensible	The students make less frequent grammatical errors which make the message generally understandable	The students make a few grammatical errors and show control over the errors	The students' speech is generally error-free
Interaction	The students cooperate deficiently with each other	The students cooperate actively with each other, but miscommunications happen many times	The students cooperate actively with each other, but some miscommunications happen in one or two parts	The students cooperate actively with each other
Creativity, preparedness, and prompts	The students lack of creativity/show predictable acts that disengage the audience; no costume and supporting material	The students show one or two creative acts in their roles/characters; seem not very well-prepared; use more than one custom/less than two supporting materials	The students show some levels creativity/unpredictable acts in their roles/characters; seem prepared; use more than two costume pieces and other supporting materials	The students show high levels of creativity/unpredictable acts in their roles/characters; seem well-prepared; use more than two costume pieces and other supporting materials

Table 6. The assessment rubric of the final speaking test

Criteria	Scores			
	0.5 (Fair)	1 (Average)	1.5 (Good)	2 (Excellent)
Content (Able to provide relevant answers to the topic with explanation and/or supported ideas provided)				
Vocal expression (clarity and audibility) (Able to pronounce the words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs clearly and correctly)				
Presentation (Able to show strong self-confidence and uses proper posture, gesture and eye contact)				
Fluency and accuracy (Able to express himself/herself in English fluently and accurately)				
Listening Skill (Able to comprehend the given instructions and perform correctly the given tasks)				

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Results

A linear regression analysis was run to predict the development of students' communicative competence in the final speaking test based on their theme-based role-play performances. The results (see Table 7) revealed a significant regression equation: $F(1, 780) = 31.783, p < .001$, with $R^2 = .039$. Students' predicted final speaking test scores were equal to $4.921 + .261$ in role-play scores, when role-play is measured in the range of 2.5–10. About 39% of the variance in the final speaking tests can be explained by role-play performances. Students' final speaking test scores increased .26 for each score in their role-play performances. These results accepted the alternative hypothesis that theme-based role-play performances predicted the development of communicative competence in the final speaking test.

Table 7. Regression analysis results on the development of communicative competence

Model Summary					
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
.198 ^a	.039	.038	1.2023		

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	45.939	1	45.939	31.783	.000 ^b
Residual	1127.428	780	1.445		
Total	1173.367	781			

Coefficients					
Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig. (p)</i>
Theme-based role play performances	.261	.046	.198	5.64	.000

Differences in means were also explored to expose the development of learners' communicative competence across the four theme-based role-plays (see Table 8). The findings displayed that differences in means existed in the data, but the trends fluctuated among the role-plays. The scores increased slightly in the second role-play, then making a small decline in the third role-play, before showing an increase again in the last role-play. The third and fourth role-plays had the lowest scores at 2.5, while the first and second role-plays had lowest scores of 3.5 and 3.0 respectively. The highest variance occurred in the fourth role-play ($S^2 = 1.503$), and the lowest one was evident in the second role-play ($S^2 = 1.149$).

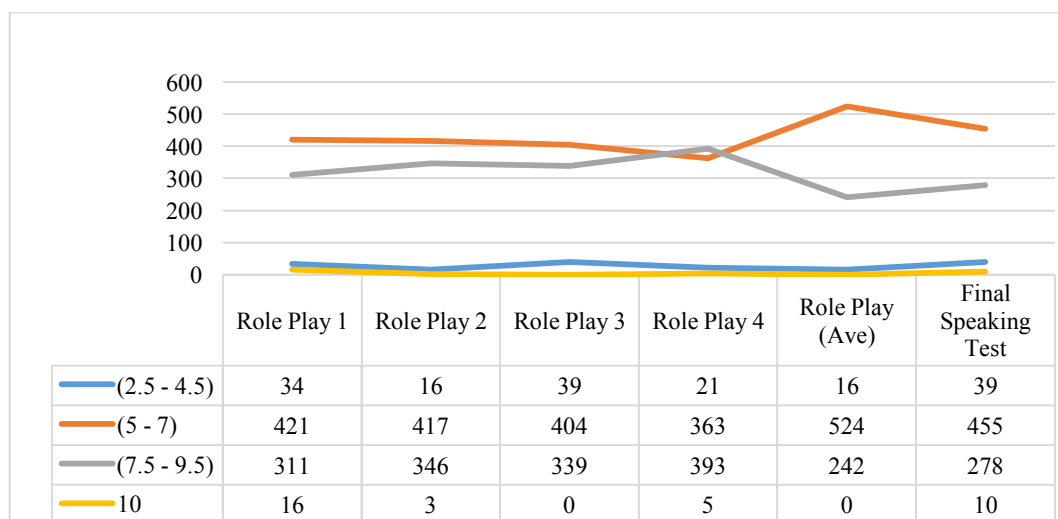
Table 8. Descriptive statistics (N = 782)

	Role-Play 1	Role-Play 2	Role-Play 3	Role-Play 4	Role-Play (Average)	Final Speaking Test
Mean	6.92	7.05	6.92	7.15	7	6.75
SD	1.20	1.07	1.22	1.23	.93	1.23
Variance	1.44	1.15	1.48	1.50	.87	1.50
Minimum	3.5	3	2.5	2.5	4.3	2.5
Maximum	10	10	9.5	10	10	9

To obtain more detailed information about students' development, the results based on the scoring rubrics of role-play and final speaking test were analyzed. The criteria of the rubrics were used to help illustrate students' development across the four theme-based role-play performances and in the final speaking test. The analyses put the cut-off point at 7.5 and higher to distinguish students who had made good development; below 7.5 was considered average and fair in terms of development. From this analysis of the role-plays, it was found that the number of students who received 7.5 or higher varied across the four role-plays: 327 in the first role play, 349 in the second role play, 339 in the third role play, and 137 in the fourth role-play. The trend showed an increase from the first to the second yet declining in the third and fourth role-plays.

As an illustration, students who obtained 7.5 or higher used a wide range of vocabulary and language expressions, showed occasional hesitation, repetition, and self-correction, made a very few grammatical errors, interacted each other actively, and displayed high levels of creativity in their roles/characters. Moreover, in the final speaking test, there were 288 students who obtained 7.5 or higher. These students were able to provide relevant answers to the topic with good explanations, had good clarity and audibility in pronunciation, showed strong self-confidence and proper gestures and eye-contact, displayed good fluency and accuracy in English expressions, and comprehended the given instructions well reflected in their performances on tasks. Figure 1 provides the detailed number of students within each score range in the various rubrics.

Fig. 1. Number of students for each score range reflected in the rubrics (N = 782)



In terms of proficiency levels, the differences in means showed that theme-based role-play had more effect on students at the intermediate level. The means of students' scores reflected an increasing trend across the four role-plays and in the final speaking test. On the contrary, fluctuations were found in the means of students' scores at the beginners' and the advanced levels.

Table 9. The means of students' scores based on proficiency levels

Level		Role-Play 1	Role-Play 2	Role-Play 3	Role-Play 4	Role-Play (Ave)	Final Speaking Test
Unidentified	Mean	6.704	6.667	6.383	6.864	6.654	4.685
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81
	Std. Deviation	1.2010	1.0398	1.1839	.9843	.7956	.4216
Beginner	Mean	6.764	6.946	6.731	6.968	6.853	6.419
	N	420	420	420	420	420	420
	Std. Deviation	1.2254	1.1130	1.1933	1.2563	.8956	.6028
Intermediate	Mean	7.317	7.364	7.469	7.579	7.432	8.104
	N	254	254	254	254	254	254
	Std. Deviation	1.0161	.9134	1.0210	1.1267	.8404	.5897
Advanced	Mean	6.352	6.759	6.222	6.639	6.494	5.259
	N	27	27	27	27	27	27
	Std. Deviation	1.5116	1.1959	1.5021	1.2410	1.2110	.2546
Total	Mean	6.923	7.047	6.917	7.145	7.008	6.747
	N	782	782	782	782	782	782
	Std. Deviation	1.2017	1.0720	1.2182	1.2261	.9308	1.2257

4.2 Discussion

The results of this study sustain the hypothesis that students' performances in theme-based role-play predict the development of their communicative competence. As the superiority of TBLT lies in the opportunities to promote oral language production and facilitating meaning-negotiation (Winnefeld, 2013) and advance learner's fluency and complexity in the target language (Rahimpour, 2008), the outcomes of the regression analysis in this study encourage the implementation of theme-based role-play for developing EFL learners' communicative competence. Theme-based role-play has the potential to fulfil the expectations of using tasks in language teaching, such as facilitating learners to communicate in the target language (Ellis, 2009; Nunan, 1991; Willis, 1996) and engaging learners in a naturalistic learning process that enables them to use the target language frequently (Skehan, 1996). Role-play tasks enhance learning through frequent use of the target language in contextual situations, so that immediate comprehension of how to express meanings in the target language can be grasped by learners, which may help learners improve their communicative competence after several role-play performances (Ampatuan & San Jose, 2016; Aliakbari & Jamalvandi (2010); Islam & Islam, 2013). Simply, theme-based role-play can be an alternative in creating effective learning by engaging learners in a communicative language task in task-based teaching.

In the present study, fluctuations in students' performances appeared across the four theme-based role-plays. It is argued that role-play topics and teacher's roles in the three phases of role-play (pre-task, during role-play performance, and post-task) might influence students' performances. For instance, regarding the role-play topics, the first and second topics are Airport and Restaurants, while the third and fourth topics are Living Abroad and Festivals, Arts, and Crafts. The topics of Airport and Restaurant could be familiar contexts to students, where they might have had direct or indirect experiences for both topics. On the other hand, the first-year students who participated in this study might not be familiar with the "experiences" of Living Abroad, since they had just completed high school. Thus, as reflected in the differences in means, students' performances improved from role-play 1 to role-play 2, but declining in role-play 3. The performances showed some improvement again in role-play 4, since the topic is about Festivals, Arts, and Crafts, which is arguably close to Thai students' life.

Besides, in the present study, teachers were involved in the three phases of role-play: pre-task, during role-play performance, and post-task. Teacher's roles in these phases might have contributed to students' communicative competence development. For instance, in the pre-task session, teachers fed the students with the target language features commonly used under each theme in the textbook, encompassing vocabulary and pronunciation, grammar points, listening, and reading. Then, during

the role-play performance, teachers facilitated and ensured the availability of required equipment, such as computer, projector, and speaker, while encouraging the students to bring any supporting materials that can enhance their performance, such as hat, dress, plate, spoon, and so forth. In the post-task, teachers became more crucial, as they gave direct feedback to the students right after their performance. The schemes of corrections involved feedback on the target language used by the students during their role-play, primarily focusing on pronunciation, choice of word, grammar, and so forth. The relevance of the role-play topic to learners' learning goals, teacher's elaboration on the appropriate language used in the role-play, schemes of error corrections, and teacher's role in the role-play affect the success of using role-play as a task in task-based teaching (Liu & Ding, 2009).

This study is consistent with the findings of previous studies that found the positive impact of role-play on enhancing learners' communicative competence at the university level (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010; Ampatuan & San Jose, 2016; Islam & Islam, 2013). Nonetheless, although not specifically explored, it suggests the benefit of using scripted role-play in task-based teaching, different from the findings of previous studies that showed the superiority of non-scripted role-play over scripted role-play (Chotirat & Sinwongsuwat, 2014; Nakseevee & Sinwongsuwat, 2014). In the use of theme-based role-play in task-based teaching, one should also consider: 1) the role-play design, including topics and contents of role-play activities; 2) the roles of students as an individual and a group; 3) teachers' provision of support from preparation, beginning, development, until the end of play (Magos & Politi, 2008). Providing that role-play stimulates authentic conversational interactions in different social contexts and social roles (Al-Senaidi, 2010; Richards, 1985), appropriate role-play designs and plans that fit learners' situational needs of the target language both in knowledge and practice can help create a bridge between theoretical language features and conversational practices (Insani, 2016).

Another purpose of the present study is to contribute to the practice of task-based teaching in actual classrooms. The findings of this study indicate the benefits of using theme-based role-play for developing learners' communicative competence. Some would argue that role-play does not offer anything, and is but an artificial activity that does not really reflect real world language needs (e.g. Shapiro & Leopold, 2012); however, this study explored students' communicative competence development in two parts: students' performances across the four role-plays and students' performances during the final speaking test, which is an individual interview. Additionally, as explained earlier, the assessment rubrics not only encompassed technical points, such as content, presentation, preparedness, prompts, creativity, and vocal expression, but also included the assessment of vocabulary use, fluency, and accuracy. All these points were intentionally prepared to ensure that, although theme-based role-plays are essentially an artificial and planned activity, students still gained useful knowledge and practical experience that were required in communicating in particular contexts, such as when they are at the airport, in a restaurant, or studying abroad.

5 Conclusion

Given that the primary goal of language teaching is to develop communicative competence, theme-based role-play offers opportunities for teachers to promote oral language production and create authentic conversational interactions in various social situations and roles in classroom. It can serve as a means of realizing meaningful classroom language practice in task-based teaching. For effective implementation, attention should be paid to the role-play designs and plans as well as the roles of students and teachers. The three basic goals underlying task-based teaching can be used as guidelines, in which accuracy, complexity, and fluency should be considered in the development of learners' communicative competence. Role-play tasks should enable learners to form a connection between in-class language learning and the use of the target language outside the classroom.

Furthermore, the present study has some pedagogical implications. As pointed out by previous studies, teachers are still struggling with the implementation of TBLT in classroom practices (Yen, 2016). Limited dissemination of principles and procedures of TBLT (Plews & Zhao, 2010), and a

lack of familiarity with task design and restrictions from textbook (Jasim, 2011) are among the obstacles and challenges faced by teachers. At this point, the present study contributes to the dissemination of principles and procedures of TBLT in classroom practices through theme-based role-play. Nonetheless, the success of role-play as a task in TBLT may be influenced by the relevance of role-play topics to learners' backgrounds, scripted or non-scripted role-play, and the teacher's role in the role-play. Although role-play is an artificial activity, teachers must ensure that the language features practiced by students are real-world language required in the performed contexts.

It is acknowledged that this study could have provided more detailed information, if it had collected students' and teachers' perceptions of the implementation of theme-based role-play for developing communicative competence. In this instance, the findings of this study should be understood in a limited context that requires interpretations of students' scores in role-play performances on the development of their communicative competence. This research could have adopted experimental research designs, such as controlled group versus experimental group or pre- and post-tests; nevertheless, due to the inflexibility of the course, which involved forty classes, and foreign and Thai lecturers, it was not possible to include experimental research designs. Hence, future studies are encouraged to further explore the potential of role-play as a communicative task in task-based teaching through different ways of interpretations and research designs.

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