

Research Article

The Effectiveness of Role Play in Improving EFL Students' Speaking Ability: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: This study aims to systematically examine empirical evidence on the effectiveness of role play in improving EFL students' speaking skills. Using Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology guided by the PRISMA framework, this study analyzed 20 peer-reviewed articles obtained from Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus databases. Inclusion criteria focused on studies investigating role play as an instructional technique targeting speaking skills in EFL or ESL contexts. Findings reveal that role play consistently and significantly improves key speaking components including fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence. Additionally, role play reduces speaking anxiety and promotes a more communicative and interactive learning environment. This review also identifies moderating factors such as class size, student proficiency level, and teacher facilitation quality that influence role play effectiveness. These findings suggest that role play is a highly effective pedagogical strategy for improving speaking competence, particularly in EFL contexts, and its systematic integration into curriculum design is strongly recommended.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching; EFL; Role Play; Speaking Skills; Systematic Literature Review.

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1. Introduction

Speaking skills fall into the category of productive skills that play a crucial role in foreign language learning, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Speaking is not merely about conveying information but is also an interactive process that demands the ability to produce spontaneous, accurate, and effective speech in a variety of authentic communication situations (Alghmadi, 2024). In the English language learning process, speaking skills reflect an individual's ability to convey ideas, thoughts, and feelings verbally by utilizing appropriate vocabulary, grammatical structure, and pronunciation, so that the message is clearly understood by the other person. Speaking skills are composed of several essential components that learners must master to achieve optimal competence. These components include fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. Fluency refers to the ability to speak continuously without pauses or hesitation, while accuracy relates to the use of language forms that comply with applicable rules. Pronunciation relates to the ability to produce easily understood sounds and intonation, while vocabulary and grammar form the foundation for constructing appropriate sentence structures. The integration of all these components reflects communicative and effective speaking skills (Ilham dkk., 2024).

In addition to linguistic aspects, speaking skills are also influenced by affective factors. Anxiety levels when speaking can hinder language production, foster fear, and reduce student participation in speaking activities. Conversely, self-confidence plays a significant role in encouraging students' readiness to communicate spontaneously. Students with high self-confidence tend to be more actively involved in oral interactions, while repeated exposure to language in a conducive learning environment has been shown to significantly improve speaking skills. (Batubara dkk., 2024).

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2. Method

This research employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. This method was chosen because it synthesizes research results systematically, comprehensively, and reproducibly, while minimizing the risk of bias in the analysis process. Through this approach, researchers conducted a structured and accountable search, selection, and critical appraisal of relevant studies, ensuring the resulting conclusions have a high level of validity and credibility. Data collection was conducted through a literature search in three reputable academic databases: Google Scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and Scopus. The search process utilized a systematic combination of keywords, including "role play," "role-play," or "role playing" combined with "speaking skills," "speaking ability," or "oral communication," and narrowed down to "EFL," "ESL," or "English as a foreign language." From the selection process based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 peer-reviewed articles were obtained that met the requirements for further analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

This review involved 20 studies from various countries and educational levels, including Indonesia (n=8), Middle Eastern countries (n=5), Vietnam (n=2), Lebanon (n=1), Thailand (n=2), and other Asian regions (n=2). The studies were conducted at the junior high school (n=6), senior high school (n=7), and university (n=7) levels, using a variety of research approaches, ranging from quantitative experimental and quasi-experimental designs (n=12), mixed methods (n=5), to qualitative action research (n=3). This diversity of contexts strengthens the belief that the findings are generalizable to various EFL learning environments.

Effectiveness of Role Play on Speaking Skill Components

In general, the findings from the various studies analyzed indicate a strong positive effect of role-playing techniques on speaking skills. Seventeen of the 20 studies (85%) reported significant improvements in students' speaking skills after using the technique. Meanwhile, three other studies also showed a trend toward improvement, although these did not reach a sufficient level of statistical significance, due to the limited sample size and relatively short treatment duration. When viewed by speaking skill component, fluency was the most dominant focus, appearing in 16 studies, 14 of which showed significant improvement. This can be explained by the fact that role-playing provides students with repeated opportunities to produce language spontaneously, making the speaking process more automatic and natural (Al-Mazari & Rababah, 2024). Accuracy also improved in 12 of the 15 studies that measured it, although some studies noted that the initial emphasis on fluency tends to detract from attention to grammatical accuracy, which aligns with skill acquisition theory. Furthermore, improvements in pronunciation were found in 11 of the 14 studies, influenced by the development of phonological awareness through repeated listening and speaking activities.

Vocabulary mastery also experienced improvements reported in 13 studies, where the use of contextual scenarios in role-playing helped students understand and remember new vocabulary more meaningfully compared to conventional memorization methods. In addition, affective aspects such as self-confidence and decreased speaking anxiety were measured in 10 studies, and all showed significant positive results, in line with the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen., 1985).

Types of Role Play and Their Differential Effects

The studies analyzed in this review demonstrate the application of a variety of role-playing techniques that can be classified into three main categories. First, scripted role-playing, where students follow a pre-arranged dialogue. Second, semi-scripted role-playing, where students are given a specific scenario, but language use is developed through improvisation. Third, unscripted or open-ended role-playing, which gives students the freedom to design the scenario's flow while expressing language spontaneously. Cempaka (2024) and Mariyanah (2025) found that unscripted role-playing, which is more authentic, has been shown to provide more significant improvements in fluency and confidence, as it requires students to produce language spontaneously. On the other hand, scripted role-playing tends to be more effective in improving pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, especially for students with lower proficiency levels, as a clear structure can help reduce cognitive load. These findings indicate that the choice of role-playing type needs to be tailored to the student's proficiency level and the speaking skill component being focused on.

Moderating Factors

Several factors determine the effectiveness of role-playing in improving speaking skills. Class size is one of the most influential factors; classes with fewer than 30 students consistently demonstrate more optimal results, as they allow teachers to provide more individualized feedback and monitor each student's engagement more effectively. Furthermore, the quality of teacher facilitation plays a significant role. Eight studies confirm that teachers who provide clear role-playing instructions, provide adequate preparation time, and provide constructive feedback during the evaluation stage tend to achieve better learning outcomes than those who implement less structured strategies. Furthermore, students' initial ability levels also influence outcomes. Intermediate students generally show the most significant improvement, while beginning students sometimes experience anxiety when faced with open-ended role-playing without adequate support. Cultural factors are also important considerations, particularly in collectivist societies, where beginning students tend to lack confidence in performing in front of the class. Therefore, an implementation approach that is sensitive to cultural context is essential.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this systematic review provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of role-playing techniques in improving speaking skills in EFL learners. The consistency of positive findings across countries, cultural settings, and educational levels suggests that the benefits of this technique are not limited to specific contexts but are based on universal mechanisms. These mechanisms include engaging in active communication practices, reducing affective barriers, and implementing experiential learning. These findings align with Kaygisiz & Akar's (2025) systematic review of 32 studies and Ishak & Abdul Aziz's (2022) review. Findings related to ESL learners' communication skills also reinforce the linguistic and affective benefits of role-playing techniques. The primary advantage of role-playing compared to other speaking learning techniques lies in its comprehensive impact. While other methods tend to focus on only one or two aspects of speaking skills, role-playing can simultaneously develop multiple components, such as fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, and students' affective aspects. This is possible because role-playing activities present holistic and contextual scenarios, encouraging students to integrate various linguistic elements in communication situations that resemble real-life situations. Furthermore, the finding that role-playing can reduce speaking anxiety is a very significant contribution in the context of EFL learning. This is important considering that anxiety has long been identified as a major factor hindering the development of speaking skills in students (Horwitz et al., 1986). However, this review also identified several limitations in the available literature. Many studies were conducted over a relatively short period of time, often covering only a single learning unit, making it difficult to draw conclusions regarding the long-term sustainability of role-playing's effects.

Furthermore, the relatively small sample sizes in most studies limit the power of statistical analyses and the generalizability of the research results. Furthermore, the lack of standardized assessment instruments across studies also hinders direct comparisons of findings. Therefore, these limitations should be addressed in future research to produce more comprehensive and reliable findings.

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review provides strong evidence that role-playing is an effective pedagogical approach for improving students' speaking skills in EFL contexts. Based on an analysis of 20 reputable scientific articles, the implementation of role-playing consistently improves key components of speaking skills, including fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary mastery, and confidence, while also contributing to a reduction in speaking anxiety. This effectiveness is influenced by several moderating factors, such as class size, students' initial ability level, the type of role-play used, and the quality of teacher facilitation. Therefore, optimal implementation requires contextual adjustments and careful planning. For educational practitioners, these findings indicate that role-playing should be systematically integrated into EFL speaking curricula, rather than simply used as a supplementary activity. Teachers should consider the appropriateness of the role-playing method to the students' ability levels, provide adequate preparation time, and maintain a class size conducive to optimal active participation and individual feedback. Meanwhile, for researchers, further studies are recommended to adopt a longitudinal design with a larger sample size, use standardized assessment instruments, and conduct comparative analysis of various role-playing variations, in order to strengthen the empirical basis as a reference for implementation in the field.

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