

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59294/HIUJS2026078>

# Applying role-play to foster language and cultural competence in East Asian language majors at Hong Bang International University

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the effectiveness of role-playing as a pedagogical approach for enhancing language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among university students majoring in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean at Hong Bang International University. Grounded in experiential learning theory and intercultural competence frameworks, the research adopted a mixed-methods design involving 120 participants across the three language majors. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-tests assessing speaking performance, while qualitative data were obtained from surveys, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations to contextualize learning outcomes. The results indicate overall improvements in learners' oral fluency, grammatical accuracy, and interactional ability following the role-playing intervention, with varying degrees of gain across the three language majors. Japanese majors demonstrated comparatively higher post-test gains, while Chinese and Korean majors also showed consistent improvement. In terms of intercultural communicative competence, students exhibited enhanced attitudinal openness, interpretive skills, and behavioral adaptability. Qualitative findings further suggest that role-playing supported contextualized language use and increased learner engagement, although challenges related to vocabulary limitations and performance anxiety remained. These findings highlight the pedagogical value of role-playing in fostering both linguistic development and intercultural awareness in foreign language education. The study contributes empirical evidence supporting the systematic integration of role-play activities into language curricula, particularly for high-context languages and multilingual classroom contexts.*

**Keyword:** role-playing, language proficiency, intercultural communicative competence, drama-based pedagogy, East Asian language education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to pedagogical approaches that enhance not only linguistic proficiency but also learners' ability to communicate effectively across cultures. Role-playing has emerged as a learner-centered instructional method that promotes experiential learning by engaging students in simulated real-life communicative situations [1]. Grounded in experiential learning theory, role-play emphasizes learning through action, reflection, and contextualized application [2]. While previous research has documented the effectiveness of role-play in English language education, comparatively limited attention has been given to its application in teaching high-context languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. These languages require learners to navigate culturally embedded norms, indirect communication styles,

and socially defined roles, extending beyond grammatical and lexical competence. In such contexts, the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is integral to successful language use [3]. In the Vietnamese higher education context, foreign language instruction has traditionally emphasized grammatical accuracy and examination performance, often leaving limited opportunities for interactive and culturally grounded learning. This pedagogical orientation highlights the need for instructional approaches that integrate language use with cultural understanding. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the effectiveness of role-playing activities in enhancing language proficiency and ICC among university students majoring in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean at Hong Bang International University.

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Using a mixed-methods design, the study examines changes in students' speaking and listening performance as well as their intercultural awareness and interactional skills following a structured role-playing intervention. By providing empirical evidence from three language majors within a single institutional context, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of applied linguistics literature on experiential learning and offer pedagogically relevant insights for foreign language education in Vietnam and similar educational settings.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Role-Playing as a Pedagogical Tool for Language and Intercultural Development**

Role-playing has been widely recognized as an effective pedagogical approach in second and foreign language education, particularly within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) frameworks. By engaging learners in simulated social interactions, role-playing provides structured yet flexible opportunities for meaningful language use in context-rich situations [4]. Previous studies have demonstrated that role-playing supports the development of pragmatic competence, politeness strategies, and interactional skills, especially in languages where communication is strongly shaped by social roles and cultural norms. For example, Sato (2001) highlights the effectiveness of role-play in enhancing learners' understanding of culturally appropriate communication practices in Japanese [5]. Similar findings have been reported in Asian language learning contexts, where role-playing encourages learners to move beyond rote memorization and apply linguistic forms in socially appropriate ways [6]. Beyond linguistic development, role-playing plays a significant role in fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Byram's (1997) model conceptualizes ICC as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, interpretive skills, interactional abilities, and critical cultural awareness [3]. Role-playing activities allow learners to rehearse intercultural encounters, negotiate meaning, and adapt communicative behavior in culturally sensitive ways. Research on pragmatic instruction has shown that role-play enhances learners' ability to manage politeness, implicature, and adaptability in high-context languages such as Japanese and Korean, where

language choices reflect hierarchical relationships and collective values [7]. Moreover, simulation-based activities have been found to promote empathy, perspective-taking, and cultural tolerance by exposing learners to viewpoints different from their own [8].

### **2.2. Experiential learning theory as an analytical framework**

This study is theoretically grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation [2]. ELT provides a coherent framework for understanding how role-playing facilitates both language development and intercultural learning. Through participation in role-play scenarios, learners engage in concrete communicative experiences, reflect on their language use and cultural choices, formulate insights about linguistic and cultural norms, and subsequently apply these insights in future interactions. Despite the growing body of research on role-playing in EFL contexts, existing studies have largely focused on English-major students or monolingual classroom settings. Limited attention has been given to the comparative effects of role-playing across multiple high-context Asian languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean, particularly within multi-lingual educational contexts like Vietnam. Furthermore, few studies have examined how role-playing simultaneously influences language proficiency and ICC across different language majors. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts ELT as an analytical lens to investigate the pedagogical impact of role-playing on both linguistic and intercultural development among students from three language majors within a single institutional context.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Research design and objectives**

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine the effects of role-playing on language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence among students majoring in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean at Hong Bang International University. Drawing on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory [2] and Byram's ICC framework [3], the study investigates how role-playing activities foster learners' fluency, accuracy,

interactional skills, and intercultural awareness through experiential and reflective engagement.

A within-group pre-test and post-test design was employed to capture learners' developmental changes following the role-playing intervention. To enhance methodological rigor, quantitative findings were triangulated with qualitative data from classroom observations, student reflections, semi-structured interviews, and expert validation.

### 3.2. Analytical framework and research hypotheses

Building on the mixed-methods design, the analytical framework of this study is structured around two core dimensions aligned with the research objectives: language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence. Language proficiency is evaluated through three indicators—fluency, accuracy, and interactional ability—measured during students' engagement in role-play-based communicative tasks. Intercultural communicative competence is examined using selected dimensions of Byram's (1997) model, including attitudes toward cultural diversity, interpretive skills, and behavioral adaptability in cross-cultural interaction [3].

The framework is theoretically grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process encompassing concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation [2]. The role-playing intervention was designed to engage learners in this cycle by providing experiential tasks situated in authentic communicative and cultural contexts.

Based on this framework, the study advances three research hypotheses:

- **H1:** Role-playing significantly improves learners' oral language proficiency in the target language.
- **H2:** Role-playing enhances learners' intercultural communicative competence, particularly in attitudes, interpretive skills, and behavioral adaptability.
- **H3:** Significant differences exist in learning outcomes among students of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean majors, reflecting language-specific and cultural factors.

These hypotheses guide the subsequent quantitative and qualitative analyses, enabling the examination of both measurable learning gains and contextualized learner experiences.

### 3.3. Participants and sampling

The study involved 120 undergraduate students enrolled in the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean language programs at Hong Bang International University. The sample included 30 Japanese majors, 40 Chinese majors, and 50 Korean majors, representing a balanced mix of second-, third-, and fourth-year students. Language proficiency levels varied across programs, with Japanese majors ranging from N5 to N3 (based on the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test), Chinese majors from HSK Level 2 to 4, and Korean majors from TOPIK I to II.

To ensure representativeness, stratified random sampling was employed based on three criteria: (1) academic year, (2) gender distribution, and (3) self-reported language proficiency. This approach ensured that the participant pool reflected the diversity of linguistic backgrounds and learning experiences within each major, while also allowing for meaningful cross-group comparisons in subsequent analyses.

### 3.4. Data collection procedures and role-play intervention

A sequential explanatory design was employed, in which quantitative data collection was followed by qualitative inquiry to contextualize and explain the results. Quantitative data were obtained through pre- and post-tests assessing students' oral language performance before and after the eight-session role-playing intervention. Performance was evaluated using analytic rubrics aligned with internationally recognized frameworks, including CEFR and ACTFL, focusing on fluency, accuracy, and interactional effectiveness.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected participants from each language group, classroom observation logs recorded by the researcher, and student reflection journals completed at the end of the intervention. These sources were used to explore learners' experiences with role-playing activities, perceived language development, and changes in intercultural awareness.

The questionnaire functioned as a reflective self-report instrument rather than a standardized psychometric scale. Its results were therefore interpreted in conjunction with performance-based assessments and qualitative evidence to support data triangulation and strengthen interpretive validity.

In this study, role-playing is defined as a structured pedagogical activity in which learners assume specific social roles and interact using the target language within simulated real-world contexts. The role-play tasks were designed to reflect authentic communicative situations commonly encountered in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean sociocultural settings, such as service encounters, workplace interactions, and hierarchical social exchanges.

Each role-play session followed a four-stage instructional sequence aligned with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle [2]. First, students were introduced to the situational context and communicative goals (e.g., requesting assistance, negotiating politely, or resolving misunderstandings). Second, learners were assigned roles with clear sociocultural positions (e.g., customer-staff, junior-senior, student-lecturer) and given brief prompts rather than fixed scripts to encourage spontaneous language use. Third, students performed the role-play in pairs or small groups while the instructor observed interactional strategies, pragmatic choices, and cultural appropriateness. Finally, guided reflection and peer feedback were conducted to help learners analyze linguistic forms, cultural norms, and communicative effectiveness.

A concrete example of a role-playing task involved Japanese-major students simulating a workplace scenario in which a junior employee had to make a polite request to a senior colleague using appropriate honorific expressions. Students were required to select suitable linguistic forms (e.g., honorific verbs and polite sentence endings) while demonstrating awareness of hierarchical relationships and indirect communication norms. Similar culturally grounded scenarios were designed for Chinese and Korean majors, emphasizing context-specific politeness strategies, role-based speech levels, and non-verbal behaviors.

Through these structured yet flexible role-play tasks, learners were encouraged to integrate linguistic knowledge with sociocultural understanding, thereby fostering both communicative competence and intercultural adaptability.

### 3.5. Data analysis

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach was adopted, in which qualitative data

from interviews and classroom observations were used to explain and contextualize quantitative trends observed in pre-test and post-test results. Quantitative analysis was conducted using paired-sample *t*-tests to compare pre- and post-test scores within each language major group (Japanese, Chinese, and Korean), and one-way ANOVA to examine differences across groups. Performance scores focused on three dimensions: fluency, accuracy, and interactional ability.

Qualitative data from classroom observations, student learning diaries, and semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to communication behavior, cultural sensitivity, and learner reflection. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled methodological triangulation, enhancing the validity of the results and providing both measurable outcomes and interpretive insights into students' learning experiences.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Language proficiency

Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that the role-playing intervention positively influenced students' language proficiency across all three language majors. Analysis of pre-test and post-test results revealed improvements in key dimensions of oral performance, including fluency, accuracy, and interactional ability.

In terms of fluency development, Japanese majors demonstrated the highest average gain (mean increase = 5.3 points), followed by Chinese majors (4.5 points) and Korean majors (4.3 points). While all groups showed noticeable improvement, the magnitude of gain varied, suggesting differential responsiveness to role-playing activities across language majors. These variations may be influenced by learners' prior exposure to spoken input, familiarity with dialogic interaction, and linguistic characteristics of each target language.

Qualitative data provided further insight into these quantitative trends. Students reported reduced speaking anxiety, increased spontaneity, and greater confidence in using vocabulary and grammatical structures in context. One Japanese major noted that role-playing helped them speak "without constantly translating in my head," while Korean majors highlighted increased comfort with unscripted interaction after repeated practice.

These reflections suggest that role-playing facilitated more automatic language processing and interactional engagement.

The observed improvements align with the input-interaction-output hypothesis Long's [9], which posits that meaningful interaction and negotiation of meaning promote language development. Overall, the findings indicate that role-playing effectively enhanced learners' oral language performance, though to varying degrees across the three language majors.

These findings [6, 10] provide empirical support for Hypothesis 1, confirming the positive effect of role-playing on oral language proficiency.

#### **4.2. Intercultural communicative competence development**

The role-playing intervention also contributed to the development of students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC), as reflected in both performance-based assessments and qualitative reflections. Across all three majors, learners demonstrated improvement in key dimensions of Byram's (1997) ICC framework, including attitudes toward cultural difference, interpretive skills, and behavioral adaptability.

Comparative analysis revealed distinct patterns among the language majors. Japanese majors showed stronger gains in attitudinal openness and sensitivity to hierarchical and politeness norms, while Korean majors demonstrated higher adaptability in managing interactional roles and responding to culturally embedded expectations during simulated scenarios. Chinese majors exhibited moderate but consistent development, particularly in perspective-taking and tolerance of cultural ambiguity. These differences suggest that ICC development may be shaped by curricular focus, sociocultural characteristics of the target language, and learners' prior intercultural exposure.

Qualitative reflections reinforced these trends. Students reported increased awareness of culturally appropriate behavior and greater flexibility in adjusting communication strategies. As one Chinese major observed, role-playing revealed "how differently people might interpret the same situation," while a Korean student emphasized learning to adapt speech according to cultural expectations. Such reflections indicate that learners internalized intercultural principles through experiential engagement rather than solely through explicit instruction.

Consistent with prior research on situated and experiential learning, these findings demonstrate that role-playing can function as an effective pedagogical tool for fostering intercultural awareness and adaptability. Importantly, the variation in outcomes across language majors highlights the need for role-play design that is sensitive to the specific cultural and communicative dynamics of each target language.

#### **4.3. Validation of findings through expert and interview insights**

To enhance the validity and practicality of the research instruments-including the pre-test, post-test, and scoring rubrics-expert validation was conducted with three senior language educators specializing in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean language instruction. Their feedback confirmed that the assessment tools effectively captured both linguistic competence and intercultural communicative competence. The Chinese language expert emphasized the clarity of the task design and the cultural relevance of the scenarios, noting their capacity to evaluate students' awareness of cross-cultural norms. The Korean language expert, with over a decade of teaching experience, praised the role-play tasks for eliciting spontaneous speech and creative use of language, which are rarely observed in traditional testing formats. The Japanese expert highlighted the successful integration of linguistic (e.g., grammar, vocabulary) and pragmatic (e.g., honorifics, social norms) elements into the rubric, allowing for a holistic evaluation of learners' performance. Collectively, these expert validations strengthened the content validity and pedagogical appropriateness of the instruments used in this study.

In addition to expert input, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 students (4 from each language major) selected based on their degree of improvement in post-test scores. This purposeful sampling allowed for triangulated insight into how role-playing impacted learners across performance levels. Three major themes emerged from the interviews:

##### **4.3.1. Awareness of linguistic and cultural growth**

Students noted clearer distinctions in tone, vocabulary, and context after the intervention. A Japanese major shared that role-play practice made them more comfortable using honorific forms such as *～させていただきます* and *～ております* in

formal situations. Similarly, Chinese and Korean majors reported greater sensitivity in greeting protocols and role-based interaction norms.

#### 4.3.2. *Change in learning attitude and confidence*

While many initially expressed anxiety or reluctance to perform without a script, students reported increased enthusiasm and willingness to improvise after several sessions. One Chinese major remarked that role-playing helped them transfer speaking skills into presentations for other courses. A Korean student noted that they started using honorific endings like -ㅂ니다 or -겠습니다 more naturally as they gained confidence.

#### 4.3.3. *Challenges and suggestions for improvement*

Some students proposed increasing the duration of role-plays, providing scaffolded guidance, and using native-speaker video models for reference. These suggestions reflect a need for more individualized support, especially for lower-proficiency learners. Nevertheless, classroom observations confirmed higher engagement levels, more use of non-verbal cues, and greater peer collaboration during role-play sessions than in traditional instruction.

Together, expert feedback and student interviews reinforce the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study. Role-playing emerges not only as a dynamic teaching method but also as a catalyst for linguistic growth, intercultural adaptation, and classroom engagement. This comprehensive validation further supports the scalability of structured role-play as an instructional strategy across multilingual and multicultural learning environments.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the impact of role-playing on language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence among students majoring in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean at Hong Bang International University. The findings indicate that role-playing functions not merely as a supplementary classroom activity but as an effective experiential pedagogical approach that enhances learners' oral fluency, grammatical accuracy, pragmatic appropriateness, and intercultural adaptability. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence revealed consistent improvement in

spoken language performance and ICC dimensions across all three language majors, with variations reflecting language-specific and cultural characteristics. Learners who actively engaged in reflective and collaborative role-play tasks demonstrated greater gains in both linguistic and intercultural development. The inclusion of expert validation further strengthened the methodological reliability of the study, confirming that the assessment instruments captured both linguistic performance and intercultural awareness. These results support the applicability of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory [2] and Byram's ICC framework [3] in structured foreign language classroom settings. The findings also complement previous studies that emphasized the pedagogical value of role-play and interaction-based learning in developing communicative competence, pragmatic adjustment, and broader learning skills [11], [12]. At the same time, while O'Dowd and Dooly [13] highlighted the role of telecollaboration in fostering intercultural communicative competence, the present study suggests that structured classroom-based role-play can also provide meaningful opportunities for intercultural learning when direct intercultural immersion or online exchange is limited.

Pedagogically, the findings highlight the value of systematically integrating role-playing into university-level language curricula, particularly in speaking-focused and intercultural communication courses. Aligning role-play scenarios with learners' proficiency levels and sociocultural contexts, combined with guided reflection and peer feedback, can enhance learner engagement and promote deeper intercultural understanding. Despite these positive outcomes, the study has several limitations. The absence of a control group restricts direct comparison between traditional instruction and role-playing-based pedagogy. Future research may adopt quasi-experimental or experimental designs incorporating control and experimental groups to further examine the comparative effectiveness of role-playing. Nevertheless, through triangulated data sources and intervention-based evidence, this study offers meaningful pedagogical insights for language education in high-context cultural contexts.

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## Ứng dụng phương pháp đóng vai nhằm phát triển kỹ năng ngôn ngữ và nhận thức văn hóa của sinh viên ngành Ngôn ngữ Nhật, Trung và Hàn tại Trường Đại học Quốc tế Hồng Bàng

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### TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này khảo sát hiệu quả của phương pháp giảng dạy đóng vai trong việc nâng cao năng lực ngôn ngữ và năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa của sinh viên đại học chuyên ngành tiếng Nhật, tiếng Trung và tiếng Hàn tại Trường Đại học Quốc tế Hồng Bàng. Dựa trên lý thuyết học tập trải nghiệm và các khung năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa, nghiên cứu được triển khai theo thiết kế phương pháp hỗn hợp với sự tham gia của 120 sinh viên thuộc ba chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ. Dữ liệu định lượng được thu thập thông qua bài kiểm tra trước và sau can thiệp nhằm đánh giá sự thay đổi trong kỹ năng nói, trong khi dữ liệu định tính được thu thập thông qua khảo sát, phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc và quan sát lớp học nhằm làm rõ trải nghiệm học tập và nhận thức văn hóa của người học. Các công cụ nghiên cứu được hiệu chỉnh thông qua tham vấn chuyên gia nhằm đảm bảo tính nhất quán và độ tin cậy trong phân tích. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên có sự cải thiện rõ rệt về độ trôi chảy, độ chính xác ngữ pháp và khả năng tương tác trong giao tiếp, với mức độ cải thiện khác nhau giữa các chuyên ngành, trong đó sinh viên ngành tiếng Nhật đạt mức tăng điểm sau can thiệp cao hơn. Đồng thời, người học cũng thể hiện sự tiến bộ trong nhận thức giá trị văn hóa, khả năng điều chỉnh hành vi giao tiếp và năng lực diễn đạt liên văn hóa. Kết quả định tính góp phần làm rõ các xu hướng định

*lượng, cho thấy hoạt động đóng vai giúp tăng cường sự tham gia của người học và gắn kết việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ với bối cảnh giao tiếp thực tiễn, dù vẫn tồn tại một số hạn chế liên quan đến vốn từ và tâm lý lo lắng khi giao tiếp. Nghiên cứu cung cấp bằng chứng thực nghiệm cho thấy phương pháp đóng vai có thể được tích hợp một cách có hệ thống vào chương trình giảng dạy ngoại ngữ nhằm phát triển đồng thời năng lực ngôn ngữ và năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa, đặc biệt trong các lớp học đa ngôn ngữ và các ngôn ngữ có ngữ cảnh cao.*

**Từ khóa:** đóng vai, năng lực ngôn ngữ, năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa, phương pháp giảng dạy bằng phương pháp đóng vai, giáo dục ngôn ngữ Đông Á

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Received: 11/9/2025

Revised: 05/01/2026

Accepted for publication: 12/01/2026