Investigating Task Uptake of a Group Roleplay in Assessing Socializing Skills in EFL Learners

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Abstract

This paper investigates how an assessment roleplay task was being interpreted and performed by its student test-takers. The rationale for this is that we need feedback into whether the task is functioning as intended and to ensure that our interpretation of the scores from grading these students correctly informs our decision making about their abilities. This study focused on a group open roleplay task in which students must choose their own persona and showcase their socializing skills for an end-of-unit assessment task. Particularly, their choice of roles can affect the quality of interaction, which in turn can affect the scores they eventually received. This study analyzed 180 students' performances, grouped into 34 roleplays. As a mixed-methods study which seeks to utilize the information that we gathered on students' task uptake to improve the assessment practices for the next iteration of this task, this study first evaluated the personas students selected for their roleplay to identify features that distinguish appropriate roles for the task from inappropriate ones. Later, the task uptake in terms of the qualities of their roleplay interaction was also investigated through the lens of conversation analysis (CA). The results show very few incidences of roleplay personas deemed inappropriate for the task, showing a good level of alignment between student task uptake and the intended design of the assessment task. The CA results show that this roleplay provided opportunities for students to display interactional skills that were similar to that of real-life interactions. The findings highlight the unique aspects of communication skills that this open roleplay task required from the students specifically in the turn-taking organization, overall sequential organization, and topic management practices.

Keywords: interactional competence, roleplay, group oral assessment task

Introduction

Using roleplay as an assessment task is desirable for the purposes of eliciting interactional performance that resembles more closely to the real-life interactions (Huth, 2010; Kasper & Youn, 2018; Okada, 2010). While roleplays have been recognized for its capacity to generate interactions which are closer to ordinary conversation, whether a roleplay task can be considered similar or different from real-life interaction remains an empirical question facing every test developer. For example,

Okada (2010) analyzed the ACTFL roleplay task and found that moving from interviewing format to a roleplay format does not change the fact that there is asymmetrical relationship between test taking candidates and the interviewers. The candidates still have little to no control over what role they get to play or what topics are permissible. In other words, the roleplay task in the ACTFL test is still another type of institutional talk which is different from real life ordinary conversations.

This concept that task realization can differ from its pre-conceived intention was first pointed out by Breen (1989) when she discussed the split personality of tasks as they can be viewed as a workplan and then also as interactional process. She made an important distinction between the intended pedagogy, namely *task-as-workplan*, which refers to plans over what teacher and learners would do, and *task-in-process*—the actual pedagogy as it happened in the classroom. Since then, many researchers have provided empirical evidence on how these two incarnations of tasks can be quite different (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Hall & Pekarek-Doehler, 2011; Seedhouse, 2005). Not only that the interaction-in-process can differ from the task's workplan, but the interactions can also turn out differently when performed by different groups (Seedhouse, 1996).

For tasks used for assessment purposes, we have seen in an example from Okada (2010) earlier that the difference between the imagined construct of a task and the actual construct how students perform the task can be sizable. When it comes to assessment tasks, the alignment between task-as-workplan and talk-in-process is even more crucial as the misalignment can hamper its construct validity, which represents the concerns whether the test is actually measuring what it claims to be measuring (McNamara, 2006; Messick, 1994). The importance of asking this question over how students understand and interpret the task is therefore apparent and fundamental for any claims over the validity for using any tasks especially for the purpose of assessment or decision making over students' skills and abilities on any construct (Chapelle, 2020; Kane, 1992). More examples of this line of investigation capturing the transformation of test tasks when being performed by test-takers have been reported in cases of oral proficiency interviews or OPIs (Kasper, 2013), peer participants (Sandlund & Sundqvist, 2011), and also peer group roleplay activity (Kasper & Youn, 2018).

Following this line of research enquiry, a group roleplay task designed for assessing students' socializing skills is put at the focus of this study. To determine whether the current design and implementation of the task match well with its assessment purposes, it is crucial that the students' performances on this task are closely and empirically analyzed. The results from this endeavor can provide evidence for assessment validity and some further recommendations for improving the task design in the future use of this test.

Therefore, this study explores whether students' performance on the roleplay task can offer empirical evidence in support of its use. The findings can lead to recommendations and guidelines on how to use open roleplay to assess speaking interactional skills in classroom contexts. At this stage, we seek to answer the question of what the students' interpretations of the task are. What can we see from

their roleplay performances that displays their task uptake and engagement? To address this question more specifically, there are three research questions that this current study is investigating.

(1) Were the roles that students designed for the task matched well with the task description as per the developers' intention?

(2) How did students organize their roleplay performances? What was the order or structure of interaction that this roleplay task elicited?

(3) Which part of the interaction within this roleplay task resembles interactions in real life?

Literature Review

In this section, this study is first providing a review of relevant literature to help readers understand the task and its ties to naturally occurring interaction. Also, because judging ones' ability to conduct themselves competently during a socializing situation goes beyond assessing their speaking and listening skills, the construct of interactional competence (IC) has become relevant in our study as it encompasses ones' ability in coordinating and accomplishing social actions within the progress of talk-in-interaction (Hall & Pekarek-Doehler, 2011; Pekarek-Doehler, 2019). Given the strong social orientation of the roleplay task we are investigating, this section also provides a review of related literature regarding the construct of interactional competence (IC) that underpins students' accomplishment of this task, especially in the challenges facing this socializing practice.

Socializing Skills

The conversational skills being referred to in this task as socializing skills is colloquially known as doing small talks. Coupland (2000) noted how small talks used to be perceived as "minor, informal, unimportant and non-serious" talk (p. 1). However, recent research has increasingly acknowledged the critical functions of small talks in performing a wide variety of functions, both for personal and professional purposes, for example, building friendly relationships (Placencia, 2004), demonstrating their identity (Tracy & Noughton, 2000), establishing shared social relationship (Dooly & Tudini, 2016), and contributing to diagnoses in medical consultations (Jin et al., 2022). Ryoo (2007) also argued that small talk serves as a resource for friendly interactions for people from different cultural backgrounds.

Despite the growing recognition of its importance, skills in doing small talk appear to not have been effectively taught in second and foreign language classrooms. In terms of the available material for language teachers, a survey of EFL textbooks in many Asian countries found that the textbooks usually cover greetings and introduction in minimal question-answer sequences only (Nguyen et al., 2014). A more recent study also reported pre-scripted simulated dialogues, as opposed to real recorded interactions, still being widely used in many mass-market textbooks for ESL/EFL learners (Povey, 2021). Mastering these greetings and minimal sequences is not enough to equip learners with socializing skills. The dissatisfaction on these shortcomings was reported by Cowling (2007) as students expressed

a strong desire to learn how to conduct small talk especially for the purpose of business communications. Calls for an increased pedagogical revisiting on the topic of small talk have been made by many researchers (Chan, 2021; Cruz, 2013; González-Lloret, 2019; Kim, 2022), showing a strong demand for language classrooms to dedicate more time and resources to help students master this significant skillset.

Empirical Studies on Small Talks

To exemplify what socializing skills normally entail in real-life conversations, this section presents related findings through the rigorous lens of conversation analysis (See Liddicoat, 2021 for a comprehensive overview). In a situation similar to the task on which this study is focusing, conversation analysis (CA) studies small talk as an interaction practice of first-time encounters (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984) where participants seek to exchange personal information to further develop relationships as their talk unfolds.

More specifically, Svennevig (1999, 2014) identified a sequence called self-presentational sequence, a standardized practice occurring quite regularly within first-time encounters, consisting of presentation-eliciting question, self-presentation response, and another response following the self-presentation, where participants would go through series of small actions to identify each other, explore shared knowledge, and promote positive affiliations (Svennevig, 1999, p. 135). For multi-party openings, Pillet-Shore (2011) also described different cases among acquainted and unacquainted party in first-time encounter conversations. In the phrase she called *introducing* when there was a known-in-common person in the group, Pillet-Shore (2011) pointed out that the person with the knowledge of all participants would assume the responsibility of introducing unfamiliar participants to each other before moving on to the main topical talk during the ongoing interaction. In cases that the known-in-common person is absent, research findings have reported that self-introduction may be offered or requested for participants to become more acquainted before the participants move on to other topical talks (Haugh, 2011; Sinkeviciute & Rodriguez, 2021; Svennevig, 1999, 2014).

CA research on first-time encounters also shed light on the issue of preference and the consequences which follow a delayed or deviated execution from the preferred method. Pillet-Shore (2011) reported that self-initiation is not preferred when there was a commonly known person present in the group interaction. This is evident in the tendency that self-initiation is often delayed and usually with the known-in-common person issuing an apology to account for the missing introduction afterwards. In the case of unacquainted participants, self-introduction (unprompted) or request for request for others' self-introduction (prompted) are both reported to be equally acceptable (Pillet-Shore, 2011; Sinkeviciute & Rodriguez, 2021). Another preference commonly mentioned in existing research is the expectation for reciprocity following a self-disclosure action (Stokoe, 2009; Svennevig, 2014). Not reciprocating your information can signal a disaffiliative stance towards other speakers which can often lead to a conversation closing because repeated requests for self-disclosure can be considered a

moral violation in the context of first-time encounters (Haugh & Carbaugh, 2015). Finally, Sinkeviciute and Rodriguez (2021) also reported how the sequence of self-introduction (prompted or unprompted) really is an indispensable component of first-time encounter talks and their data showed that, even when being sidetracked or delayed, participants would always discursively resume or initiate the sequence before continuing their talk on other topics.

The existing findings from CA highlight the complex process of how a socializing task is executed on a turn-by-turn basis and the vast amount of interactional knowledge and repertoire a speaker needs to have in order to navigate such interaction successfully. While L1 speakers have years to accumulate and master such skills, L2 learners may not always be able to transfer what they are able to do in their L1 to help accomplish the same outcome in their L2. This ability or competence in coordinating and accomplishing social actions within the progress of talk-in-interaction is conceptualized as interactional competence (IC) (Hall & Pekarek-Doehler, 2011; Pekarek-Doehler, 2019), as detailed in the next section.

Assessing Interactional Competence

In the past recent decades, IC has received a surge in research attention in the fields of L2 assessment and second language acquisition (SLA) (Lam et al., 2023). With its firm root in ethnomethodologically informed conversation analysis (EMCA) approach (Garfinkel, 1967), IC construct is operationalized for assessment purposes under the framework of CA's units of analysis, namely, turn, sequence, and interactional practice (For comprehensive overview, see Roever & Kasper, 2018; Wong & Waring, 2010). According to Lam et al. (2023), IC encompasses features such as:

- *Turn-taking management*: how test-takers take turns and organize multiple turns to formulate actions. This includes the consideration on aspects of time and linguistic formations of the turns in service of the social actions being carried out.
- *Topic management*: how test-takers initiate topics, respond to their interactional partner, and maintain (self-initiated) and develop (other-initiated) topics
- *Repair management*: how test-takers maintain their intersubjectivity, or mutual understanding of what is going on in interaction

Given the relative novelty of IC, challenges in its operationalization for the purpose of assessing IC remain. First of all, since talk is a product of multiple parties co-constructing their interaction together, a challenge for language assessment is, therefore, concerning how we can tease apart which accomplishments are shared and which can be attributed to individuals (Lam et al., 2023). Second, teachers or raters can often be inexperienced and undertrained for evaluating IC constructs. Hence, when given the responsibility to evaluate an interactional task, raters need to rely on their overall impression which adds extra layers of interpretation from the performance they see. This makes IC a *high-inference* scale for raters (Fulcher, 1993), meaning that the trait is less observable in the performances,. In their study which analyzed raters' behaviors while assessing IC, it was reported that

raters tend to rely on students' fluency when they do not know what IC features to look for (Sandlund & Sundqvist, 2019).

This study offers an example of how CA can address the issue of co-construction and untangle individual contributions through identifying interactional resources invoked and made relevant in turn-by-turn analysis (Youn, 2019).

Research Design and Methodology

Assessment Task

In this study, an open roleplay used in Communication and Presentation Skills course is the focal activity under investigation. The course is a speaking and listening subject designed for engineering students at a university in Bangkok, Thailand. One of the four units taught was focusing on socializing skills, and for this unit, an open roleplay task was used to assess the students' performance at the end of the module.

On this task, students worked in groups of four to six people and roleplayed as conference participants attending a welcoming party of a professional expo held in Australia where all of them met for the first time. To prepare for the roleplay, each student had prepared the role/persona they would act out for themselves. This included creating their personal information focusing on the job titles, job responsibilities, and their company's profiles. On the assessment date, the members of the groups were randomly selected by the teacher assessor of their section. Each group then had 15 minutes to practice together before starting their performance. During the roleplay, appropriate small talk topics covered in the material are expected be used. The assessment criteria used in the real-time assessment included group collaboration, content, language and pronunciation, and delivery. The detailed descriptors of the original rubric used by the teacher can be found in Appendix 1.

Research Participants

From the 240 students who were enrolled this course at the time of data collection, 180 students (75 percent of the total population) have consented to participate in this study. These students were second-year and third-year undergraduate students from different engineering majors offered at this university: Computer Engineering, Mechanical Engineering; Industrial Engineering, Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering, and Nuclear Engineering. One hundred and sixty student participants were male (approximately 89%), and 20 were female. This ratio roughly represents the current demographic of the engineering job market in the country ("Gender representation in Engineering: 2014 vs 2018," 2021; Martinez & Christnacht, 2021)

Descriptive statistics of their scores based on the original rubric are shown in Table 1 below. Note that the original scores were awarded individually for their content, delivery, and language and pronunciation scores.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Scores on the Original Rubric

	N	*Min*	*Max*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Skewness*	*Kurtosis*
Group collaboration	180	3	5	4.20	0.53	-0.493	0.223
Content	180	3	5	4.17	0.55	-0.434	-0.043
Language and pronunciation	180	2.5	5	3.88	0.56	-0.169	-0.245
Delivery	180	2.5	5	4.02	0.60	-0.199	-0.557

Overall, the descriptive statistics of the original rubrics' scores help us understand the participants' levels of achievement viewed by the teachers of this course. They had satisfactorily mastered group collaboration and content of the roleplay task. The level of language and pronunciation skill was a challenge for this group of students, but their delivery was mostly acceptable across the dataset.

Research Procedures

These 180 students were made up into 34 groups, resulting into 34 roleplay performances being video recorded. The videos were transcribed following conversation analysis convention (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) to reveal the details on how students organized their turns and the sequences of their actions during their roleplay performances. The overall sequential organization of the roleplay performance had been previously reported as part of another study that investigated the construction of a data-driven rubric aiming to evaluate student interactional competence (see Patharakorn, 2018). This study was an extension of that project as it further examined the validity argument for the socializing task focusing specifically on the task's uptake to help connect the dots for extrapolating students' interactional competence (IC) from their performance observed in the roleplay.

This study employed a concurrent mixed methods approach and divided the consideration on students' task uptake into two parts: the student interpretation of the task in terms of the roles they played, and the normative orientations observable in the student interaction within the parameter of this task.

To address the first research question, the study first looked into the role students had designed to meet the task requirements. Designing their roles was one of the most important responsibilities students can prepare for the assessment, and it can reflect their interpretation of the task descriptions as well as display their understanding of the target situation or social contexts required by the task. For this reason, I worked with the teacher coordinator of this course to develop a set of categories to simplify our analysis of student roles. Our different experiences with the course provided complementary views for our interpretations. The course coordinator was part of the team which wrote the teaching material and designed this roleplay task along with its rubrics. As someone who is familiar with socializing events at a professional conference setting, my perspective represented an outsider's viewpoint of a

proficient member of the targeted situation. After we have discussed the categories that could best describe our observations of the roles played by each student, we have finalized on two categories: *Task Appropriate* (TA) roles and *Task Inappropriate* (TI) roles. The two of us then individually combed through all students' roleplay profiles to assign them into TA and TI groups.

For the second research question concerning the interactional methods used by the students within the parameter of this roleplay activity, the video data and transcripts were reviewed, and additional analysis was made after inspecting student normative orientations within this roleplay task. While the original study focused on comparing students' high and low levels of accomplishments using extraneous benchmarks to assess their interactional competence, this study's aim is to explicate on what interactional features were treated as normal by the participants, and thus reveal their interpretation of the interactional demands put upon them by the roleplay task. Through the lens of CA, the video data collected are analyzed to ascertain the extent to which students' performance on this open roleplay task can reveal their pragmatic and interactional abilities relevant to the communication construct under socializing skills as intended.

Data Analysis

For the first research question, we report the result from our coding scheme along with the reliability estimates represented in the percent of agreements and the interrater reliability between the two raters.

For the second and third research questions, CA is chosen to provide an analytical description of how students perform the roleplay because, firstly, CA is uniquely conceptualized to capture the organizations and architecture of social interaction with the level of details necessitated by the construct of IC. With CA, the questions of what has been individually achieved or collectively achieved, by what resources, and in what manners can be explicitly addressed. Finally, because CA takes an emic perspective in analyzing what and how actions and accomplishments have been made in interaction, it can be illuminating to ascertain how student accomplishments match with those expected by teachers and users of test outcome (Seedhouse, 2005).

Results

The results presented below are divided into two sections. Firstly, we reported the results from the categorization of student's roles. Example cases and challenges arisen from the coding practice are also discussed to give comprehensive picture of how students showed their interpretations of the task through the designs of roles they chose to play. Later, CA findings are presented to show some organizational features how students managed their roleplay.

Categorization of Student Roles

Before the coding process, the researchers discussed the task description to refamiliarize themselves with what can be perceived as Task Appropriate (TA) roles and Task Inappropriate (TI) roles. Given the setting of the roleplay situation being a welcoming reception at a product-of-the-year expo. The main consideration distinguishing between TA and TI roles is whether the roles were conducive and meaningful for students to be attending this conference. Table 2 shows the results from our categorizing practices. It shows a high level of agreements at 99.44 percent between the two researchers. Despite the high percentage of agreements, Cohen's Kappa (κ) statistic calculated from the data was only 32.84, which indicates a fair degree of agreement without the chance probability (Viera & Garrett, 2005). This could be due to the much larger proportion of TA to TI in the dataset, making the chance probability that the two raters would agree being higher than normal.

Table 2

Rater's Categorization of Student Personas Prepared for the Roleplay Task

	TA (Percent from total)	TI (Percent from total)	Total
Rater 1	179 (99.44%)	1 (0.56%)	180 (100%)
Rater 2	178 (98.89%)	2 (1.11%)	180 (100%)
Rater agreement	178 (98.89%)	1 (0.56%)	**179 (99.44%)**

Given the fact that students who participated in the study were from the faculty of engineering, the roles that were categorized as TA include mechanical engineers, software engineers, product designers, and even marketing managers or sales representatives. While majority of students had chosen the roles at the level of associates up to division manager positions, some, approximately 15 percent of the students, had chosen to play top positions like the CEOs, company owners, or company's presidents. The companies the students had chosen to represent also varied widely. Most students opted for well-known companies such as Apple, Microsoft, Lamborghini, AMD, Lazada Group, and Line Corporation. Some had chosen to only specify the key industries they were supposed to be working for, e.g. a camera company, a security company, an engineering consultant company. Interestingly, a few had chosen to work for well-known but fictional companies, like Stark Industries (from the Ironman movies) or Wayne Enterprises (from Batman movies). The researchers had particularly discussed the appropriateness of this type of roles. However, given the current specifications of the roleplay instruction, we decided to categorize these roles under TA because it would be difficult to differentiate these companies from the unnamed ones as they were technically both fictional. Therefore, the raters aired on the side of cautions and gave students benefits of the doubt when we judged how the role itself would carry potential for a meaningful socialization at this hypothetical event for the roleplay.

On the other hand, roles that fall under TI tend not to have little connections to the character being at this product-of-the-year expo. The one role which was agreed by both researchers for having a

bleak association with the roleplay event is a zookeeper from the London Zoo. For the role that caused a single discrepancy between the two raters, it was the role of a marketing manager from Liverpool Football Club. One rater argued that the role could be appropriate given the capacity of the position of a marketing manager. The other rater focused more on the company the student was representing and argued that a football club having a product to present at the expo was rather unlikely. Since this is the only disagreement we have for the categorization of student roles, and because the effect of this role to the interaction was, at this point, unclear, we decided to settle our disagreement without resolving it.

Student Interaction in the Roleplay as a Social Practice

As this study is also interested in how students organized their roleplay performances, in this section, we focus on describing the order and structure of interaction that this roleplay task elicited. Below, excerpts which highlight several features of talk being treated as normal in this set of roleplay performances are presented in the order of their occurrences within the roleplay.

To present how students managed the task opening, the first excerpt highlighted challenges that students faced at the beginning of the roleplay. The challenges are two-fold: launching the roleplay and managing among many participants who was to take the turn and when it was time to take a turn within their group.

Excerpt 1 Task Opening

01→	Stu1:	uh hi (.) sorry Do you know when does the expo start?
02	Stu2:	uh the next hour.
03	Stu1:	↑oh really.
04		(.)
05	Stu1:	o[kay.
06→	Stu2:	[he- hello (.) I'm=
07	Stu1:	=nice to meet you
08	Stu1:	°nice to meet-° nice to meet you.

At the beginning of this excerpt, Student 1 took the responsibility of launching a pre-opening sequence between lines 1–5. To initiate the sequence, Student 1 asked Student 2 about the time for the event that both were going to go. This question formulation shows Student 1's skills in audience design. There is a presupposition in Student 1's question that Student 2 was also going to the expo and therefore he was a viable candidate to ask for the time. In the next turn in line 2, the way Student 2 responded to Student 1 was quite interesting. Instead of indicating the time, he only gave a rough estimate 'the next hour.' Student 1 in the subsequent line, treated this information as something unexpected with the turn initial high-pitched 'oh' (Heritage, 1984) and an other-repair initiation 'really' with a falling intonation (Schegloff, 2007). However, the repair initiation had not been picked up by Student 2 and after a brief

pause in line 4, both students then treated the sequence as complete as Student 1 said ‘okay’ in line 5 and Student 2 overlapped that with a greeting ‘hello’ in line 6.

The pre-opening sequence business was there to tie-in to the main business of self-introduction and then greeting each other (lines 6–8). The timing of the actions seemed to be disrupted with the overlap and a cut-off (‘I’m=’) on line 6 in what appeared to be Student 2 beginning to introduce himself. Student 1 (line 7) mistook the brief pause in line 6 as the end point of Student 2’s greeting turn, so he offered his greeting ‘nice to meet you’ in almost overlapping with Student 2’s self-introduction attempt. Student 1 then repeated himself with his greeting ‘nice to meet you’ in line 8 and got it in his third attempt. In this instance, he did a self-repair as the first time on line 7 was not timed correctly and the second time on line 8 was marked with hesitation as he said it in very low voice and a cut off (‘nice to meet-’).

As you can see in Excerpt 1, students not only had to manage the action of getting their roleplay performance started, but they also had to juggle the issue of speaking rights. At any given time, students must collectively decide who was taking the turn, what actions to carry out, and when and how to accomplish those actions. The knowledge which can aid the accomplishment of launching the roleplay includes how the roleplay can begin with a pre-opening sequence on any business which can be tied into the main business of a greeting sequence which can include introducing each other’s names following by exchanging greeting tokens.

It was evident from the data that the students’ management of pre-opening sequence was short of being seamless. Some actions were abandoned as the interaction progressed, e.g. the repair initiation in line 3 or the self-introduction sequence initiation (‘hello, I’m=’) in line 6, as if they were not the main interactional activities needed for completing the roleplay.

This orientation to getting to the self-introduction sequence is quite robust. The second excerpt shows a case when students began the roleplay with the pre-opening sequence, but then the action sequence veered off from the aforementioned organization. We can see how students would then work to bring it back to the main business of self-introduction before issuing greeting tokens in closing the task opening sequences.

Excerpt 2 Side Sequences

3	Thom:	long time no see
4	Yoshi:	yeah long (.9) >long time no see<
5	Thom:	Yoshi right?
6		(.6)
7→	Yoshi:	yes and:: [my name] is Yoshi
8	Thom:	[do you-]
9	Thom:	oh do you remember me?
10		(.5)
11	Yoshi:	yes I (.2) I:: (.4) I- I can remember you.
12		(.6)
13	Thom:	↑oh ˚o˚kay.

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14                  (1.3)
15→       Thom:     This is my friend Kate,
16                  (.4)
17→       Kat:      hello Yoshi (.) I'm Kate.
18        Yos:      hello Kate (.) I'm Yoshi.
(omit 7 lines)
26        Thom:     ah I'm:: Thomas (.) okay.=
27        Thom:     =nice to meet you. too.
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At the beginning of the excerpt, we can identify pre-opening sequence between lines 3 and 4. Thomas in line 3 invoked an identity of an old friend who they happened to be meeting by chance at this expo. In line 4, Yoshi ratified the claim by providing an agreement. Instead of progressing directly to the greeting exchange sequence, Thomas launched a question 'Yoshi, right?' to provide evidence for his claim as an old friend of Yoshi. This question 'Yoshi, right?' was not to simply confirm that the recipient to that question's name was Yoshi. It was a display of familiarity as Thomas was showing through the statement that 'I remember you'. Therefore, the appropriate response would be something along the line of 'wow you remember me! I also remember you. Your name is Thomas.' However, Yoshi had misinterpreted this question as merely an informational one. It was Yoshi's response in line 7 after a rather long pause which prompted a deviation from the original trajectory of sequence organization. Possibly with a script on his mind that he needed to introduce himself in the next action, Yoshi answered 'yes and… my name is Yoshi' without fulfilling the locutionary demand placed on him by Thom's question in line 5. This is evident in lines 8–9 where we can see Thomas issuing another question 'do you remember me?' which is a more explicit request for a proof of familiarity. Once again, Yoshi treated the question only at the literal level and answered 'Yes, I can remember you', a statement which was a claim of familiarity without proof to account for. After another long pause (line 12), Thomas then closed this side sequence in line 13 by saying 'okay'. He later moved to progress the roleplay along by nominating Kate as the next speaker. This brought the overall sequence back on track as Kate then launched a self-introduction and greeting sequence in Line 17.

Following the greeting sequence, students then move on to discussing the reason why they're at the expo. This usually start with an inquiry into one's job, the company, then the job responsibilities. In the third excerpt below, we start the transcript when Student 1 asked Student 2 about the company he worked for.

Excerpt 3 Work Related Talk

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31        Stu1:     which company do you work for?=
32        Stu2:     =I work for Aston Martin (.) car company.
33        Stu1:     ((nod)) °interesting°.
34→       Stu3:     what is (.) Aston Martin.
35→       Stu2:     oh >Aston Martin is a< (.6) uh manufacturing of uh (.)
36                  sport car=and also the (.) grand tours.
```

We can see the how the answer from Student 2 latched on with the question in line 31, indicating that students recognized the action projected in line 31 immediately. Upon receiving the answer, Student 1 then offered a positive assessment token 'interesting' in line 33, displaying the knowledge of the three-part minimal sequence (Schegloff, 2007) for information exchanges. Student 3 also displayed an ability to expand upon the minimal sequence by asking a question in line 34. The question formulated in line 34 also shows their ability to generate a follow up question that contains topical cohesiveness with the prior turns. Though very general, the question did work in keeping the interaction going, the action of which the task instruction is looking for.

As the roleplay progressed, turn allocation practices potentially became more challenging for the students. To do well in the roleplay, students were required to actively assert themselves to produce a turn which fits in the ongoing flow of conversation. Excerpt 4 below highlights Kai's work to not only extended the topic of the overall talk, but also created an opportunity for himself to take more turns subsequently.

Excerpt 4 Topic Development

135	Kai:	((RH open to Ale))oh↓ what was your company?
137		(.4)
138	Ale:	my company is (.) Exxon Mobile(.4) the world largest (.) oil gas company.
139	Kai:	ooh
140	Chr:	↑wo:[:w!
141	Kai:	[wow.
142	Ale:	from U-S-A.
143		(.4)
144→	Kai:	↑OH we work in [the same (.4) Petrol industry?
145	Jon:	[((nod quickly, Gaze→Kai and Ale, smile))
147	Ale:	uhm:::↑.
148	Kai:	he ((Gaze→ Jon)) work in Chevrons company [and,] (.3) I'm work in
149	Jon:	[yes,]
150		(.)
151	Kai:	the Mitsu Oils company.
152	Ale:	[um:::↑
153	Jon:	[um::↑
154	Kai:	Ja[pan,]
155→	Ale:	[after] that (.) we can join the partnership,
156		toget- together?
157	Jon:	[sure!]
158	Kai:	[yeah] sure.
159		(.4)

At the beginning of the excerpt, in line 135, we see Kai nominated Alex as the next speaker by way of gesturing to Alex as he asked the question 'what was your company?' Alex's answer was offered in two parts. First, he provided the name of his company, Exxon Mobile. Then after a small pause, he added what sounded like a slogan for the company's brand, 'the world's largest oil company' which in

turn prompted other participants (Kai and Christ) to responded with interjections, 'ooh' and 'wow' in lines 139, 140 and 141 respectively.

To expand upon this sequence that had come to a possible stop in line 143, participants can issue a follow up question on a related topic like the earlier example in Excerpt 3. What is different in this group's interaction was how Kai instead of asking a question about Alex's company, he proffered an adjacent topic which worked to pivot the conversation away from Alex's to now being about Alex and himself. From lines 148–154, Kai coordinated his action, with Jon and Alex providing agreement tokens along the way, in summarizing his earlier observation by delineating the three companies from petrol industry in different countries. Then in line 155, the topic of talk shifted again as Alex pivoted to making a proposal, 'we can join the partnership', suggesting that they all should explore some type of partnership as a product of the interaction they had that day.

This interaction showed how students worked together in coordinating a stepwise topic transition (Jefferson, 1984) within the parameter of this roleplay interaction. This provides important evidence showing student collaboration for their roleplay performance, which fulfilled a major contribution to their group score according to the rubrics for this task (see Appendix 1).

Although according to Sacks (1992), stepwise topic shift or topic shading, where the change of topics happens gradually and seamlessly as the talk progresses, is deemed the most natural way of doing topic transition; we should note that different sequences within to overall organization of talk in this roleplay interaction seem to call for different participation methods for topic transitions. For example, Excerpt 5 shows student topic transition practice when moving from greeting sequences to talking about jobs sequences.

Excerpt 5 Topic Transition

```
28      Mark:   o.. [nice to ^meet you.
29      Kevin:      [nice to meet you.
30              (.4)
31→     Nick:   °(alrighty)°. (.4) ah who do you work with.
32              (.5)
33      Mark:   I work for Microsoft.
```

We can see how students all oriented to the greeting sequence being brought to a complete close (line 30) before starting a new topic about their jobs (line 31).

Discussion

To Research Question 1: *Were the roles that the students designed for the task match well with the task description as per the developers' intention?*

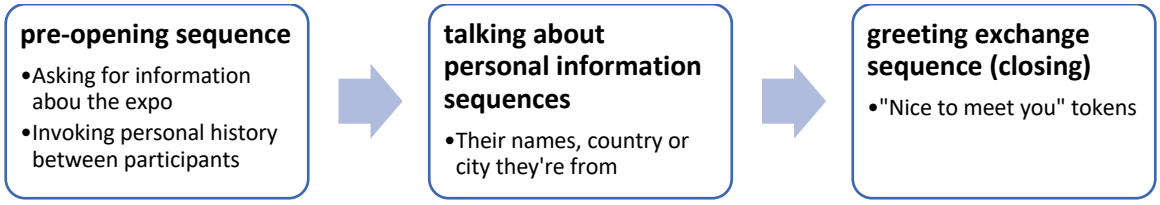
From the coding result of Task Appropriate role (TA) and Task Inappropriate roles (TI), we found that most students displayed appropriate task interpretation evidenced in the vast majority of TA compared to TI. This means that the instruction and the task designed along with its explanation is clear enough to guide the test takers to create appropriate roles for this task. This also means that the students, throughout the lessons provided by their instructors, have come to acquire an understanding of what is expected of the task and hence have shown to have this specific membership knowledge required to participate competently in this assessment activity.

To research question 2: *How did students organize their roleplay performances? What was the order or structure of interaction that this roleplay task elicited?*

It appears that the original rubric has a huge impact on the students' organization of the roleplay performance, especially the *Content* score. Under this criterion, students were expected to '*talking about personal information, jobs and responsibilities, talking about your company (accurate information), and business card*.' From the data, we can see that students oriented to certain topics of talk being more important than others and these main businesses of interaction included talking about personal information and talking about jobs and responsibilities as we have seen from the results presented above. One key finding that was found in this study is that students would bring up related businesses. The talking about personal information is often embedded in the overall sequential organization which progresses from the pre-opening sequence, talking about personal information, and then the greeting exchanges sequence (See Figure 1). Students at higher level abilities were able to construct a pre-opening sequence and move more seamlessly to the next actions. Moreover, this study has shown a few cases (Excerpts 1 and 2) when progress along these sequences was sidetracked or delayed, and more competent students would show their orientation to the progressivity of the task by bringing up the closing to the side sequences and moving the interaction to the next sequence that was relevant for the roleplay task.

Figure 1

Overall Sequence Organization of Roleplay Opening



Moreover, what emerged from the data is that different actions call for different participatory methods. In this study, students managed the practice of topic transitions differently in different parts of the roleplay. Stepwise topic transitions were employed when students were discussing their

companies and job responsibilities (see Excerpt 4). On the other hand, in moving from the greeting sequence to the topic about their work, students tended to bring the interaction to a complete close before bringing up the topic shift in the next turns (Excerpt 5). For this reason, it would be inappropriate for the future rubrics of this task to prioritize one method over the other and assign different value scores for certain method simply because it was deemed a better participatory method in the literature without looking at how students manage the interaction on the task.

To Research Question 3: Which part of *the interactions within this roleplay task resembles the interactions in real life?*

This group open roleplay task elicited a wide range of students' interactional competencies, i.e., turn-taking organization, topic management, initiating repair sequence to maintain intersubjectivity, which can then be compared to what interactionally competent language users do in real life. More specifically, student performance being elicited through this task also includes negotiating self-presentation activity at the beginning of the task, which is part of the overall sequential organization actions of the whole roleplay performances. The identified structure of students' orientation in their task performance allows task designers and raters to establish units of comparison and we can refer to the body of CA research on ordinary or institutional interactions as guidelines and benchmarks for our assessment purposes.

In this study, students who could competently manage the task more successfully have shown their abilities in recognizing the overall sequence organization of the task, managing turn-taking practices in favor of the progressivity of the roleplay, and showing an ability to audience design. To illustrate, for an ability to recognize the overall sequential organization of doing self-introduction (Pillet-Shore, 2011), we can see that Student 2 in Excerpt 3 displayed a quick recognition of Student 1's action evident in her ability to respond with type conforming appropriate answers without any delay. Showing an ability to manage turn-taking practices which help move the activity forward, Thomas, in Excerpt 2, was able to close down the side sequence and set the roleplay task back on track. In Excerpt 4, we also see Kai and Alex collaboratively manage stepwise topic transitions (Jefferson, 1984) moving the task from talking about one's work to making arrangements for future partnerships of their companies. Finally, for an ability to audience design, we have observed how Student 1 in Excerpt 1 was able to design his question in the pre-opening sequence in such a way that would provide an opportunity for him to start socializing in subsequent actions.

On the other hand, what is also important is that the task provides an opportunity to observe students' lack of such competencies at an individual level as well. For example, Student 2 in Excerpt 1 failed to recognize a repair initiation because he only focused on doing his self-introduction, which he also did not complete after his first attempt was overlapped with Student 1's greeting token. Yoshi in Excerpt 2 appeared to only be able to answer the questions addressed to him only at a literal level without showing recognition of the ongoing larger sequence of talk, showing how he lacks an awareness

of reciprocity which is the preference competent speakers should display (Stokoe, 2009). From the results of problematic managements of the roleplay task, as Youn (2019) has also previously shown, we can see that when students had shortcomings in their interactional skills, such as topic initiations or repairs, the breakdowns in their roleplay performances can be attributed to individual student.

This basis would provide our raters with very specific points for observing about students' IC, making it a *low-inference* scale for raters which, according to Fulcher (1993), can help increase the reliability for the rating practice. The implication of this for future rating practices of any performance assessment is that it is possible for raters, with or without extensive training in conversation analysis, to correctly identify the students' levels of competence and assign appropriate scores for their performance that is valid for its construct as long as they have been trained as follows. Firstly, they should be trained to recognize interactional practices that have been identified to be relevant for the task. An example is knowing that the typical task opening would progress from pre-opening sequence to self-presentation, and then complete with greeting exchange sequence. Secondly, they can identify features of competent participation in each stage of interaction.

Conclusion

This study investigated the validity of a group roleplay task in assessing EFL learners' socializing skills by examining students' interpretation of the task through the roles they selected and the interactional practices they employed during the roleplay performance.

The categorization of student roles revealed a high level of agreement between raters, with only a few instances of inappropriate roles chosen. This suggests that students generally interpreted the task requirements accurately and selected personas conducive to the welcoming reception setting of the product expo.

The conversation analysis of student interactions highlighted several key features of the roleplay task. Firstly, students managed the opening sequence by launching pre-opening questions and greetings, though some actions were occasionally abandoned or overlapped. Secondly, students variably showed awareness of the overall sequence organization of the roleplay and ability to design their turns in favor of progressing the roleplay and maintain the flow of conversation. Finally, students used a variety of methods for topic development involving both stepwise transitions when discussing work details and complete closings before shifting to new topics.

Ultimately, the study gives an overview of how individual students displayed varying levels of interactional competence within the parameters of this group roleplay task, with more competent students orienting to the overall sequence organization of the task, managing task progressivity more effectively and showing greater sensibility to design their turn for specific audience.

By analyzing task uptake through role selection and interactional practices, this study offers insights into improving the design and implementation of the roleplay task for future assessment purposes. We now have a better definition of what *appropriate* and *inappropriate* task interpretations

are, both in terms of the role design and the roleplay interactions that students These understandings can be used to further clarify our rubrics' descriptors and help provide practical examples for raters to understand different levels of task accomplishments in future trainings.

The findings in this study strongly support the specialization of tasks for assessing interactional competence, for example, interactional competence for doctor-patient interactions, or interactional competence in handling customer complaints, etc. Given the wealth of conversation analysis research findings on the topic of institutional conversations, future roleplay tasks and rubrics can be more data-driven and grounded in micro-observation of moment-by-moment managements of talks.

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Appendix 1

Roleplay task instruction and rubrics

Assessment 1 (10%)

Role-play: A conference welcoming party

Setting: The Products of the Year Conference and Expo is an event being held at the moment in Sydney, Australia. As this event deals with a wide range of businesses, it attracts thousands of participants from all over the world. None of the conference participants is from Thailand.

Assessment Task

You will be part of a group of 5 people who are meeting for the first time. You all work for different companies and are meeting **at the conference welcoming party**. You will introduce yourselves to each other and make small talk for 10-15 minutes. All group members should make use of the appropriate communication strategies, language functions and expressions covered in the first unit.

Preparing for the Assessment:

You will need to research a company and a position that you think will be interesting. You should find out key details about your company as well as the job responsibilities that your position would hold (You may make use of the "Company Profile & Job Description" on page 34 as guideline.) in order to have enough material to fill the 15-minute assessment. You should also research appropriate small talk topics. You won't know which people will be in your group until 15 minutes before your group is assessed. You will not be allowed to use a script.

On the Day of the Assessment:

At the beginning of the assessment, the members of the first group will be chosen. They will be given 15 minutes to practice together. As the first group is called in to perform, the members of the second group will be chosen, and they will prepare while the first group is being assessed. This will continue until every group has performed. During the role play, each student needs to participate actively for the entire conversation.

Group Scores (5)

Scores	5	4	3	2	1
Group collaboration (5)	- members contribute in **equal proportion** - **exceptionally well-prepared** and **professionally helped each other** out during the role-play - 1 min +/- the allotted time	- members contribute in **slightly unequal** proportion - **well-prepared** and **helped each other out nicely** during the role-play - **2** mins +/- the allotted time	- **2-3 members dominate** the role-play - **prepared; not so smooth** when helping each other out during the role-play, **in chunks, a few snags** - **3** mins +/- the allotted time	- **1 or 2 member (s) dominate(s)** the role-play - **individually prepared**, seems **fragmented, little collaboration** during the role-play - **4** mins +/- the allotted time	- **1 member dominates** the role-play - **individually prepared**, seems **very fragmented, no collaboration** - **5** mins or more +/- the allotted time

Individual Scores (15)

Scores	5	4	3	2	1
Content (5) (Talking about personal information, jobs and responsibilities; Talking about your company (accurate information), Business card)	- covers all key parts with substantial details - Accurate information	- covers all key parts with adequate details	- covers some points with appropriate details	- covers some points with explanation	- covers some points with some explanation - inaccurate information
Language & Pronunciation (5)	- **full control** of sentence structure - **no major errors, very few minor errors** - very clear & easy to understand	- **adequate control** of sentence structure - **occasional major and minor errors** - easy to understand	- **some major and minor errors** that are **sometimes distracting but do not interfere** with meaning - moderately difficult to understand	- **noticeable major and minor errors** that are **very distracting** - somewhat difficult to understand by sympathetic listeners	- **many noticeable major and minor errors** that **severely interfere with meaning** -difficult to understand by even sympathetic listeners
Delivery (fluency, performance) **(5)**	- **very fluent and natural** - **no script at all** (notes are okay) - may repeat or stumble **a few times**	- **fluent & natural** - **glances** at note **several times** - may repeat or stumble **several times, but not major**	- **moderately** fluent but **sounds memorized**; a few **pauses here and there but not distracting** - glances at notes often - **no major** breakdowns	- **somewhat** fluent; **some** long pauses - relies on notes from time to time - **a few major** breakdowns	- **not fluent; lots of** long pauses - **heavily** relies on notes - **some major** breakdowns

About the Author

Patharaorn Patharakorn obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Hawai'I at Mānoa and is currently a lecturer at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. Her research interests include conversation analysis of classroom interactions, role-play interactions, task-based language assessment, and rubric construction and validation.