

# The Impact of Role-Play on Thai EFL Learners' Interactional Competence: A Case Study of Pre-engineering and Pre-architecture Students in Vocational Education

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## Abstract

Interactional Competence (IC) is necessary for second/foreign language learners in using the second/foreign language in face-to-face interaction. Since social interaction is a complex process. It requires the participant's ability to; manage turn-taking; repair conversational troubles; articulate ideas and topics; organize the sequence of acts; and fully participate in the participation framework. This study posits that EFL learners' IC can be promoted through teacher's use of engaging, practical, and interactive teaching methods. Thus, this study investigated whether role-play benefits the teaching of IC for Thai EFL learners (i.e. participation framework, turn-taking strategies, repair mechanism, sequential organization of acts, and topic management). Therefore, two EFL classrooms comprised of Thai students of mixed gender, studying in a vocational college, were recruited. Data collection occurred during the English for Everyday Communication lesson, which focused on the topic of shopping. The learners' role-play performances were video recorded. Conversation Analysis was adopted for data analysis. The findings suggested that role-play benefited the teaching of IC. Appropriate use of role-play promoted interactive learning by moving the learners' participation framework towards the learners' center. Passive learners became interactive in the discursive practice. Self-initiated turn-taking strategy and the ability to articulate relevant topics for face-to-face interaction were adopted by the learners during the task. Other-initiated repair and self-initiated repair strategies helped the learners carry out their role-play successfully. This increased the learners' ability to organize multiple sequences of acts and increased their interactional abilities in using English in face-to-face interaction. However, role-play can be more effective in developing EFL learners' IC when the learner's planning time is adequate and script reading is avoided during role-play.

**Keywords:** interactional competence, role-play, face-to-face interaction, conversation analysis

## Introduction

Acquiring the ability to develop meaningful conversations in a second or foreign language is seen as the ultimate goal of language learning. However, it appears that many classroom activities are limited in offering learners opportunities to develop conversation skills for authentic social interaction. It has been pointed out that classroom interaction is far from the practice of authentic social interaction which requires unpredictable conversational features in conversation opening, developing conversational topics, turn-taking, organizing sequences, negotiating meaning, and participation. Walsh (2012, 2014) highlighted that these interactional abilities can be developed through classroom activities when increase opportunities for learners' involvement, engagement, and participation. Because interaction is a social activity therefore successful social interaction requires various interactional resources, not only the knowledge of language. In line with Walsh (2014), the present study views that the interactional competence or IC of L2 learners can be developed with effective teaching methods. This teaching method needs to go beyond the traditional methods i.e. lecture or note-taking. The present study believes that role-play activity may be an effective technique in improving the teaching of IC in L2 classrooms since it is a simulation of real-life encounters in various contexts of social interactions. Elsewhere, role-play is found to be an effective method, especially for developing conversation and dialogue skills (Daif-Allah & Al-Sultan, 2023). However, the present study interests in examining the benefits of role-play from an interactionist lens, the most recent language teaching and learning perspective that focuses on the role of social interaction in the development of language, communication, or behavior. An interactionist lens emphasizes how learners acquire and use language through meaningful interactions with others, such as peers, teachers, or the community. It suggests that language development is not just about individual cognitive processes but is deeply influenced by social exchanges and the context in which communication occurs. From an interactionist lens, role-play activities in language teaching are seen as valuable because they simulate real-life interactions, allowing learners to practice language skills in a social context, and promoting both linguistic competence and interactional competence (IC). This perspective aligns with the idea that language is shaped and learned through communication, collaboration, and negotiation of meaning in interaction (Hall et al., 2011; Young, 2019). This study therefore seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does role-play activity benefit language teaching in developing the learners' interactional competence?
2. What factors hinder or promote the development of IC in pre-university engineering and pre-university architecture students when role-play activity is used as a teaching method in EFL lessons?

## Literature Review

Two major related literature are reviewed in this section: 1) role-play, and 2) interactional competence. After a separate review of the literature on the two topics, the final section examines how role-play has been used in teaching interactional competence in EFL lessons, especially in the Thai EFL context.

### Role-play in English Language Teaching

Role-play is defined as ‘simulations of real-world interpersonal encounters, communications, or events’ (Van Hasselt et al., 2008, p. 251). Using role-play in language teaching is one of the most popular activities for promoting conversational skills in the target language. (Daif-Allah & Al-Sultan, 2023; Liu & Ding, 2009; Srithep & Patharakorn, 2024). Studies reported that using role-play in language teaching can develop L2 learners’ dialogue skills in terms of self-esteem, good listening, the expression of opinion, respect for others, and motivated students to develop dialogue skills in an organized manner. (Daif-Allah & Al-Sultan, 2023). Nguyen (2023) applied drama-based activity in teaching high school students the speaking skills of EFL learners in Vietnam. Based on questionnaires and interviews, the results of their study revealed that students had positive perceptions towards the use of drama-based activity in speaking lessons because it helped them improve their discourse management.

In the Thai EFL context, in the past decade, Phuetphon et al. (2012) investigated the impact of unscripted role-play on the development of Thai university students’ speaking skills in English for communication courses. The findings showed that students significantly improved their speaking skills in terms of fluency, pronunciation accuracy, and appropriate language use after learning English lessons through role-play. Their study further recommended that role-play can be more effective when students are allowed to share their opinions independently, teachers should make students feel comfortable, and unscripted role-play is preferred over scripted role-play by the students in this study. Nakseevee (2013) studied the impact of non-scripted role-play activity on the oral performance of Thai university students in EFL classes. The results showed that role-play activities helped improve the abilities of Thai EFL learners to naturally employ the target language in conversation in terms of turn-taking, sequence organizing, overlaps, reciprocal greeting, third turn assessment, self-initiated, self-repair, and the use of turn-holding, delay devices. The study further suggested that promoting non-scripted role-play in EFL lessons diverted from the traditional method that emphasized language form to meaningful and effective communication. As a result, it helped the learners to improve fluency, pronunciation, expression style, and choice of words. Putri and Hariyati (2016) investigated the impact of role-play as a method to improve the English-speaking ability of a secondary school student in Thailand. Their study found that role-play helped to improve learners’ speaking abilities in widening their vocabulary knowledge and usage and utter more correct pronunciation of English words. Their study further claimed that role-play

enhanced more active learning in EFL classrooms. Worawong et al. (2017) used role-play as a method to teach intercultural competence to Thai university students in English courses. Their study found that the use of role-play helped the learners gain a better understanding of nonverbal clues that could be encountered in actual communication. Their study recommends that role-play should be introduced to English classes because it is beneficial to get learners engaged in conversation flows more naturally. Other studies also suggested that the use of role-play in language teaching can be more effective when the chosen topics of role-play activities are real and relevant, the teacher's appropriate feed-in language, properly provides error correction, and the teacher acts as a learning facilitator-like (Liu & Ding, 2009). Hence, students' age and experience should be considered when designing a role-play or selecting role-play topics (Liu & Ding, 2009). More recently, Srithep and Patharakorn (2024) examined how Thai EFL university students incorporate humor in various role-play situations to enhance communication effectiveness. Their findings revealed that humor in role-plays is not only used to make situations funny, but it also plays a role in enhancing social connections between learners, making language communication more engaging, and helping to build confidence in using the language. Some students use humor to alleviate tension and create a relaxed atmosphere during speaking practice. The use of humor in role-plays allows learners to practice response skills and the use of more complex language. The study further suggests that the use of humor in role-plays can make language learning more enjoyable for learners, but caution is needed in selecting words and interpreting the humor, as humor may not be understood the same way by everyone.

Based on the literature review, it is evidenced that role-play helps to improve students' language use in real-world communication scenarios. However, more empirical research is needed to explore the connection between the use of role-play and the promotion of students' IC. The present study aims to examine how role-play activities benefit language teaching in developing learners' IC and identify the factors that either hinder or promote the development of IC in pre-university engineering and architecture students when role-play is used as a teaching method in their EFL classrooms.

### **Interactional Competence (IC)**

The concept of interactional competence (IC) was initiated by Kramersch in 1986 to change the emphasis from grammatical competence and communicative competence to interactional competence (Young, 2019). Kramersch (1986) viewed that L2 learners should be competent in employing their existing skills and knowledge of L2 in social interactions rather than focusing on the knowledge of language function, content, and accuracy. This agrees with Well's and Cummin's view that L2 learning is a collaborative activity (as cited in Kramersch, 1986, p. 367, 369). Kramersch (1986) further argued that learners should be given adequate opportunities to demonstrate their interactional abilities - "the abilities to reflect on interactional processes, to manipulate and control contexts, to see oneself from an outsider's point of view" (p. 369). Kramersch's (1986) notion of IC has influenced several studies to gain an in-depth understanding of IC and its features.

Hall (1995) expanded the concept of IC by suggesting that IC is another component of language competence. In other words, Hall (1995) put it as “the ability to develop and manage topical issues in practices-relevant ways” (p. 39). Young (2008) further explains that IC is the relationship between the participants’ employment of linguistic and interactional resources and the contexts in which they are employed. Thus, IC is co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice. In a similar line, Walsh (2012) views IC as “the ability of the speakers who can pay attention to the local context, to listen and show that they have understood, to clarify meanings, to repair breakdowns, and so on” (p. 2). Up to the present, there are seven IC frameworks proposed by Oksaar (1979, as cited in Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011), Hall (1995), He and Young (1998), Young and Miller (2004), Kasper (2006), Young (2008), and Celce-Murcia (2008). In the present study, IC is viewed as the interactional abilities of L2 learners in participation framework, turn-taking strategies, sequential organization of acts, repair mechanisms, and topic management, which appear similar to Kasper’s (2006) IC framework. To draw the line for the CA of the data analysis of this study, the following section provides the details of what the five IC constructs mean in this study context.

The first construct of IC is the participation framework. The concept of the participation framework has been discussed and developed by various scholars across fields such as sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and applied linguistics. From a sociolinguistics perspective, the term was introduced by Ervin Goffman to explain the nature of face-to-face interaction. According to Goffman (1981), participation centered around roles and interactions within a given social context. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (2006) posit that participation frameworks are social roles and relationships that impact communication. From CA domain, Goodwin and Heritage (1990) defined participation framework as how participants in a conversation get involved in the construction of meaning, and how roles and relationships between the participants shape interaction. This involves the analysis of turn-taking, sequence organization, and participant roles in everyday conversation. They emphasized how participants manage their roles in talk-in-interaction. Young (2008) applied the concept of the participation framework in the context of language assessment, focusing on the importance of IC in oral proficiency testing. His work highlights the roles of participants in formal language assessments, especially in role-play tasks. For Young (2008), the participation framework is the way the participants are involved in the conversations. In other words, it means the role in which the participants perform in conversations (Young, 2008). Drawing on these definitions of participation frameworks, the present study aims to examine the extent to which participants enact their roles during interactions with other discourse members in the role-play activity. Second, it is turn-taking strategies which are explained as the ability of the interactional member to turn-seeking (Leelasopawut, 2022; Wong & Waring, 2010). This study aims to examine how role-play activity encourages the participants to construct or allocate their turns in conversation exchanges. Third, it is a topic management. This refers to the ability of the participants to lead one conversational topic to another or open and close one topic to make a shift to another. Fourth, the repair mechanism refers to the participants’ ability to fix conversational troubles

(Wong & Waring, 2010; Young, 2008). The final feature of this study is sequential organization of acts. This refers to “series-of-turns” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 1). In other words, it is the participants’ methods of connecting two or more turns coherently (Leelasopawut, 2022). Wong and Waring (2010) noted that these five elements are basic and essential for successful conversation-making in social interactions. In this line, the five IC features are the focus of this study.

### **Research in Role-play and IC**

Role-play has been widely used in both education and research across various disciplines to create interactive learning (Muhayyo & Muhabbat, 2024). However, its use in the field of IC has gained significant attention only in recent years. Dated back, Kormos (1999) posited that role-play tasks can replicate aspects of conversations authentically and realistically. Therefore, she suggested that role-play could be useful for measuring the IC features of test takers' conversational abilities in an oral assessment. In a similar line, Hu (2015) conducted a study to examine the interactional features of assessment-oriented role-play among Chinese English learners in China. The study found that assessment-oriented role-play encouraged the learners to use various interactional resources to negotiate with their interlocutors across different proficiency levels, resulting in joint interaction and collaborative tasks. The findings also revealed that role-play could facilitate greater learning if the learners shared a similar proficiency level. Kasper and Youn (2018) argued that role-play helps bridge the gap between language learning and real-world communication by creating authentic contexts for meaningful interaction. They emphasized that role-play not only assesses linguistic proficiency but also interactional competence, which is essential for effective communication. Youn (2020) viewed that while interactions in role-play may not be fully authentic, they can still effectively demonstrate the test takers' level of competence. Lampropoulou (2022) also agreed that role-play can be useful in eliciting test takers' conversation management skills, similar to those observed in real-life conversations. Therefore, incorporating role-play as a task in oral proficiency interviews is valuable when including the construct of IC in speaking assessments. Youn and Chaipupae (2022) explored how L2 learners navigate pragmatics such as understanding cultural norms, appropriate use of language in context, and managing social roles within role-play scenarios. Their findings indicated that role-play interactions provide a valuable context for assessing and developing L2 pragmatic competence, as learners can practice real-life communication strategies, adjust their language according to social contexts, and manage conversational dynamics. Their study highlights the importance of role-play in enhancing learners' ability to use language effectively and appropriately in diverse conversational settings. Havadar and Balaman (2024) investigated how paired role-play activities can be adopted as a method for assessing L2 IC in language education. The study found that paired role-play can be a valuable and practical method for assessing L2 IC, as they focus on real communicative functions including turn-taking, repair mechanism, and pragmatic appropriateness. The study emphasized that task design and the context in which role-plays are conducted are essential for accurately assessing L2 learners'

outcomes. Additionally, factors such as learner anxiety and limited language proficiency can significantly impact the assessment results. In Thailand, Srithep and Patharakorn (2024) studied how Thai EFL university students incorporate humor in various role-play situations to enhance communication effectiveness. Their findings revealed that humor in role-plays is not only used to make situations funny, but it also plays a role in enhancing social connections between learners, making language communication more engaging, and helping to build confidence in using the language. Some students use humor to alleviate tension and create a relaxed atmosphere during speaking practice. The use of humor in role-plays allows learners to practice response skills and the use of more complex language. The study further suggests that the use of humor in role-plays can make language learning more enjoyable for learners, but caution is needed in selecting words and interpreting the humor, as humor may not be understood the same way by everyone. Recently, Li (2025) explored how lower-level English language learners co-create meaning and negotiate understanding during role-play activities in online English-speaking lessons. The study focused on intersubjectivity (shared understanding) and co-constructed framings (jointly developed contexts or interpretations) that emerge in these interactive tasks. The findings highlighted that role-play interactions allow students to collaboratively build meaning and effectively navigate various social contexts.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts the case study approach as a methodology to gain an understanding of the current phenomenon. As suggested by Yin (2003), “a case study approach enables the researcher to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (p.13). Thus, adopting an exploratory case study enables the researcher to explore a changing phenomenon through Conversation Analysis of IC, which is appropriate to examine the impact of teachers’ differing teaching techniques in promoting or obstructing the development of IC in their EFL classrooms.

### **Participants**

The research site explored in this study was a vocational college in Thailand located in Chiang Mai Province. The selection of the research site is based on the accessibility and convenience of the researcher who works as a full-time English lecturer at the time when the data collection took place. In relevance to the research focus, two EFL classrooms were purposefully selected as a case study. The participants were first-year learners, aged between 15–17 years old, enrolled in pre-engineering and pre-architecture courses, selected regardless of age and gender. However, the participants were required to study in “English for Everyday Communication” lessons when the data collection took place. Since this study involved students below 18 years old, to avoid unethical considerations, an information sheet and informed consent were provided to the participants to ensure their parents’ permission and the student’s willingness to participate in the study before the data collection.

## **Context**

In the participants' context, EFL has been one of the compulsory subjects in the completion of the curriculum. This study selects a topic from "English for Everyday Communication", which is a compulsory course for first-year students of pre-engineering, pre-architecture, and pre-business administration courses. However, data collection is taken from first-year pre-architecture and pre-engineering students enrolled in the English Program (EP). Most of the students in this course appear to have limited ability to use English for oral communication. This study aims to investigate how role-play benefits language teaching in developing learners' IC, while also examining the factors that hinder or promote the development of IC in pre-university engineering and architecture students.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Following the introduction to the activity, participants were asked to independently form a group of 4–5. They were then given instructions for role-play, which focused on the topic of 'shopping' and was the same for all groups. The participants were free to design their role-play scripts and shopping context within an hour of planning time. Each group performance was conducted in front of the class for about 5–10 minutes. The role-play performances were videotaped for data analysis.

Following the data collection, conversation analysis (CA) was adopted to analyze the interactions between the learners videotaped during their role-play. Using CA in this study enabled the researcher to explore the features of IC through an analysis of the interactions between learners gathered through videotape. CA is adopted in this study as it is the most appropriate to analyze the interactional abilities of the participants in simulating real-life conversation. In agreement with Barraja Rohan's (2011) view of the advantages of using CA for studying classroom interactional competence in second language teaching. Furthermore, CA allows the researcher to overcome the constraints of examining classroom interactional competence that are difficult to explore through traditional methods i.e., coded, counted, or summarized presentation. Additionally, CA allows the researcher to uncover the realities from an emic perspective (Ten Have, 2007), in line with the study's theoretical underpinning that understanding the influence of teachers' teaching pedagogies on the development of IC should be studied from a bottom-up approach. Since the study is informed by the CA approach, the data analysis involved data transcription, selection of relevant extracts, transcribing the data with CA, and identifying the features of IC concerning teachers' pedagogies used in their classrooms.

## Findings

In this section, two excerpts of students' interaction during the role-play activity have been selected to illustrate how the role-play activity encourages the students to employ their interactional resources in a simulation of social interaction within the shopping context. Following each excerpt, comments are made concerning the evidence of IC constructs employed by the participants in the role-play activity.

Excerpt 1 below features a conversation in which pre-architecture students role-play as grocery buyers interacting with a shopkeeper in a grocery store.

### Excerpt 1: The performance of pre-architecture students during their role-play activity

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[1] A TODAY↑ (.) my mom (.) ↑tood me to buy (0.4) arh grocery (.) for ↑coo↓king.  
 [2] (0.4) let's go to buy (0.4) ↑oh butcher shop =  
 [3] SS Hhhhhh  
 [4] B =Hello! ((waving)) =  
 [5] A =Hello! What do you have.=  
 [6] B =I have ((count his fingers)) chicken pork and meat (.) what do you buy?  
 [7] A I want (.) a meat (0.4) one kilo.  
 [8] SS hhhh  
 [9] B (0.4) it t↑wenty baht.  
 [10] A (.) t↑wenty baht?  
 [11] B ((nodding))  
 [12] A I think it's too expensive. can you discount (.) for me?  
 [13] SS ~~หม่า~~ ((bargain)) hhhh  
 [14] B \$fifteen  
 [15] A fifteen. how a↓bout (.) ten baht?  
 [16] B twelve baht.  
 [17] SS hhhh  
 [18] A \$t↑welve baht okay ah\$  
 [19] B ((take the money from A))  
 [20] A ((turn to another side)) ↑Oh. this (.) is s↑pice shop. ((smile))  
 [21] SS hhhhhh  
 [22] C (.) yeah. what do you want?=  
 [23] A =I want (.) ↓ah (0.4) red pepper.  
 [24] C yeah (.) wait a minute. (0.4) do you want this? ((show two items supposedly red peppers))=  
 [25] A =yes (0.4) how much?  
 [26] C twenty bath.  
 [27] A (.) twenty bath?=  
 [28] C =yeah  
 [29] A ((search for the money in his pocket, then handling the money to C in exchange with the goods))  
 [30] thank you  
 [31] SS hhhhhhhh  
 [32] A Okay ((turn the goods around for checking) okay. let's go to home. oh I forgot something. ((walking back to the shop)) what do you buy?=  
 [33]

[36] D    =\$twenty baht\$=  
 [37]       =\$OY\$=  
 [38] SS    hhhhh  
 [39] A    vegetable, right?  
 [40] D    ↑yeah  
 [41] A    do you have a carrot?=  
 [42] D    =Yeah=  
 [43] A    =Where? (0.4) Where is carrot?=  
 [44] D    = ((point to the white board where the carrot is))  
 [45] SS    hhhhh  
 [46] A    how much how much is it?  
 [47] D    \$twenty five\$  
 [48] A    ((touch his chin with one of his hand seems he is thinking about something)) can  
 [49]       you can you discount?  
 [50] D    (0.4)↑no  
 [51] A    how a↑bout (0.4) twenty five? =  
 [52] D    =no=  
 [53] A    =no?=  
 [54] D    =↑NO  
 [55] A    twenty four?  
 [56] D    No :: no \$twenty ↑FIVE\$  
 [57] SS    hahahaha  
 [58] A    O↑kay. ((buy)) let's go to home ((start walking))

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The above excerpt features a conversation among pre-architecture students—A, B, C, and D—with the entire class (SS) serving as the audience during their role-play performance. The interaction simulates a grocery shop setting, involving a customer, a butcher, a spice shopkeeper, and a vegetable seller engaged in a grocery-buying scenario.

Unlike the pre-engineering students, the pre-architecture students used a story preface or storytelling to initiate the conversation during the role-play. This is evident in lines 1–2, where A engages in self-talk, indirectly establishing the interactional context for the audience and eliciting laughter from them in line 3. This is a typical role-play scene that does not usually occur in authentic social interactions. However, A's opening sequence presents an interesting approach to turn allocation, allowing B to self-select his turn using both verbal and non-verbal cues. This mimics the way a typical shopkeeper greets customers in a market setting, leading to the organization of the actual first adjacency pair (lines 4–5) when A resumes his turn by responding to B's greeting with the typical greeting token “Hello” and offer space to develop further conversation by asking B what is available in the shop. This serves as the second pair part, helping to maintain the conversational structure. The conversation between A and B (lines 1–19) flows smoothly, with no noticeable breaks. Notably, a confirmation check is seen in lines 9–10, while a non-verbal cue, such as nodding, is used to complete a turn in line 11. This interactional strategy is commonly observed in real-life conversations. Additionally, B occasionally uses non-verbal cues—such as counting on his fingers—not as a repair mechanism, but as a tool to enhance the meaning of his verbal utterances (line 11). In line 18, B says "Okay" as a

projectability cue to signal the closing of the sequence, thereby marking the completion of their conversation.

In line 20, A again uses self-talk as a method to initiate a new conversation with C, the spice shopkeeper. A's opening sequence is acknowledged by C, who uses the confirmation token "yeah" and an inquiry to further develop their conversation. From lines 20 to 32, we can observe multiple turn exchanges between A and C, with a smooth flow of conversation.

In line 34, A again uses self-talk as a method to initiate a new conversation with D, the vegetable seller. A few mistakes are made in line 35 when A asks D, "What do you buy?" instead of "What do you sell?". Interestingly, no repair is made for this error. Instead, D responds by stating the price (line 36), which is irrelevant to A's inquiry. In a real conversation, this could be considered ineffective communication, as the response does not address the intended question. However, the entire conversation between A and D is interesting, particularly with the use of drawing to help develop the conversation about buying vegetables, such as the carrot drawing in line 44. It is observed that multiple turns occur between A and D as they negotiate the price of the vegetable (lines 46–58).

Overall, we see significant student involvement throughout the data set. However, the most interesting finding from these role-play excerpts is that overlapping talk between interactants does not occur at any point in the data set. To make their role-play conversations more closely resemble authentic interactions, students may need to practice using overlaps in conversation. Since appropriate and timely overlaps are viewed not as inappropriate but as a sign of skilled interaction (Wong & Waring, 2011), it is important to help students develop this ability through role-play activities.

Excerpt 2 below features a conversation in which pre-engineering students role-play as customers interacting with a waiter at a café.

### **Extract 2: The performance of pre-engineering students during their role-play activity**

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[1]	SS	hhhhh
[2]	S1	hhh ((walking to the customers sitting on dining table)) \$↑Can I take your order now::\$=
[3]	S2	=yes:: (0.4) may I have hhhh ((laugh)) can I have a cup of milk?
[4]	S3	And I a::h a cup of coffee and chocolate cake please?= =↑Sure would you like anything (0.4) to drink with?= =A::h may I have a::h (.) croissant= =\$And you\$?= =No thank you ((laugh)) that will be ((gesture)) for now. ((return to counter)) the order is (0.4) a cup of ↑milk (.)coo↑kies, ↑two (.)two cup of cof↑fee chocolate cake and croissant. (.) ↑Oh okay, but croissant is out of stock.= =↑OH (.) can you (.) can you ask with them yourself?= =Of ↑course ((walk to the customers)) <u>but</u> croissant is out of stock. will you ↑want some↑thing else? ↑No ((laugh)) we are fine for now ↑thanks.= =((Smile then walk back to the counter and back to the customer)) your or↑der is rea↑dy enjoy your ↑food and ↑drink. Thank ↑you.
[5]	S1	
[6]	S3	
[7]	S1	
[8]	S2	
[9]	S1	
[10]		
[11]	S4	
[12]	S1	
[13]	S4	
[14]		
[15]	S3	
[16]	S4	
[17]		

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The above excerpt is an example of conversation during the role-play activity videotaped in English for Everyday Communication lesson of pre-engineering students. This instance involves a conversation between S1, S2, S3, and S4, with the whole class (SS) serving as the audience for the role-play. The interaction simulates a café setting, featuring two customers, a waitress, and a waiter engaged in ordering food and drinks.

Overall, there is clear evidence of interactional strategies employed by the role-play participants to collaboratively develop their simulation of social interaction within a shopping context. The most prominent methods include self-initiated turn-taking, topic shifts and expansions, multiple sequencing organization practices, non-verbal repair mechanisms, and embodied completions. These strategies contribute to a balanced engagement, allowing participants to share the conversational space equally. As seen in line 2, S1 demonstrates sequencing practices to initiate the conversation, specifically by using a request as a strategy to open the interaction with S2 and S3, who are positioned as customers in the café setting. This interactional strategy invites participation from S2 or S3, providing them with an opportunity to employ self-selected turn-taking strategies during the exchange. Following S1's grammatically well-formed utterance, S2 successfully self-selects his turn by responding appropriately with the confirmation token 'yes,' indicating that their interests in receiving service at the café. S2's response contributes to the structuring of the first adjacency pair in the conversation, forming the First Pair Part (FPP) across line 2 and 3. In line 4, S3 continues the exchange by saying "And I a::h a cup of coffee and chocolate cake please?" , which functions as an expansion of the initial adjacency pair, effectively including himself in the interaction and contributing to the development of a multi-turn conversation. In line 5, S1 politely responds to S2 and S3's request with a different confirmation token, 'sure,' showcasing a wider range of confirmation strategies. S1 further extends the conversation by shifting the topic from drinks to food or bakery items, thereby creating the second adjacency pair in the interaction. This prompts S2 and S3 to respond using a preference organization practice, expressing either a preferred or dispreferred response.

Another prominent interactional strategy observed in this excerpt is the use of embodied completion, where participants rely on physical gestures to complete their turns. For instance, in line 8, S2 compensates for missing words by using hand gestures, effectively completing his turn through nonverbal means. In contrast, S1 addresses a moment of conversational trouble by making a request to S4 to provide information during his turn, using this strategy to repair or clarify the interaction. As the conversation unfolds, the participants equally share in co-constructing the interaction. The conversation also flows with genuineness and naturalness, free from teacher interruptions, comments, or feedback. Towards the end, we observe the participant's interactional ability to organize a sequence closing in lines 16 and 17, providing the audience (SS) with a clear sense of the conversation as it might occur in a real café.

## Discussion

This study aims to explore two research questions. The first question investigates the potential benefits of using role-play to develop interactional competence (IC) in Thai EFL learners. The second question examines the factors that either hinder or promote the development of IC in pre-university engineering and pre-architecture students when role-play is used as a teaching method in EFL lessons. For the first research question, a detailed analysis using Conversation Analysis (CA) was conducted to examine the learners' use of IC features during role-play activities simulating social interactions in a shopping context. The findings, drawn from two case studies in EFL classrooms (pre-engineering and pre-architecture), reveal that role-play activities enhance the teaching of IC by providing learners with opportunities to apply various interactional strategies. These strategies include managing turn-taking, introducing and articulating topics, repairing conversational disruptions, organizing sequences of actions, and contributing meaningfully to the development of conversational exchanges. The key findings from the analyzed data will be discussed below.

Firstly, the findings suggest that role-play effectively enhances the IC of EFL learners by fostering more active and engaged participation in face-to-face interactions. This study observes that, through role-play, EFL learners are required to adopt various roles. Role-play allows them to step outside their typical classroom roles as students. For example, in the context of this study, learners assume the roles of shoppers and sellers engaging in conversations about shopping. In doing so, they develop the ability to articulate appropriate verbal expressions in the target language based on the roles they assume. The findings suggest that role-play functions as a time machine, imaginatively transporting learners into simulated real-world scenarios. It allows them to practice language in contexts that mirror authentic social interactions. By stepping into these imagined roles, learners are not just rehearsing vocabulary or grammar, but they are engaging in the kinds of spontaneous, meaningful exchanges that happen outside the classroom. That is where IC develops: through negotiation of meaning, managing turns, repairing misunderstandings, and using body language or tone in real time. The findings align with Goffman's (1981) and Young's (2008) concept of the participation framework, which emphasizes that social interaction encompasses a range of participant roles. This highlights that the relationship between interlocutors often extends beyond the simplistic speaker-listener dynamic. The use of role-play activities in this study supports EFL learners in organizing their participation through the roles they adopt, drawing on both verbal and nonverbal interactional resources to construct dialogues and accomplish role-play tasks. While enacting roles such as shoppers and sellers, they learn to engage in dynamic forms of participation that go beyond the traditional speaker-hearer dichotomy.

Secondly, the findings indicate that role-play enhances learners' ability to initiate turns in face-to-face interactions. In this study, self-initiated turn-taking was particularly evident during role-play performances among both pre-engineering and pre-architecture students. The study reveals that role-play requires learners to actively engage in conversation, rather than simply waiting for prompts or

following a script. By assuming different roles, learners are compelled to initiate and manage parts of the dialogue, which encourages a proactive approach to turn-taking and helps drive the conversation forward. In real-life interactions, individuals often need to self-initiate turns to maintain the flow of conversation, whether by articulating a new topic or taking over an ongoing exchange. Role-play simulates these spontaneous interactions, providing learners with the opportunity to practice the necessary skills for navigating conversations naturally. As a result, learners gain confidence in managing conversations. By practicing roles such as a seller or customer in a shopping context, they learn when and how to initiate turns or intervene in the conversation without relying on others, thereby building autonomy in their turn-taking ability. Additionally, role-play helps EFL learners strategically initiate turns at key moments such as by asking questions, introducing new topics, or responding to sustain the dialogue, thus improving their real-life interactional skills.

Thirdly, it is important to highlight that role-play supports EFL learners in developing the ability to initiate and expand topics within social interactions. In this study, although the role-play scenario was the same for both pre-engineering and pre-architecture students, the conversational topics that emerged varied between the two groups. While learners were required to co-construct dialogue during their role-play performances, it was observed that both groups frequently made requests or used embodied completions to manage conversational challenges during their turns. Interactional features such as non-verbal resources including gaze and gestures indicated that learners' repair strategies played a key role in meaning-making and fostering intersubjectivity in conversation. For example, hand gestures were often employed to compensate for the missing vocabulary when learners struggled to retrieve specific words. As learners participated in the role-play, the conversational topics evolved dynamically, leading to multiple and varied sequences of interaction.

These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that role-play interactions enable students to collaboratively construct meaning and effectively navigate diverse social contexts (Li, 2025). They also support Naksevee's (2013) study, which found that role-play activities enhanced Thai EFL learners' ability to naturally use the target language in conversation, particularly in areas such as turn-taking, sequence organization, overlaps, reciprocal greetings, third-turn assessments, self-initiated self-repair, and the use of turn-holding and delay devices. The present study further suggests that role-play is beneficial in offering space and time for learners to practice their interactional skills in discursive practice. According to Walsh & Li (2013), teachers need to create space for learning. Scholars recommend teachers take the key role in increasing learning opportunities and shaping learners' contributions (Can Daşkın, 2015; Li, 2017). Hence, one way to promote learners' learning and shape their contribution is to promote classroom interaction (Walsh, 2012, 2014). This view appears consistent with the social interactionist perspective in positing that language proficiency and competency are not only about one's knowledge of the language functions, accuracy, and fluency, but it is more about one having the ability to apply the knowledge of language suitably and meaningfully to contexts (Kramsch, 1986). Hence, interaction is recommended as a tool to stimulate classroom

interaction (Li, 2017; Walsh, 2012, 2014). In correspondence to this view, the findings of this study confirm that role-play can be used as an effective tool to stimulate interaction in language classrooms.

For the second research question, the findings suggest that to use role-play more effectively, teachers can support learners' learning by addressing areas such as correcting pronunciation mistakes at the end of the role-play. It is clear in this study that without the teacher's interruption during the participant's role-play enhanced more natural conversation flows. Although there were some instances where the participants encountered difficulties in pronouncing words and vocabulary, they somehow managed to use gestures to resolve their difficulties and successfully used the gestures to convey their thoughts. Hence, the findings of this study confirm previous findings (Phuetphon et al., 2012; Naksevee, 2013; Worawong et al., 2017) that non-scripted role-play benefited the teaching of conversation skills in enhancing more genuine and natural conversation skills. Based on the present findings, non-scripted role-play is further recommended. However, there could be different results on different groups therefore future studies may conduct a similar study to compare whether non-scripted role-play and scripted role-play have different impacts on improving students' IC.

It is clear in this study that using role-play in language classrooms promotes students' interactional skills. However, learners' experience in learning the language through role-play can turn negative if they lack good preparation. So, an appropriate time plan is recommended. Hence, the findings agree with Walsh & Li (2013) that increased planning time can help create learning space for learners to promote conversations in language classrooms.

Furthermore, the findings point to learners' need for teachers' support. As shown in the data, the participants occasionally ran out of words but finally self-managed to use gestures to fix their conversation troubles to help the conversation flow. Pronunciation mistakes were also found in the data. To construct learning opportunities, teachers may help to shape their learners' learning by providing feedback at the end of their role-play, suggesting alternative vocabulary or more suitable words for the learning context, fixing their incorrect pronunciation, revising correct sentence structure and tenses, as well as adding information concerning cultural differences of western and eastern beliefs and practices. In this way, teachers can facilitate learners' learning when using role-play to promote learners' IC in EFL classrooms.

Most importantly, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of role-play as Richards (1985) noted that, while it can be beneficial for learners in developing conversational competence, claiming its effectiveness without recognizing the artificial nature of the activity can be misleading. When designing role-play activities for language teaching, failing to address this aspect may hinder students from fully acquiring the intended competencies. Furthermore, they miss the opportunity to observe how real-life conversations unfold beyond the role-play context.

### Conclusion

Although there is evidence of using role-play as a method for language teaching. Unlike the existing literature, this paper attempts to examine the benefits of role-play in language teaching using a conversation analysis approach. In this context, how role-play activity benefits the development of Thai EFL learners' interactional abilities in English lessons for pre-university engineering students and pre-university architecture students. To simulate an authentic social interaction, "shopping" was selected as the role-play topic to guide the learners in designing their social interaction context. Students' interactions during the role-play activity were videotaped. Conversation analysis is used as a method for data analysis. The findings reveal that role-play is effective in promoting the IC of the participants in terms of encouraging their self-initiated turn-taking. The appropriate use of role-play promoted interactive learning by moving the learners' participation framework toward the learning center. Passive learners became interactive in the discursive practice. Self-initiated turn-taking strategy and the ability to articulate relevant topics for face-to-face interaction were adopted by the learners during the task. Other initiated repair and self-initiated repair strategies helped the learners carry out their role-play successfully. This increased the learners' ability to organize multiple sequences of acts and increased their interactional abilities in using English in face-to-face interaction. However, role-play can be more effective in developing EFL learners' IC when the learner's planning time is adequate and script reading is avoided during role-play.

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