

Role-play as a communicative strategy for students to improve their English as a second language speaking skills: A Review

El juego de roles como estrategia para mejorar las habilidades verbales de estudiantes del inglés como segundo idioma: Una Revisión

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Abstract

Role-playing is a strategy to engage students in the process of acquire a second language in an interactive way. This systematic review is a research based on the improvement of the speaking skill of EFL students through role play technique. EFL learners showed difficulty in the learning process to improve their speaking skill. This review objective was to prove that role play help EFL students to improve speaking skill using role plays. In this project a quantitative and qualitative methods were combined to demonstrate the role play impact in the acquisition process. For this review, twenty scientific articles were selected to find out if the role-play technique helps to improve speaking skills in EFL students. Role-play is an innovative and interactive technique to the improvement of English in EFL learners. The scientific articles researched demonstrated an improvement of the speaking skill. Also, the studies showed that role playing is a successful technique to improve the speaking skill of language acquisition.

Keywords: Speaking Skills, Role-plays, improvement, English as a second language.

Resumen

El juego de roles es una estrategia para involucrar al estudiante en el proceso de adquisición de una segunda lengua de forma interactiva. Esta revisión sistemática es una investigación basada en la mejora de la habilidad oral de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera a través de la técnica del juego de roles. Los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera mostraron dificultades en el proceso de aprendizaje para mejorar su habilidad para hablar. El objetivo de esta revisión fue demostrar que los juegos de roles ayudan a los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera a mejorar su habilidad para hablar mediante juegos de roles. En este proyecto se combinaron métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos para demostrar el impacto del juego de roles en el proceso de adquisición. Para esta revisión se seleccionaron veinte artículos científicos con el objetivo de conocer si la técnica del juego de roles ayuda a mejorar las habilidades orales en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. El juego de roles es una técnica innovadora e interactiva para mejorar el inglés en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los artículos científicos investigados demostraron una mejora de la habilidad de hablar. Además, los estudios demostraron que el juego de roles es una técnica exitosa para mejorar la habilidad de hablar en la adquisición del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: Habilidades verbales, juego de roles, mejoramiento, inglés como segundo lenguaje.

Introduction

English as a foreign language (EFL) learners know that in the process of learning a second language, they need to practice and spend a lot of time improving each language skill. Learners in the process of language acquisition are aware that the most necessary skill to master is speaking, although the rest of the skills are also important and part of the learning process. Speaking is considered a difficult skill to improve as a second language learner. Speaking English is not only necessary in offices or travel companies; nowadays, speaking English is necessary in every field. Developing accuracy and fluency in speaking a foreign language is critical to successful language learning (Bhatti, 2021).

However, there is a strategy that could help improve speaking in a fun way called role-playing. Role-playing seems like an innovative way to improve speaking. Yuliana, (2014) said that “role-playing is a very valuable method to help learners.” Other researchers show that there are numerous strategies to improve speaking skills through role-playing, which students consider the most difficult but most important skill to develop accurately and fluently. In some cases, teachers need to know how to use role-playing as a teaching technique. Some English learners think that role-playing is based on reading a text, memorizing it, and then acting it out. For that reason, it is necessary for the instructor to follow common steps for success to achieve improvement.

Method

Database and search strategy.

Twenty scientific articles from 3 different academic search engines were selected for this study. These articles are not only cited across the document, but they are listed in the references section. The common denominator was the content related to role-playing as a strategy to improve speaking skills. These scientific papers offered insights and findings from their results after collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data which served for the purpose of this review. The use of qualitative and quantitative data has been essential in analyzing journal articles on role play as a strategy to improve ESL speaking skills.

Quantitative data, such as test scores, fluency measurements, and student performance statistics, provide objective evidence of role play's effectiveness in enhancing speaking skills. Meanwhile, qualitative data, including classroom observations, student reflections, and teacher feedback, offer deeper insights into learners' engagement, confidence, and interaction patterns. Together, these data types have strengthened the literature review by ensuring a balanced analysis, highlighting both the measurable improvements in speaking proficiency and the subjective experiences that support role play as a valuable instructional strategy. Figure 1 depicts the screening process for the selection of these journal articles.

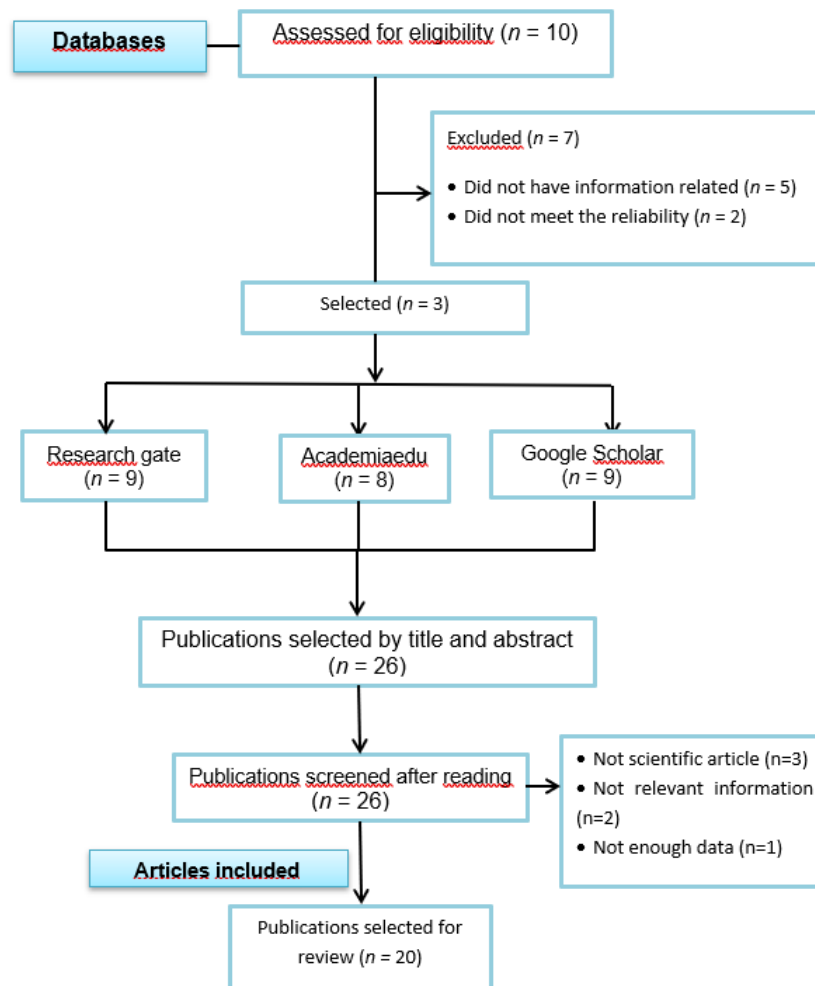
Criteria for inclusion.

To conduct a literature review on the use of role-playing as an activity to improve verbal skills in English as a second language learners, the following selection criteria were used to filter scientific articles in databases:

- **Thematic Relevance:** Studies that analyze the impact of role-playing on the development of verbal skills in learning English as a second language.
- **Methodological Rigor:** Articles with clear methodology, including qualitative, quantitative or mixed studies with a representative sample.
- **Recent Publication:** Preference for research published in the last 10 years to ensure up-to-date information.
- **Indexed Journals:** Selection of articles published in peer-reviewed journals and recognized databases (Academia, Research Gate and Google Scholar).
- **Educational Context:** Research focused on learning English in formal educational environments (schools, universities, academies).
- **Language:** Articles in English will be prioritized for greater accessibility and depth in the analysis.
- **Accessibility:** Preference for open access articles or those available in academic libraries.

Figure 1

Flow chart of the data selection process for the review study of scientific articles and the database used



Note: Adapted from PRISMA (2020); BMJ, (2021).

Results

Improvements in verbal skills.

Speaking skills are considered the most difficult skill to develop in classrooms (Ayuningtias, 2019), because the teaching techniques used interfere with the improvement of the skill that most English learners would like to improve or need to develop. Improving speaking skills as an ESL (English as a Second Language) student becomes a priority as a communication tool in any area

to gather ideas and exchange them with others through the way people normally do it, which is by speaking (Ayuningtias (2019). When students talk about improving their speaking skills, they are referring to improving their fluency and accuracy in communication. However, Alam and Uddin (2013) suggest that teachers should allow students to participate in the learning process by allowing them to practice.

On the other hand Rao, (2019) mentions that improving speaking skills as an EFL/ESL student is vital. To achieve their goals in the job market, English language learners (ELLs) must devote a significant amount of time and effort to improving their speaking skill. For all that, it is necessary to constantly practice focusing on improving the skill through the right activities, activities that allow them to acquire new words, phrases, and opportunities to use them. In other words, practice so that EFL learners can participate in debates and discussions and even control their fear when attending a job interview.

Furthermore Suban, (2021) suggests that in speaking classes to help EFL learners improve their speaking skills, teachers should use activities that include more communication practice and invest time in classes because most EFL learners only practice speaking in class. Teachers who want to use a teaching technique or activity based on improving speaking skills with EFL learners should be aware of the context in which they teach the language and also provide learners with training in accuracy and fluency. Also, provide them with opportunities to participate and express themselves. Also, come up with a plan to implement activities that provide guidance and opportunity to practice. Puspitorini, (2018) concludes that 74.3 percent of the improvement in speaking skill in his study was due to the use of a speaking activity such as role-playing.

As suggested by Henry, (2019), teachers should also improve their use of techniques to teach speaking skills. In some cases, teachers apply activities, techniques, or methods just to use them. Therefore, teachers should improve their ability to use each activity to help EFL learners improve their skills, especially speaking. Although other skills are involved in the process, speaking as a productive skill is the most desired among EFL/ESL learners. (Bhatti, 2021). According to Idham *et al.*, (2022), in their research, the researchers used a quasi-experimental technique where they classified the sample into two categories: A and B. Group A was exposed to the role-playing technique and Group B was not exposed to the technique. At the end of the pre-test, it was found

that both groups scored 0.0. After using the techniques, the post-test showed that Group A had a score of 11.2174 and Group B had a score of 8.696. This shows that using speaking skills techniques such as role play helps students improve their speaking skills.

Role-playing Techniques.

Nowadays, role-playing is one of the useful techniques to improve the speaking skills of someone learning English as a second language. Role-playing offers students the opportunity to improve their speaking skills and allows them to manage situations by communicating appropriately according to the situation they are faced with (Magos & Politi, 2008; Zakaria *et al.*, 2019). Role-playing, as most educators know, is when students can practice daily life events. Moreover, this technique engages all students and makes them feel comfortable with the learning environment (Magos & Politi, 2008).

The role-playing technique is considered appropriate for second language learners (Magos & Politi, 2008; Zakaria *et al.*, 2019). Participants who practice their speaking fluency and accuracy through role-play are allowed to interact naturally, which means that participants may mispronounce some words or use incorrect phrases depending on the situation; at the same time, the teacher and participants are required to correct each other's incorrect pronunciation and use of phrases (Dorathy & Mahalakshmi, 2011). Role-play is a strategy to engage the learner in the process of improving the most difficult skill to develop, sufficient for native speakers (Rao, 2019). Through role-play, EFL learners feel confident to even start a conversation or help another person in any situation.

As Alabsi, (2016) mentions, role-play helps to enrich the student's vocabulary. Vocabulary plays an important role in improving speaking skills, with this enrichment, students increase their confidence to communicate with others and improve the competence to speak a second language. Gumelar and Sugara, (2019), in their AR (action research), with thirty-six students (22 males and 14 females), observed that students were able to improve their speaking skills by using role-plays. The researchers divide the study into two cycles. In Cycle I, students do not show much improvement, but in Cycle II, they become better students. This is based on the data collected after the pre-test and post-test. In the pre-test, students scored 2.5; after the implementation of role-play

in the post-test, students scored 3.0. Furthermore, the use of role-plays became an opportunity to connect with students and learn about their interests, which helped teachers practice recreating situations they would face in the future. Practicing real-life situations like Zakari *et al.*, (2019) helps ESL students, especially shy students, to engage and share with others in the class. However, Alabsi, (2016) indicates that role-playing as a technique could be used to increase vocabulary and encourage critical thinking. Alabsi, in his research using a quasi-experimental method, observed that between the G-A (the experimental group) and G-B (the control group) groups, there was no difference after the pre-test. Thus, after applying the role-playing technique, the post-test showed that the vocabulary proficiency in G-A and G-B was significantly higher. Now educators should use role-playing in the learning process to simulate real-life situations and expose students to them.

Furthermore, the results of Yuliana, (2014) showed that role-playing is a technique that can be used to connect students and get results in improving speaking. At the same time, it helps students feel confident to express their ideas and not believe that English is a difficult language to learn. An important detail of using role-playing as a teaching technique is that teachers or researchers cannot interfere during the rehearsal; they only observe and act as a director or coordinator. (Magos & Politi, 2008) As a suggestion, one thing that EFL learners should avoid when they want to improve their speaking is the grammatical structure. In most cases, even when it is necessary to know grammar, students are afraid to express themselves because of the word order.

At the end of the research Bhatti, (2021) concludes that role-playing helps students improve their speaking skills. Thus, he proved that role-playing is an innovative technique to improve speaking skills and motivate students to practice. Teaching speaking skills through role-playing involves teachers introducing, implementing, and combining with role-playing suitable activities to engage students in their improvement process. Ayuningtias, (2019), in the CAR (classroom action research) applied to 30 tenth grade students, finds that role-playing helps improve students' attitudes. The researcher planned to divide the study into three cycles, but the objective was scored in two cycles.

The use of role-playing gave EFL learners the opportunity to improve their speaking skills after being exposed to using them in real-life situations. Moreover, students can freely express themselves through role-playing and write their own dialogue without forcing expression and

enjoying the learning process (Henry, 2019). Furthermore Bhatti, (2021) states that role-playing allows the learner to be free in expressing ideas or feelings. Role-playing carries out debates and simulations. Magos and Politi, (2008) based on their research after interviewing and observing 16 adult immigrants (11 women and 5 men) learning Greek, observed that for adult learners, role-playing is a good technique to safely engage in. At the same time, the role-playing used shows a change in interest and attitude.

Strategies for Role-Playing.

In some cases, students are engaged in learning or being taught in a traditional way without communication methods. For second language learning to be effective, it is necessary to implement activities focused on speech production (Magos & Politi, 2008). Despite this, several studies have shown that role-playing is an innovative way to improve speaking skills. Role-playing is an ideal technique where students act out a real situation and teachers acknowledge the students' interest. With that knowledge, instructors can help English learners feel motivated to improve not only their speaking skills but also their self-awareness and knowledge to solve a situation (Gumelar & Sugara, 2019). Role-playing has proven to be a good strategy to improve speaking skills at all ages. In Bhatti (2021), a sample of 360 primary school students was subdivided into 180 males and 180 females to test the improvement in their speaking ability. The researcher found that the group of 90 male students scored 64.26 in the pre-test and 67.99 in the post-test, showing significant improvement. In contrast, the group of 90 female students scored 63.82 in the pre-test and 68.43 in the post-test, showing that after the post-test, the performance of those who were exposed to the use of role-playing was better.

Most researchers follow the same steps and procedures to apply role-playing at the first meeting. First, students are prepared with a story, flashcards, videos, or any other visual aid. As a next step, they are given information about the roles and setting to be displayed; then, they interact and observe. In the last step, the improvement of each individual and the group is assessed. (Gumelar and Sugara, 2019; Magos and Politi, 2008). Other researchers, such as Ayuningtias, (2019) conducted this activity twice to prove that role-playing is a successful technique to improve speaking skill: prepare a dialogue, then divide the roles and have the student memorize the script to finally act out the drama or dialogue. Later, in another meeting, the process changes to give

more details without memorizing any information, just acting naturally. On the contrary, Alam and Uddin, (2013) demonstrate the activity to students, then call volunteers to repeat or role-play a similar situation. On the other hand, they suggested showing an article so that students must ask their peers questions or answer questions like “what, how, and why”. While Zakaria *et al.*, (2019) use role-playing in a group of students from different majors and group them in pairs, then they exchange partners and can learn from each other.

Arismayang, (2016) conducted a study to improve students’ speaking skills using combined strategies of communication games, recorded role-plays, and peer feedback activities. He divided the study into three cycles, each cycle consisting of three 90-minute meetings. Arismayang concluded that students become interested in class when all three techniques are used, although the recorded role-play activities were difficult. At the end of the study, the use of recorded role-play activities was instrumental in allowing students to practice and improve their speaking skill while expanding their vocabulary. On the other hand, Krebt, (2017), to prove the validity of role-plays in improving speaking, followed three steps “before role-play, during role-play, and after role-play.” These steps provide different opportunities to students. In the first step, students were given material and time to work on their role-plays. In the second stage, students are only given words and idioms to create their own role-plays. In the last stage, students received feedback on their prepared performance. Yuliana, (2014) conducted experimental research comparing the use of two techniques, role-play and information gap, on high school students. The sample was 11th grade high school students, who were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. At the end of the study, the researchers found that the experimental group had a great improvement in the development of speaking skill compared to those who used the information gap.

Role-play can also be used with tour guides, as Anwari, (2021) shows in her study. Teaching how to guide a person around a place, answer possible questions about a tourist attraction, and greet tourists or visitors, for example, could be excellent role-play for tour guides. Otherwise, the application of role-play reflects that students who practice their language learning through role-play change their attitudes towards others. At the end of the research, Anwari concluded that using the role-playing technique improved students’ fluency, pronunciation, diction, and grammar.

Furthermore, when teachers apply a technique such as role-playing, they should consider students' motivation. In the qualitative research conducted by Lestari & Andini, (2020), students mention that role-playing is a good activity to improve speaking skills. Otherwise, they feel that role-playing is a difficult activity to practice due to the memorization and confidence they need to speak in public. In this regard, teachers should observe how students are grouped to work, as the way they are grouped with their team members shows the success of the technique (Castro & Villafuerte, 2019).

Discussion

In this systematic review to help EFL learners improve their speaking skill, readers would ratify that role-playing is an innovative and excellent strategy to improve speaking skill. To demonstrate the success of role-playing as a technique, a search strategy was conducted with the keywords related to the topic, where twenty scientific articles could be found that provided relevant information. The different articles showed that role-playing is a successful strategy to improve speaking skills.

All the studies demonstrate an increase in the improvement of speaking skill. Similarly, some researchers apply the technique at different levels and age ranges, the result was that role-playing helps EFL learners improve their speaking skill, involving intonation, diction, pronunciation, and grammar.

The findings of this research reinforce the idea that speaking is one of the most difficult skills to develop in the classroom for EFL learners (Ayuningtias, 2019). Lack of practice opportunities and traditional teaching strategies can limit the development of fluency and accuracy in communication (Alam & Uddin, 2013). However, results suggest that the use of role-playing is an effective technique to improve verbal skills, as it allows students to engage in authentic interactions, acquire new vocabulary, and gain confidence in their speaking (Magos & Politi, 2008; Zakaria *et al.*, 2019).

Quantitative data analyzed, such as those obtained by Idham *et al.*, (2022), demonstrate that students exposed to role-playing make significant improvements in their speaking skills compared to those who do not participate in this technique. The difference in scores in pre- and post-tests

after the application of role-playing supports the hypothesis that frequent and contextualized practice is key to language learning. Furthermore, studies such as Puspitorini, (2018) and Gumelar & Sugara, (2019) have shown that this strategy not only improves pronunciation and fluency but also strengthens students' confidence in public speaking.

Despite its benefits, role-playing presents challenges. Some students may feel insecure or anxious when participating in public speaking activities (Lestari & Andini, 2020), highlighting the importance of creating a learning environment that fosters comfort and motivation. Furthermore, the effectiveness of this technique is highly dependent on teacher preparation and guidance (Henry, 2019). Therefore, it is critical for teachers to receive training in implementing interactive activities and adapting role-playing to different educational contexts.

In conclusion, role-playing is an innovative technique that not only facilitates language acquisition but also positively impacts student attitude and engagement (Bhatti, 2021). However, its implementation should consider factors such as student motivation, level of confidence in speaking, and teacher preparation to maximize its benefits. Future research could focus on comparing its effectiveness with other teaching strategies and exploring its application in different educational levels and cultural contexts.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

Evidence shows that role-playing is a good activity that can be applied from preschool to university students, even with adults aged 30-40, to improve speaking skills. Role-playing is a technique that can be easily applied with other classroom activities. Since speaking is the most important skill to be developed for communicative competence, teachers should strive to use more speaking skill activities in the classroom, such as role-playing.

It is concluded that improving speaking skills is important in EFL learners and helps teachers interact with students, and using innovative techniques increases students' motivation to improve their speaking skills. The present study confirms that speaking is one of the most difficult skills to develop in EFL learners, mainly due to lack of practice opportunities and traditional teaching methods that do not encourage interaction (Ayuningtias, 2019; Alam & Uddin, 2013). However, the use of role-play is presented as an effective strategy to improve verbal skills, as it allows

students to practice in a real communicative context, expand their vocabulary and develop confidence in their oral expression (Magos & Politi, 2008; Zakaria *et al.*, 2019).

Quantitative results support the effectiveness of this technique, as demonstrated by studies by Idham *et al.*, (2022), which indicate significant improvements in students' oral expression after the implementation of role-play. Furthermore, previous research has shown that this strategy strengthens fluency, pronunciation and confidence in speaking (Puspitorini, 2018; Gumelar & Sugara, 2019). However, its implementation is not without challenges, as some students may experience anxiety when speaking in public (Lestari & Andini, 2020). This highlights the importance of creating a positive learning environment and providing ongoing support to students. Furthermore, the effectiveness of role-playing depends on teacher preparation, which underlines the need for adequate training for teachers in the application of interactive methodologies (Henry, 2019).

In conclusion, role-playing is a valuable tool to improve speaking skills in English language learning, not only from a linguistic perspective, but also from a motivational and psychological perspective (Bhatti, 2021). However, its success depends on proper implementation, including strategies to reduce student anxiety and adequate teacher training. Future research could focus on comparing its effectiveness with other pedagogical strategies and exploring its application at different educational levels and cultural contexts.

For future research, studies can be conducted at different levels to compare improvement across age differences. Studies can focus on combining different techniques to improve speaking skills in university students. Make a comparison between the way role-playing is conducted in different settings, such as private and public education.

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