



# ROLE DEVELOPMENT IN ONLINE EFL LISTENING CLASSES: A CASE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract.** The roles of the teacher and students in online language classes have been a well-researched area, yielding various insights into the potentials of online technologies and the need for a consideration of re-defining classroom roles. Drawing on a case study, for particularities, this paper presents the results of an exploratory investigation into the development of classroom roles in an EFL Listening class integrating online technologies at a university. Teacher and student interviews and Zoom class observations were used as instruments for data collection. Findings from qualitative data analysis show two major issues. First, there was a critical development of the teacher's roles and her students' roles over a semester of listening instruction totally based on online technologies. Second, online technologies helped enable the development of roles, which otherwise was impossible. Among the discussion issues, an argument that can be raised concerns the relationship between teachers' and students' roles and identities. The paper implies a need to redefine classroom roles in higher education.

**Keywords.** EFL Listening classes, online language classes, role development, university teacher's roles, university student's roles

## 1. Introduction

The roles of the teacher and students in online classes have been a well-researched area yielding various insights into the potential of online technologies and the need for a consideration of re-defining classroom roles. It has been claimed in the literature that there has been a shift in classroom roles primarily on the part of the teacher when online technologies are involved (Alvarez & Espasa 2010; Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Guasch, Lam & Lawrence, 2002; Smith & Kolosick, 1996). The teacher, while still playing the main roles like those in traditional classes such as planning lesson plans, disseminating knowledge, managing classes, evaluating

students, is required to be able to deal with issues emerging from the online environment. Those issues range from technical skills of using software to those which are far more pedagogical with essentially an understanding of the online environment for the meaning-making process (Salmon, 2000). Since the teacher and students do not meet face-to-face, it is vital for the online teacher to create an environment supporting and maintaining students' interaction and motivation (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004). This remains a potential area rich for further research into classroom roles in online environments in various contexts.

In the context of higher education particularly, Bennett and Lockyer (2004) emphasize a call for a movement from teacher-directed instructional practices to student-centred approaches, claiming that university teachers have still relied on mass lectures and tutorials. To respond to the reality and meet the necessity for a change, many universities have offered more online courses involving less face-to-face and more distance or online interaction capitalized by online technologies. This has presented a shift in pedagogy in concert with the implementation of online technologies (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004). The shift has brought about critical changes primarily to the role of the teacher and thus transformed both teaching and learning experiences. Specifically, Wheeler (2010) suggests a new pedagogical practice required of by the online teacher, focusing on developing students' collaborative knowledge construction and promoting a culture of sharing and collaboration through Web 2.0 open learning. In the same vein, Salmon (2000) indicates characteristics that an online teacher needs to develop, concerning not simply technical skills but more importantly online communication skills to engage students online, content expertise to support students' knowledge construction, and the development of students' personal characteristics such as adaptability, positivity, and confidence, all of which can be obtained when/if the teacher has an understanding of the online environment. At the macro level, the shift in pedagogy and practice has been recognized in both literature and reality (Oliver, 2001).

While much attention has been paid to the necessity of a repertoire of (new) roles required by the online teacher, which entails shifts in students' roles, there has still been a call for an elaboration of the roles (Guasch et al., 2010). As a matter of fact, detailing teacher roles has been done from different perspectives, mostly focusing on competencies required by the online teacher, thus yielding different recognitions of roles (Guasch et al., 2010). According to Guasch et al. (2010), this lack of consensus on what roles are and how they can be distributed can be explained by the fact that roles are shaped in association with particularities of the online context. These researchers therefore claim that the diversity of outlooks on this topic highlights the need to carry out contextualized studies for elaboration of roles. This is where this study fits in. Specifically, this study aims to investigate a teacher's and her students' roles in an online EFL Listening class over a semester at a university during COVID-19. This lends itself well to

the contextualization need. More importantly, the online teaching and learning reality implies that roles are not something ready-made in the online environment but take time to develop in accordance with the context and/or discourse. An observation of how roles develop over a period of time, which is still of little scholarly attention, would provide insights into how roles should be elaborated. The latter serves as the motivation for this study. With that, this study seeks answers to the research question: How do the university teacher's and students' roles develop in an online EFL Listening class over a semester?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Roles of teachers and students in language classes**

Role is defined as what one does and/or expected to do in a particular environment (Lam & Lawrence, 2002; Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Wright, 1987). It is emphasized that role is not only expressed through what one does but also what other people believe what one should do, the social expectation to be precise (Lam & Lawrence, 2002; Walker & Shore, 2015). The expectation could be prescriptive or norm-based, according to some theorists, and could be preferences according to others (Walker & Shore, 2015).

In the literature (e.g.: Lam & Lawrence, 2002; Walker & Shore, 2015; Wright, 1987), role is indicated to be composed of three main factors: i, job-related activities, ii, relationships and communications one has with others, and iii, behaviours and attitudes. Turner (1978) explains the relationship of the three factors in describing how a person adopts behaviours and attitudes accompanying activities, and how social interactions facilitate this process. However, role conceptualization has still been fraught with discrepancies resulting from different perspectives (Walker & Shore, 2015).

Many researchers claim that role and role development are influenced by variables such as attitudes and beliefs (Kinchin, 2004), norms and expectations (Ryu & Sandoval, 2010; Webb, 2009), experience (Eick & Reed, 2002), and social factors (Reiman & Peace, 2002). Role development in the classroom particularly is influenced by other variables like student engagements and levels of interaction (Herrenkohl & Guerra, 1998; Walker & Shore, 2015). An example of role development, student engagement, and social interactions from Herrenkohl and Guerra (1998) studying a science class shows that students who took on audience roles were more engaged and more sharing in the knowledge construction process, which led to a shift in the teacher role toward mediator and monitor within the classroom.

## 2.2 Roles in the traditional language class

In the traditional class, or the offline class, teacher roles have been well-documented in the literature. It is assumed that teachers have to take full responsibility for everything happening in the classroom (Lam & Lawrence, 2002). Teachers are considered all-powerful and all-knowing, control over the dissemination of knowledge and learning (Johnson, Delarache, Marshall, Wurr, & Edwards, 1998). Teachers are catalysts, vehicles and judges for the learning process (Smith & Kolosick, 1996). Teachers are both responsible for imparting knowledge and creating and managing a condition favourable for learning to happen (Tudor, 1993).

In language teaching particularly, the centrality of the teacher has long been held as the norm (Lam & Lawrence, 2002). Finkel & Monk (1997) claim that because the teacher is the only person in the class who has expertise in the subject, the teacher is viewed as the group leader responsible for motivation and enlightenment with a sense of purpose. In association with teacher roles, students in the traditional class are passive audiences metaphorized as the vessel into which knowledge is poured by the teacher (Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Smith & Kolosick, 1996). Students' outcomes are dependent on how they conform to what the teacher requires and on how much knowledge from the teacher that they can grasp. Critically, the students are mere recipients who have to accept the knowledge transmitted by the teacher under the conditions created by the teacher (Lam & Lawrence, 2002).

## 2.3 Roles in the online language class

Teacher roles in the online class have been researched and classified widely by many researchers. Despite discrepancies, the classification shares commonalities, including main roles of design, socialisation, cognition and affection, management, technology, and evaluation (Alvarez, Guasch, & Espasa, 2009; Anderson, Liam, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Badia, Garcia, & Meneses, 2017; Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2002; Varvel, 2007).

In the particular context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), Salmon (2000) uses the term e-moderator to describe the person who is responsible for building on and responding to the contributions of the online discussion, which is considered the major part of the teacher's roles. The researcher suggests a model indicating five characteristics that the e-moderator needs to develop:

- An understanding of the online environment;
- Technical skills in using the features of the software;
- Online communication skills to engage learners;
- Content expertise to support learners' knowledge construction; and

- Personal characteristics, such as adaptability, positivity, and confidence.

This model concentrates on teaching via CMC, which is distinct from other responsibilities such as subject design, content development, and evaluation.

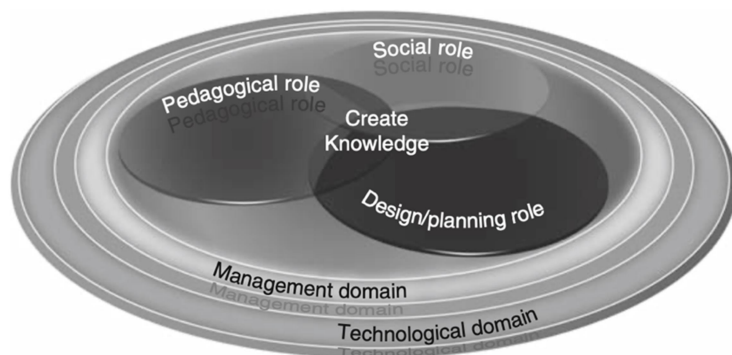
During the delivery of the course, Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter (2002) identify three roles of the online teacher: cognitive, affective, and managerial. In these three areas, activities relating to learning, thinking, and information belong to cognitive roles, classroom atmosphere and relationship with and/or among students relates to affective roles, and managerial to management of the course.

In a broader view, Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples & Tickner (2001) develop a model encompassing eight roles of the online teacher in association with key competences showing the nature and scope of online teaching. The eight roles are: content facilitator, technologist, designer, manager/administrator, process facilitator, adviser/counselor, assessor and researcher, as shown in the following table:

**Table 1:** Roles and indicators of key competences of the online teacher (Goodyear et al., 2001)

Role	Task areas
Content facilitator	Facilitate the learners understanding of the content ('In-course' activity)
Technologist	Making technology choices to improve the online environment
Designer	Designing worthwhile learning task ('Pre-course' activity)
Manager/administrator	Administration and record keeping
Process facilitator	Welcoming, establishing ground rules, creating community, managing communication, modeling social behaviour, establishing own identity
Adviser/counselor	Providing students with advice or counseling on a one to one basis
Assessor	Provides grades and feedback
Researcher	Creation of new knowledge relevant to content

In higher education in particular, Guasch, Alvarez, & Espasa (2010) identify three main roles on the part of the teacher teaching through online technologies: pedagogical, social, and design/planning, as shown in the following figure.



**Figure 1:** Roles and domains for university teachers in online environments

(Guasch, Alvarez, & Espasa, 2010, p. 349)

In terms of the difference between roles and domains, the researchers claim that technology is considered part of the environment so it is more of the domain than a specific role, and the same is true for management, which concerns the organizational environment in which teaching and learning take place. For designing/planning role, the online teacher plans activities that assist students in the acquisition of self-organisation and self-regulation skills. It is important to adapt the planning on the dynamics of ongoing learning activities. The pedagogical role refers to the abilities necessary to create learning situations by proposing activities that will have to be linked to specific contents. For the social role, the teacher must foster the creation of a community of learners in order to diminish the feeling of isolation and help create a group identity. The technological domain means the competence to use ICT within an educational framework. The management domain means the competence to organize information before, during, and after the teaching and learning process. Because of its comprehensiveness and relevance, the framework of Guasch, Alvarez, & Espasa (2010) is used in this study.

Students in online classes are reported to undergo changes in association with changes in teacher roles. Since the online environment provides students with more autonomy (Collins, 1990; Nellen, 1999; Peterson, 1997; Pickard, 1994; Salaberry, 1996; Warschauer, Turbee & Roberts, 1996), they are able to proceed at their own speed, thereby have control over the learning process (Lam & Lawrence, 2002). Lam and Lawrence clarify that in the online

environment the students are still recipients, but ones of their own choice; and the class is thus more learner-centred, with the teacher less of a dominant role and more of a facilitator.

Craig, Goold, Coldwell, and Mustard (2008) also share that students need to be more active if they want to be successful in the online environment, which is designed for self-directed learning. They need to get more involved in discussions, develop solutions, and work collaboratively if they want to generate deeper understanding (Chang & Fisher, 2003). Self-directed learners need to be responsible for organizing their learning, and being reflective. They need to reflect on their learning to identify their personal skill gaps so that they can manage their own learning, set obtainable goals, and be motivated to continue learning (Birch, 2002; Craig et al., 2008).

#### **2.4 Relevant key studies and research gaps**

Studies into teacher roles and learner roles in online language classes in higher education have been proliferating both in quantity and quality and from various perspectives. Those major studies which either serve as theoretical foundations or are key to discussion of this study are reviewed here so that possible research gaps could be identified.

The study by Guasch, Alvarez, and Espasa (2010) about roles and domains for university teachers to teach in online environments has underpinned my study. Drawing on the large-scaled net-based research study involving 78 experts from 14 universities of 10 European countries, the researchers develop a competency framework of specific roles of university teachers in online environments. The framework is theoretically supported with the notion of socioconstructivist and situated learning, meaning people's actions and the surrounding environment are mutually intertwined, and validated with a European-wide study, thus provides a comprehensive and rigid basis. However, as the overall comment of the study goes, this empirical study points to the nature and complexity of teaching online in the higher education in explaining that teacher tasks in online environments are carried out by different professionals so that a university teacher does not necessarily perform all the roles, meaning overlaps between the roles. This reveals a need to validate the framework with such situations in which the teacher, apart from students, is the only person. That means a need to complexify teacher roles particularly in the university context. This uncovers a possible research gap.

A study by Lam and Lawrence (2002) examines changes in teacher roles and student roles in a computer-based project conducted in a university foreign language class. What is noticeable from this study is the focus of foreign language teaching online. In this computer-based class, the teacher's expertise in the foreign language was threatened because the students had ready access to a vast amount of information online that the teacher could not control,

including not only grammar rules that the teacher was not very sure but also authentic texts of the foreign language. This posed a potential erosion to the expert role of the teacher. While this study shares the similar teaching context with my study, it may imply a consideration of adjusting the lesson objective in the language class to validate the possible relationship between lesson objective and teacher roles in online environments. Exploring this kind of relationship remains an under-researched area.

A study by Salmon (2000), which has been reviewed in section 2.3, puts forth a model indicating five characteristics that online teachers need to develop. Among the five characteristics, namely an understanding of the online environment, technical skills, online communication skills, content expertise, and personal characteristics, which are widely recognizable in the literature, what stands out is the item of personal characteristics. As a matter of fact, when online teaching advances quite fast, it really matters how people can catch up with the speed and develop adaptive personal characteristics. This really motivates my study to contextualise Salmon's model in this aspect.

In the context of Vietnam, recent research into university classroom roles has been pivoting the reform of teaching and learning approaches in language classes from various perspectives. Thanh's study (2008) investigates the role of the teacher in Vietnam when cooperative learning is introduced to the classroom, indicating some mismatch between traditional teacher roles and the innovation. Le Ha (2004) investigates university classroom roles when Western methods, known as Communicative Language Teaching, were introduced to the class. Her study reveals how teachers contested the cultural stereotypes. Nguyen & Habók (2021), with a big sample of 1565 EFL learners, concern students' belief about teachers' roles, typifying a tendency towards teacher-centredness, showing the important roles the teacher plays in the students' language learning process. Despite a considerable number of relevant studies, previous research has been looking at role as something fixed or ready-made, and investigation into how role develops over a period of time remains of little scholarly attention. Role development in the online environment in the Vietnamese tertiary context is less under-researched.

To sum up, a review of relevant key studies above uncovers some possible research gaps. First, teacher roles in the context of higher education should be complexified particularly when the teacher is the only person, apart from students, in the whole process that the online environment involves. Second, is there a relationship between lesson objectives and teacher roles, particularly in the context of online foreign language learning? Finally, personal characteristics such as adaptability, a key component alongside other components relating to skills and expertise, should be contextualized.



### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research approach**

Qualitative case study research is the approach chosen for this research. As suggested by the nature of case study, which provides an in-depth and multifaceted investigation of a single case (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 2016), this study relies on this approach to showcase a comprehensive picture of a classroom in terms of the teacher's and her students' roles to see how the roles developed over a period of time. More importantly, as the aim of this study is to contextualise role development for an elaboration of roles in an online environment of teaching listening in English, it is particularities of the case under investigation that matter. This is where a qualitative case study research approach fits in.

#### **3.2 The Listening class**

The participating EFL Listening class in the current study is Listening 5, Listening – Note Taking, covering a range of topics and genres for advanced listening and note taking skills. The class took place between September and December 2021, school year 2021-2022, during COVID-19. Specifically, all class materials including listening materials/websites, practice tests, class announcements, assignments, and students' papers were uploaded on the university's Learning Management System (LMS) and accessible to every student enrolled in the class. Every week, the class took place via Zoom platform in the scheduled time (two hours/week). On Zoom, the teacher normally started with a Listening audio file, classroom activities before and after listening such as brainstorming, report, reflection, etc., and exchanged some strategies and/or tips for listening and doing listening tasks.

The participants of the study include a teacher and her forty-five students making up a class. The teacher is female, in her age of 30s, and holds an MA (TESOL) degree. The students were generally at B2 level at the time of their participation. Five interview students include two females and three males, are invited basing on their availability and willingness. The five students are pseudonymized to S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5 in the interview. The teacher is referred to as Tracy (pseudonym) in the findings.

#### **3.3 Data collection instruments and analysis**

Online class observation (including Zoom and LMS observation) and interview are two instruments of data collection. First, online class observation was conducted by me on Zoom when the class took place as scheduled. Besides, LMS also showed some class activities. Second, semi-structured interview was conducted by me with the teacher and with five students. The interview protocol centers teacher roles and student roles that the teacher and the students

respectively perceived when they had this class, with the particular focus on role development. The interview was conducted in Vietnamese language for the interviewee's convenience of expression, lasted for approximately an hour, was recorded, and verbatim transcribed.

Guided by the research question, the interview transcription was scrutinized for generating initial codes. The codes were thematized drawing on the literature. Then recurring themes were grouped for hyper-themes, which were cohered for a complete story. Data from online classroom observation and LMS history were used to triangulate the interview data and contributed to building up the overall picture.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 The teacher

#### *The co-learner*

The role of co-learner, as what she called herself, with layers of meaning and intention, was the most salient role of the teacher in this online listening class. According to the teacher, this role developed from some critical factors. First, this was especially relevant, as she stressed in the interview, when the COVID-19 took place unexpectedly and exerted huge influence upon the traditional or offline teaching. This situation required all teachers to learn particularly how to use technologies. Remarkably, while for other teachers generally, learning how to use technologies was something as a must to switch to online teaching, for this teacher, it rooted from her identity as a teacher, someone as a fulcrum for students, as she said:

I am often interested in technologies but I don't know much. In this unexpected situation, since I find myself not knowing *enough* [emphasised by the teacher], I have to be a learner. Because I am instructing the students I have to learn and know the technologies thoroughly beforehand so that when they encounter problems, I must be able to help them no matter what, or they will cry out. [Interview, Tracy]

Tracy stressed that it was her teacher identity to force her to learn a new technology before giving instruction to students because she did not allow herself being in situations that she could not be of help to the students due to not knowing the technology.

Second, being a co-learner was what the teacher did with intention as a pedagogical strategy to create a favourable learning atmosphere, as she revealed in the interview:

Being a co-learner means I study alongside the students. I often told the students "this is what I have just learnt and now I tell you. It is not that I am superior." By saying so I created a space, a favourable atmosphere for them to learn. I wanted them to feel that

teachers are not someone knowing something superordinary but also have to learn normal things to transfer to students in an optimal manner. [Interview, Tracy]

The teacher's pedagogical strategy was also meant in a different aspect, as she continued: Sometimes, for some things I had already known but when the students spoke out, I was kind of *acting out* [the teacher's words], saying "wow I didn't know these things when I was at your age". They then felt they were appreciated for their effort in answering that and thus aligned to the tone of the lesson and started to learn. I find this way very effective in getting the students to *follow* me [the teacher's word]. [Interview, Tracy]

In the particular relation to the listening class, Tracy emphasized the development of co-learner role as related to her identity of a learner of listening skills. This is what she explained in the interview:

The starting point was that I was a learner hugely challenged by the subject of Listening. I didn't have a favourable start when I first learnt English in general, and had difficulties in Listening skills in particular. This subject is known as student-killer. So, when I teach Listening, I know students' problems, which were mostly mine as a former learner. Being a co-learner can support both the students both spiritually and academically, and me as a teacher. [Interview, Tracy]

According to the Zoom class observation, the way Tracy often referred to a certain issue throughout the lesson as the problem she as a learner had faced also helped 'equalize' the teacher and students in the class.

#### *The ultimate role of a teacher*

If the role of a co-learner was most salient to this teacher's perception, the role of a teacher was packed with substances that may help transform the meaning of who a teacher is. First, instead of being the person providing answers to students' problems, as teachers generally do, what Tracy did was to raise problems for her students, as what she told in the interview:

I saw their mistakes but didn't show them. I instead told them "well, in order to solve this problem you have to research this and that". Then in the following class they told me they knew why they had that problem, and realised the root of the problem. So, what the teacher did was using the students to self-teach themselves drawing on their real inquiry and capitalized by online resources. [Interview, Tracy]

From a different perspective, the role of a teacher, particularly in the Listening class, was emphasized by Tracy, that she was not simply teaching Listening skills, which, by its nature,

has little to teach. She said she often embedded other subjects like grammar, phonetics, phonology in her lessons drawing on what the students had researched beforehand as home assignments. More importantly, her teaching was often driven by what she called *neuroscience*, which was meant by her to equip the students with knowledge to become life-long learners, things like how to retain information, how the memory works, how to summarise, classify, and synthesise information. With these, Tracy stressed the irreplaceable role of a teacher, even in the Listening class, in which the students needed her to instruct them precisely what they needed among numerous alternatives provided by the internet.

#### 4.2 The students

Highlights of the students' roles in this online listening class are the role of a researcher and the role of a peer mentor.

##### *The researchers*

Both the teacher and the students claimed in the interview that this online Listening class enabled the students to develop their role of researchers. It was the merit of the online environment, and what listening skills involve, that facilitated the development of this role. First, the online environment made the development of the role possible, as these following interview responses:

Those who were able to self-study would surpass the others because they were surrounded by the available information. I just gave them an idea, for example COP26, they googled and dropped details onto the google sheet and shared with each other. I was not sure if all group members participated but those who did would outgrow because this benefited them a lot. [Interview, Tracy]

The benefits were perceivable to the students, as long as they were prompted by the teacher, as in this interview response:

The teacher just implied that this problem originated from the *schwa* and asked us to research. She just gave us the idea and we did the research. And we had everything available on the internet. We could read ourselves. The teacher just needed to trigger. [Interview, S2]

Not only listening skills but also other skills such as critical thinking could be benefited when the students were given more room for developing their researcher role, as in this response:

I think online learning helped me to develop research skills that traditional classes never did. I often had to compare information among websites, check and double check for trustworthy sources of information before using that for my class. [Interview, S3]

Second, the teacher made obvious to the students, through her practice, according to the Zoom class observation, that listening skills were not simply about listening as an activity. She showed the students that in order to be able to listen, and take notes, it involved many things, from which she ignited the students' motivation for research. This is reflected through the following student interview response:

She showed us the underlying reason of why we couldn't take it. I hadn't thought of that before. I mean we already studied those things but we had hardly seen their value. Things became much clearer till we researched and realized "oh!" [Interview, S1]

### *The peer mentors*

The interviewee students called themselves peer mentors when being asked about their salient roles in this online class. This was explained by all the students that the online environment conditioned the development of this role, as in these interview responses:

Online learning is inherently fraught with problems. Many people didn't have enough facilities such as webcam, microphone, or they just logged in with the cellphone. When the teacher assigned some task, I often texted around to know what to do and when no-one replied I had to start off myself. Then people turned to ask me. [Interview, S5]

I was like to 'parent' my classmates [student's word]. Because I often want to complete tasks well, they often rely on me excusing lacks of facilities and the internet. If I didn't do well my role, the whole group would suffer, which I never liked that. [Interview, S2]

For some points of the lesson, some friends wanted to ask me rather than to ask the teacher because it was not convenient to ask [the teacher] online. One more thing, not all students were technologically ready for online learning, they didn't know many technical things and even feared to hit some button. My trait was adventurous in this field and thus I offered help to anyone in need. [Interview, S3]

According to Zoom class observation, the students' role of peer mentor was clearly reflected in almost every class, when there were always a few students more technologically savvy than the rest and ready to offer help to others.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of the study uncover three salient issues about role development in online language classes that are worth discussing.

First, as for the teacher's roles, there reveals the relationship between identity and role development. No matter what role Tracy played between the co-learner or the teacher, it rooted from her identity, as she stressed. As a former learner of listening struggling how to grasp this skill, Tracy intentionally distributed the co-learner role as a pedagogical strategy, as she clearly stated in the interview. As a teacher tailoring her lessons to resonate with the students' tastes, she confirmed "I must be in tune with them to catch their trend so that I can hit the spot". At the core of this was her trait of being someone who was passionate, trendy, and sensitive, as she featured herself in three words. Among one of the three factors constituting role (which are: i, job-related activities, ii, relationships and communications one has with others, and iii, behaviours and attitudes) which was indicated in the literature (e.g.: Lam & Lawrence, 2002, Walker & Shore, 2015; Wright, 1987), the factor of behaviours and attitudes should be viewed furthest that touches identity.

Second, the expectation for the teacher as a fulcrum in an online language class in higher education, which was from the students and Tracy herself, was both norm-based and preference, as in the role theory as Walker & Shore (2015) put forth. As for the teacher, it clearly reflects who the teacher perceived herself to be through the reality that she made herself master a technology before the class and for whenever the students needed. As for the students, while they were exposed with numerous alternatives and sources of information in the online environment, they still needed the teacher to tell them what was precisely for them. This may problematize the relationship between how the teacher perceived herself and what she aimed for through the lesson integrating online technologies, as presented in the research gap section. If in an online language class the role of the teacher can normally be eroded because the students had ready access to a vast amount of information online that the teacher could not control, including not only grammar rules that the teacher was not very sure but also authentic texts of the foreign language, as presented in the study by Lam and Lawrence (2002), what the teacher in this online Listening class did shows an irreplaceable position of the teacher when the lesson objective shifts. This points to the need to complexify the role of the teacher in online classes particularly in the tertiary context.

The third issue concerns the students' roles of researcher and peer mentor, the ones which both the teacher and the interviewee students found rewarding. It is widely claimed in the literature that the online environment provides students with more autonomy (Collins, 1990; Nellen, 1999; Peterson, 1997; Pickard, 1994; Salaberry, 1996; Warschauer et al., 1996), thus enables them to manage their own learning and motivates them to continue learning. This may

suggest those who are autonomous in online learning would make progress and outgrow. However, through the case of this online Listening class there reveals two issues underlying the development of students' roles and their positiveness. First, the development of the roles, particularly the researcher one, was conditioned by the teacher's instruction. It was not simply what the teacher told them to research but more importantly how the teacher made the research topic most relevant and meaningful to the students so that it could trigger and drive their inquiry. In other words, how to ignite the students' motivation to both embark on and sustain the journey is key. One of the ways the teacher did was to use the students' research as the material to start the new lesson, which was intended by her to appreciate their effort. Second, the development of the students' roles, particularly the peer mentor one, uncovers the reality of the so-called *polarization* in the class, as what the teacher stated in the interview, which helps distancing the students from each other. This reality can also help problematize the teacher's practice in assigning roles and thus also contribute to the complexity of re-defining roles in online classes in higher education.

## 6. Conclusion

This case study relies on qualitative data to showcase an online Listening class during a semester (i.e.: fifteen weeks) at a university in terms of how the teacher's and her students' roles developed in the online environment. The highlight of role development was the teacher's roles of co-learner and of teacher that fuel each other, the students' role of researcher and peer mentor, capitalized by the online environment. The findings reveal a few issues centering role in the university classroom. First, there seemed to be the relationship between role development and identity, which was mirrored through the teacher's roles. Second, while the students were exposed with numerous sources of information online, they still needed the teacher as a fulcrum. Third, the students' role of researcher can be capitalized by the online environment but must be unlocked and triggered by the teacher.

The findings of this study, although do not lend themselves to generalizability, can have a few implications. In terms of theory, the findings call for a need to consider redefining roles of university teachers and students, particularly in the online language class. In terms of practice, it is salient from the findings that the online environment should be viewed resourceful for developing not only skill and language/knowledge but more importantly roles and potential pool of identities.

Given the inherent limitations and yet strengths of a case study as showcasing the uniqueness of a case, future research could help refine this case through a longitudinal study for a more insightful examination of role development.

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