HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

THE ROLE OF ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22171579

Abstract. This study systematically reviews empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of role-play activities in enhancing EFL students' speaking skills. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following the PRISMA framework, with 20 peer-reviewed articles retrieved from Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus databases. The selected studies met inclusion criteria by examining role-play as an instructional technique for developing speaking skills in EFL or ESL learning contexts. The findings demonstrate that role-play activities consistently contribute to significant improvements in major components of speaking performance, including fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and learners' confidence. Furthermore, the reviewed studies indicate that role-play can reduce speaking anxiety and foster a more communicative, interactive, and supportive learning environment. The review also highlights several moderating factors that may affect the effectiveness of role-play, including class size, learners' proficiency levels, and the quality of teacher facilitation. Overall, the findings confirm that role-play represents an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing EFL learners' speaking competence. Therefore, the systematic incorporation of role-play activities into curriculum design and classroom practice is strongly recommended.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching; EFL Learners; Role-Play Activities; Speaking Skills; Systematic Literature Review

1. Introdution. Speaking is considered one of the productive language skills and plays a fundamental role in foreign language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. It involves more than simply transmitting information, as effective speaking requires learners to engage in interactive communication and produce spontaneous, accurate, and meaningful speech across a range of authentic communicative situations (Alghmadi, 2024). In the process of learning English, speaking ability reflects learners' capacity to verbally express ideas, thoughts, and feelings through the appropriate use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation, enabling interlocutors to understand the intended message clearly.

Developing effective speaking competence requires mastery of several interconnected components. These include fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. Fluency concerns the ability to maintain speech with minimal hesitation and unnecessary pauses, whereas accuracy refers to the appropriate application of linguistic forms and grammatical rules. Pronunciation involves producing comprehensible sounds, stress, and intonation, while vocabulary and grammar provide the linguistic resources necessary for constructing meaningful and appropriate utterances. The effective integration of these components contributes to learners' overall communicative speaking competence (Ilham dkk., 2024).

However, the development of speaking skills is not determined exclusively by linguistic competence. Affective factors, particularly speaking anxiety and self-confidence, can substantially influence learners' willingness and ability to communicate. High levels of anxiety may interfere with language production, create fear of making mistakes, and discourage students from actively participating in oral activities. In contrast, self-confidence can strengthen learners' readiness to communicate spontaneously. Students who possess greater confidence are generally more willing to

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participate in oral interaction, while continuous exposure to the target language within a supportive and conducive learning environment can contribute to the improvement of speaking performance (Batubara dkk., 2024; Ishak & Abdul Aziz, 2022).

In recent years, research on the application of role-play techniques in language education has continued to expand. Nevertheless, there remains a need for a systematic examination that brings together findings from different educational contexts and learner levels. Therefore, this study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to comprehensively examine the effectiveness of role-play activities in developing the speaking skills of EFL learners.

2. Method. This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. This approach was selected to enable the systematic, comprehensive, and reproducible synthesis of existing research while reducing potential bias throughout the review process. By applying this methodology, the study followed a structured procedure for identifying, selecting, and critically evaluating relevant literature, thereby strengthening the validity and credibility of the findings.

The literature search was conducted using three established academic databases: Google Scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and Scopus**.** To identify relevant studies, a combination of keywords and search terms was systematically applied. These included *"role play," "role-play,"* and *"role playing,"* which were combined with terms such as *"speaking skills," "speaking ability,"* and *"oral communication."* The search was further refined by incorporating the terms *"EFL," "ESL,"* and *"English as a Foreign Language."*

Following the application of predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, the selection process resulted in 20 peer-reviewed articles that were considered relevant and suitable for further analysis. These studies formed the primary source of evidence for evaluating the effectiveness of role-play activities in developing EFL learners' speaking skills.

3. Results and Discussion. This review analyzed 20 studies conducted across different countries and educational settings, representing a diverse range of EFL learning contexts. Of these studies, 8 were conducted in Indonesia, 5 in Middle Eastern countries, 2 in Vietnam, 1 in Lebanon, 2 in Thailand, and 2 in other Asian regions. In terms of educational levels, the reviewed studies covered junior high school (n=6), senior high school (n=7), and university (n=7) contexts.

The methodological approaches employed across the studies also varied. Twelve studies adopted quantitative experimental or quasi-experimental designs, five used mixed-method approaches, and three employed qualitative action research. This methodological and contextual diversity provides a broader basis for understanding the effectiveness of role-play activities in EFL instruction. The representation of different countries, educational levels, and research designs also suggests that the findings may be applicable across a range of EFL learning environments.

Effectiveness of Role Play on Speaking Skill Components.

Overall, the findings of the reviewed studies demonstrate a strong positive relationship between the implementation of role-playing techniques and the development of students' speaking skills. Among the 20 studies examined, 17 (85%) reported statistically significant improvements in speaking performance following the implementation of role-play activities. The remaining three studies also indicated positive developments, although the improvements did not reach the required level of statistical significance, which may be associated with relatively small sample sizes and short intervention periods.

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When the findings are considered according to specific components of speaking competence, fluency emerged as the most frequently investigated aspect, appearing in 16 studies. Of these, 14 reported significant improvements. This result can be attributed to the repeated opportunities provided by role-play for learners to produce language spontaneously, which may gradually make speech production more automatic and natural (Al-Mazari & Rababah, 2024).

Accuracy was examined in 15 studies, with 12 reporting improvements. However, several studies indicated that the initial emphasis on developing fluency may result in comparatively less attention being given to grammatical accuracy. This finding is consistent with the principles of skill acquisition theory, which suggests that the development of fluent performance may initially require learners to prioritize meaningful and continuous language production.

Pronunciation was investigated in 14 studies, of which 11 reported positive improvements. These outcomes may be related to the development of learners' phonological awareness through repeated exposure to listening and speaking activities. Regular participation in role-play allows learners to repeatedly hear and produce target-language expressions, thereby supporting the development of more comprehensible pronunciation.

Vocabulary development was also positively influenced by role-playing activities, with improvements reported in 13 studies. The use of contextualized and realistic scenarios enables learners to encounter and apply new vocabulary in meaningful communicative situations. As a result, students may develop a better understanding and longer-term retention of new lexical items compared with conventional memorization-based approaches.

In addition to linguistic outcomes, affective factors such as self-confidence and speaking anxiety were examined in 10 studies. All of these studies reported significant positive outcomes, indicating increased self-confidence and reduced levels of speaking anxiety among learners participating in role-play activities. These findings are consistent with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, according to which lower levels of anxiety and increased confidence can create more favorable conditions for language acquisition.

Types of Role Play and Their Differential Effects.

The studies included in this review employed various role-playing techniques, which can be broadly grouped into three principal categories. The first category is scripted role-playing, in which learners perform a predetermined dialogue or follow a prepared script. The second is semi-scripted role-playing, where students are provided with a specific scenario or communicative framework, while the actual language used during the activity is developed through improvisation. The third category is unscripted or open-ended role-playing, which allows learners greater freedom to determine the direction of the interaction and produce language spontaneously.

According to Cempaka (2024) and Mariyanah (2025), unscripted role-playing, due to its more authentic and spontaneous nature, can lead to greater improvements in speaking fluency and learners' confidence. This type of activity requires students to formulate responses independently and adapt their language to changing communicative situations. In contrast, scripted role-playing appears to be more beneficial for developing pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, particularly among learners with lower proficiency levels. The presence of a clear linguistic structure may reduce learners' cognitive load and allow them to concentrate more effectively on accurate language production.

These findings suggest that the selection of an appropriate role-playing technique should take into account both the learners' proficiency level and the specific speaking component targeted by the instructional activity.

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Moderating Factors.

Several factors influence the effectiveness of role-playing activities in developing learners' speaking skills. Among these factors, class size appears to be particularly important. Studies indicate that classes consisting of fewer than 30 students tend to produce more favorable outcomes because smaller groups enable teachers to monitor learners' participation more effectively and provide more individualized feedback.

The quality of teacher facilitation is another important factor affecting the success of role-playing activities. Eight of the reviewed studies emphasize that learning outcomes tend to be more positive when teachers provide clear instructions, allocate sufficient time for preparation, and offer constructive feedback during the evaluation stage. In contrast, role-playing activities implemented without adequate structure and guidance may produce less effective results.

Learners' initial proficiency levels also appear to influence the outcomes of role-playing activities. Intermediate-level learners generally demonstrate the most substantial improvements, whereas beginner-level students may experience greater anxiety when participating in open-ended role-play activities without sufficient support or guidance. For this reason, the level of task complexity and the amount of teacher scaffolding should be adjusted according to learners' existing abilities.

In addition, cultural considerations should be taken into account when implementing role-playing activities. This is particularly relevant in collectivist cultural contexts, where beginner-level learners may feel less confident performing in front of their classmates. Therefore, effective implementation requires an approach that considers learners' cultural backgrounds and provides a supportive environment in which they can participate comfortably and gradually develop their confidence in oral communication.

Discussion.

Overall, the findings of this systematic review provide substantial evidence supporting the effectiveness of role-playing techniques in enhancing the speaking skills of EFL learners. The consistency of positive outcomes across different countries, cultural contexts, and educational levels indicates that the benefits of role-playing are not restricted to a particular learning environment. Instead, these benefits may be associated with several fundamental mechanisms, including active participation in communication, the reduction of affective barriers, and learning through direct experience.

The findings are consistent with the results reported in Kaygisiz and Akar's (2025) systematic review of 32 studies, as well as the review conducted by Ishak and Abdul Aziz (2022). Research focusing on ESL learners' communication skills further supports the linguistic and affective benefits associated with role-playing techniques. Compared with other approaches to teaching speaking, one of the main strengths of role-playing is its multidimensional impact. While some instructional techniques primarily address one or two aspects of speaking competence, role-playing can simultaneously support the development of fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and affective factors.

This comprehensive effect can be attributed to the contextual and experiential nature of role-playing activities. By placing learners in realistic or simulated real-life situations, role-play encourages them to integrate different linguistic resources while communicating for a specific purpose. As a result, learners have opportunities to apply vocabulary, grammatical structures, pronunciation, and fluency simultaneously rather than practising these elements in isolation.

Another particularly important finding concerns the ability of role-playing to reduce speaking anxiety. This represents a significant contribution to EFL education because anxiety has long been recognized as an important factor that can negatively affect learners' speaking performance and

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participation (Horwitz et al., 1986). By creating opportunities for interaction in supportive and relatively low-risk situations, role-playing may help learners become more comfortable with using English and gradually develop greater confidence in oral communication.

Despite these positive findings, the review also reveals several limitations in the existing body of research. A considerable number of studies were conducted over relatively short periods, in some cases covering only a single instructional unit. Consequently, it remains difficult to determine whether the improvements associated with role-playing can be sustained over the long term.

In addition, many of the reviewed studies involved relatively small sample sizes, which may reduce the statistical power of the analyses and limit the generalizability of their findings. Another important limitation is the absence of standardized assessment instruments across the studies, making direct comparison of results more difficult. Future research should therefore employ larger and more diverse samples, longer intervention periods, and standardized assessment procedures to provide more robust evidence regarding the long-term effectiveness of role-playing in EFL speaking instruction.

4. Conclusion.

This systematic literature review provides substantial evidence that role-playing represents an effective pedagogical approach for developing students' speaking skills in EFL contexts. The analysis of 20 reputable scientific articles demonstrates that role-playing activities consistently contribute to the improvement of key components of speaking competence, including fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, and learners' confidence. In addition, the reviewed evidence indicates that role-playing can help reduce speaking anxiety and create more supportive conditions for oral communication.

The effectiveness of role-playing, however, is influenced by several moderating factors, including class size, learners' initial proficiency levels, the type of role-playing activity employed, and the quality of teacher facilitation. Therefore, achieving optimal outcomes requires careful planning and appropriate adaptation of role-playing activities to the specific learning context and needs of students.

For educational practitioners, these findings suggest that role-playing should be systematically incorporated into EFL speaking curricula rather than being used solely as a supplementary classroom activity. Teachers should select role-playing techniques that correspond to learners' proficiency levels, provide sufficient preparation time, and maintain a classroom environment that enables active participation and allows for individualized feedback.

For future research, further investigation is recommended through longitudinal research designs involving larger and more diverse samples. Researchers should also employ standardized assessment instruments and conduct comparative analyses of different types of role-playing activities. Such approaches would strengthen the empirical foundation of existing research and provide more reliable evidence for the effective implementation of role-playing in EFL speaking instruction.

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ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
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