

How Do EFL Learners Interact and Learn English Communication Skills during a Role-Play Strategy?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the comparative effectiveness of a role-play strategy vs. traditional learning methods in the achievement of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners to gain proficiency in communication skills. This paper reports results of an investigation on the effects of a role-play strategy in enhancing EFL students' English communication skills when learning English as a foreign language. The current study took 2 months and used the English Achievement test and an observation timetable of communication skills with a sample of elementary school students in Saudi Arabia. The sample included 43 male pupils aged 10-13 years, at level five in an elementary government school in Al-Baha City.

The results of the study show the existence of significant statistical variances between the pre- and posttest average scores of the EFL students who used role play for learning English skills, as well as those who did not use role play, hence learning English via traditional methods. The results favor the participants who used role play for learning the English language. The findings also show favorable variances for the experimental group while the pretest scores show no statistical variances among the EFL learners in the initial group and the other groups in their English skills achievement.

Moreover, on the determination of the effectiveness of the role-play strategy on the improvement of the EFL learners' communication skills, the results note a significant difference between the control and experimental conditions in terms of improving communication skills such as confirmation, repetition, imitation, and responding to other people by giving them examples, which was not available for learners in the control group. On the other hand, the participants in the control group improved their communication skills in areas such as clarification, explanation, and making statements during the application of the role-play strategy compared to their peers in the experimental group.

Keywords: applied linguistics, teaching English as a foreign language, role-play strategy, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

As one of the critical components of language skills, speaking is a core tool of instruction that must be given the attention it deserves solely because it is considered a natural way to communicate (Alzboun et al., 2017). According to McCarthy (1998), mastery of speaking ability is a cornerstone to the effective acquisition of a second (L2) or foreign language, and this ability supersedes any other ability. Speaking is generally regarded as a system of symbols in which verbal and nonverbal cues converge to make meaning as dictated by context. As a result, speaking is central to not only language learning but also teaching. Previously, learners have relied on recall and memorization in learning, but today, communicative competence is very important. Language in context has taken a center stage in learning, and therefore, a student should understand social and cultural rules as guided by context. Alzboun et al. (2017) opined that speaking is an active use of language to communicate meaning. They further stated that the spoken language is a critical means by which an L2 or foreign language is learned, practiced, and understood; and that lack of communicative competence hinders effective communication with others. Spoken and written languages have various differences. Specifically, spoken language has features that make it a more difficult task to perform than written language. This is seen in the fact that when an utterance has been made, there is no time to take it back, correct it, or look over what has been said, as is the case in written language. This is a view supported by Krebt (2017) in the proposition that while speaking, a speaker is generally under pressure; this scenario is absent in written language. According to Lewis (2011), these features can be leveraged as supportive strategies during teaching and learning, especially as a way of meeting every learner's individual learning needs. As a result, these features need to

be included in designing lesson plans for English classes. According to Alzboun et al. (2017), role play is one of the core strategies that can greatly improve a learner's speaking abilities. Role play is an effective technique by which learners can solve classroom interpersonal troubles and increase their English language proficiency (Keezhatta, 2020).

2. Literature Review

Role play as a teaching strategy may be riddled with a number of challenges. Sometimes, discrepancies arise in identifying appropriate roles for a student or group of students, giving rise to role conflict. Consequently, there is a need to discuss or consciously practice the roles assigned. In a classroom setting, these challenges can be overcome by allowing students to act them out and get used to them. Role play has been defined as the process of active participation where a learner engages actively and meaningfully in the learning process (Tompkins, 2001). In relation to foreign and L2 acquisition, this strategy is critical because it enables a learner to practice the target language in a context similar to the real situation, and in a context devoid of judgment, stress, and fear with application of appropriate learning strategies like role play, simulation, games, dramatizing, grouping, and peer learning. Additionally, these strategies are very important in learning the four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and specifically, speaking (Alzboun et al., 2017). The activities carried out in role play refer to the behavior shown by a student within a specific context and situation. As a result, role play is a key teaching strategy that proceeds by way of conscious representation and discussion of the roles in a group. This will ensure that fear or shyness about playing a certain role is mitigated through acting out scenarios in class. In addition, role play offers a wide array of productive opportunities for students to engage with the target language through speaking that is appropriate for various contexts and situations, aided by probing to think of the entire acting scene as a sort of game, and an opportunity to play roles that often occur in reality (Grill, 2013). According to Holt and Kysilka (2006), the challenges of role play can easily be overcome by conscious acting out that allows students to identify with the characters in the scenarios.

In a report on his study on the improvement of interaction skills, based on a communicative competence model, Savignon (2003) noted that communicative competence is the ability to communicate or function meaningfully within a linguistic setting, truly and competently, as shown by total adjustment to the entire informational input (linguistic and paralinguistic) of one or more interlocutors. Furthermore, Savignon (1972) contended that the dynamism in communicative competence denotes flexibility in the negotiation of meaning, and evidence of communicative competence's ability to go beyond the limitations of orality because it involves reading and writing. Context in communicative competence is crucial. An effective communicator must always have this in mind, and make appropriate linguistic responses and choices. Linguists see communicative competence as knowing the linguistic rules while communicative performance is the ability to purposefully apply those rules. Some researchers indicate that students must have a clear understanding of what their roles entail, and the context in which they are performing such roles, for effective imitation to take place. Role play, if implemented appropriately and if the whole class engages in it, is usually a very interesting approach to teaching and learning language. Gardner (2001) argued that developing a well-structured role-play lesson plan is critical in effective language learning and teaching. He further emphasized the creation of apt imaginative contexts that give students an opportunity to develop cognitive structures as well as latitude to discover and use linguistic inputs they have already learned in an interesting and interactive manner. Generally, role play is regarded as one of the language learning methodologies characterized by low input but high output (Ladousse, 1987, p. 9). This fact makes role play an approach that assesses how students act when they fall into a situation that needs a similar solving scheme (Holt & Kysilka, 2006). In addition, role play helps a learner to employ the same skills in solving real-life situations as obtained during acting. In a study that explored the effect of role play on the process of language acquisition, particularly English language structures, Najizade (1996) concluded that role play is critical because it brings real language situations into a classroom setting, thus considerably improving the effectiveness of learning an L2 or foreign language. Cornett (1999), in supporting the importance of role play, argued that role play is very effective in the acquisition of language structures due to its task-based foundation. Cornett further argued that role play helps students to not only improve their language fluency and oral interaction but also their use of body language, especially during face-to-face communication. Role-play techniques are essential to students as they learn a foreign language, especially through creating opportunities for the students to use the language. Engaging in role play can be fun, and an exciting opportunity to learn a language through student-student communication. Moreover, this will greatly enhance English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, as well as whetting students' interest in learning (Holt & Kysilka, 2006). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), a role in role play refers to the part that learners and teachers are expected to participate in within a created space (i.e., setting) guided by social and interpersonal dynamics.

Chen-jun (2006) opined that role play is a crucial way of giving learners an opportunity to practice language in a real-life-like setting such as a classroom. Due to the importance of role play, a huge corpus of literature exists. Platt and Brooks (1994), for instance, examined the interpretations of role play by two different groups where one group carried out the instructions mechanically while the other group developed goals to guide their performance. In that study, the latter group produced more metatalk than the former.

The setting or situation is a core determinant of how a student will act (Holt & Kysilka, 2006). For example, students participate differently if they are members of a congregation in a church or mosque, part of an audience, or students in a parade. In formal settings, students behave much differently from when they are with friends (i.e., in informal settings). The purpose or function to be achieved in role play affects the acting. For instance, acting out the role of a hotel manager is different from acting out the role of a front-desk staff member. This is the point Ladousse (1987) supported in his assertion that simulation is complex, inflexible, and usually lengthy. However, Holt and Kysilka (2006) posited that role play is flexible and simple in that a group, through oral presentations, can expand the time available for acting while having the flexibility to make more productive linguistic maneuvers. This will not only greatly reduce shyness but also enhance comfort and confidence when speaking. Mudofir and Maftu (2019) emphasized that students are happy and interested in implementing the role-play learning strategy.

3. Purpose of the Study

Not much information is available to date regarding what, in reality, students enact in role-play classroom milieux and how such acts impact academics and other sequels. Little research has been conducted on the methods and procedures of role-play strategy settings, owing to the fact that widely published studies have employed quasi-experimental designs where comparisons are analyzed between pretest performance and posttest outcomes.

The chief motive of this study was to ascertain the extent to which an appropriate role-play strategy enhances the interaction and communication skills of EFL students in English. In this study, I aimed to investigate a novel methodology to enable students to enrich their English communication skills and, in due course, to expedite their interactive skills with peers and other individuals. Moreover, a role-play strategy could serve as a means to enhance interactive skills since learners have prospects and the possibility of greater interaction with their colleagues and, in the process, converse with each other, thereby learning diverse English communication skills.

4. Method

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of a role-play strategy on EFL learners' outcomes in acquiring communication skills?
2. How do EFL learners interact with each other during a role-play strategy?

Participants

The study involved 43 male pupils as participants. They were 10 to 13 years of age and were at level five in the government elementary school in Al-Baha city. They were separated randomly into two groups: the control group with 22 participants and the experimental or role-play strategy group with 21 participants. In addition, the study included two male English educators from the same institution as participants. Also, all English educators possessed pertinent qualifications: Bachelor's degrees in English as well as equivalent English-teaching experiences.

English Achievement Test

For this study, I gathered only quantitative data. To accrue the data, I used pre-intervention and post-intervention English achievement tests as well as a verbal interaction (observation) timetable. The time assigned for the test was 45 min and it contained 30 score points. The test included pre- and post-intervention tests to assess the impact of a role-play strategy on the participants' acquisition or improvement of English language communication skills.

I administered the pretest prior to the onset of the study to assess the participants' previous accomplishments and to gain initial background information on the participants' English communication skills. On the other hand, I administered the posttest to evaluate the participants' gains on the English achievement test. The purpose of the posttest was to appraise the outcomes of both the role-play strategy and the traditional method adopted to evaluate the participants' language-learning achievement. Moreover, in order to avoid bias in the study, I asked a nonparticipating English teacher to evaluate the participants' pretest and posttest performance.

Observation Timetable of Communication Skills

The performance of both groups of participants was video-recorded at the single elementary government school. Of the two groups, one was the control group while the other was the experimental group who received instruction with

the role-play strategy for a period of 5 weeks. Both groups were subdivided into smaller groups of four students and each subgroup was video-recorded three times for 15 min each. The experimental group was recorded while experiencing the role-play strategy. In a similar manner, I asked the teacher of the control group to form subgroups with four participants in each, and their activities were video-recorded three times for 15 min each.

The English teacher in the experimental group was occupied with activities such as a workshop to foster teachers' acquisition of knowledge in order to implement the role-play strategy in their classrooms. Therefore, I devoted time to introduce various books concerning teaching English as a second language in Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, the English teacher of the control group did not participate in any kind of training workshop. As a matter of course, participants belonging to either group, experimental or control, studied analogous English lessons in their groups for at least 1 hour, four times a week.

Coding Communication Skills

To determine the study's outcome, I transcribed as well as coded all video-recorded clips. I observed eight most common communication skill phrases as well as statements emphasized by the students during their group discussions while learning EFL in Saudi Arabia. I identified these communication skills statements: Main statement during the role-play strategy, Imitation, Explanation, Repetition, Clarification, Confirmation, Responding to colleagues, and Giving examples.

It is noteworthy that the students carried out English lessons in the role-play strategy as a group activity throughout the study, which could be analyzed and assessed by means of the video clips. However, assessment could not be conducted for individual students; instead, the analysis provided an overview of the entire group. Consequently, I adopted Gillis's (1998) framework that envisioned the impacts of group experience on individual members. Moreover, at the group level, I also investigated the communication skills data to assess the extent and magnitude of interaction features and personalities of both groups.

The task of coding all the video clips was carried out by two research assistants who were trained to code the participants' communications skills. Interrater trustworthiness on the participants' communication was greater than 85%, which is regarded as a satisfactory level of interrater agreement (Gay & Airasian, 2010). Overall, 90 min of participants' communication skills were coded. Interrater reliability was recorded as 90% through statements marking communication skills.

Table 1. Observation Timetable of Communication Skills

Communication Skills	Frequency
1- Main statement during the role-play strategy	
2- Imitation	
3- Explanation	
4- Repetition	
5- Clarification	
6- Confirmation	
7- Responding to colleagues	
8- Giving examples	

Intervention and Assessment

This study encompassed two separate workshops for the teachers of the respective groups. The experimental group's workshop provided training in the role-play strategy for learning skills while the other workshop took place in the traditional class setting. In the control group, the participants operated in the traditional manner and no training was provided on role-play strategy implementation.

The study continued for 2 months from the beginning of the first semester in 2021. To conduct the study, I first invited two English teachers from Al-Baha school to participate in this research. Furthermore, student participants were selected from the two classes of the elementary school; one class served as an experimental group while the other class was the control group. The teaching material assigned to both groups encompassed a textbook provided by the Ministry of Education.

The students enacted diverse roles within the role-play strategy; however, two different teachers teaching the same content for 2 months were assigned to the two groups. Assessment of the effect of the role-play strategy as a learning method for EFL learners was completed using the pretest (to assess previous/background achievement in both groups)

and the posttest to evaluate the effect of the role-play strategy and the traditional learning method to teach English communication skills. The pretest reliability was high with a Cronbach's Alpha of 83.

5. Results and Discussion

Findings of the English Achievement Test

This study involved 43 student participants sampled from two classes in a public elementary school in Saudi Arabia. The participants experienced either control or experimental environments. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the outcome difference for the students in the two learning environments. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of their achievement.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations in the Total of Pretest and Total of Posttest Scores for the Experimental and Control Groups

		N	M	SD
Pretest total scores	experimental	22	14.91	2.599
	control	21	15.24	3.562
	Total	43	15.07	3.074
Posttest total scores	experimental	22	19.91	2.926
	control	21	16.19	3.945
	Total	43	18.09	3.902

One-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine the variances in the posttest and pretest totals. The results, as shown in Table 2, reveal no obvious difference between the two sets of environments at Time 1 but a significant variance at Time 2.

Table 3. Tests of Between-Subject Effects for Pretest and Posttest Total Scores

ANOVA		SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Pretest total scores	Between Groups	1.163	1	1.163	121	.730
	Within Groups	395.628	41	9.649		
	Total	396.791	42			
Posttest total scores	Between Groups	148.572	1	148.572	12.405	.001
	Within Groups	491.056	41	11.977		
	Total	639.628	42			

Discussion

Table 3 shows there are no statistical variances, $p = 0.730$ ($p > 0.05$) noted between the communication skills reported for the EFL students who utilized role play and those who used traditional learning methods for learning English. Table 3 also shows significant statistical variances $p = 0.001$ ($p < 0.05$) between the average score recorded for the group of students who were taught using the role-play strategy compared to those taught English using traditional learning methods, with the posttest results favoring the experimental group.

The findings of the current study also report the existence of statistical differences $p = 0.001$ ($p < 0.05$) between the control and experimental groups with regards to the mean in the posttest scores as a result of the adoption of the role-play learning strategy. The experimental group was favored in this regard. However, there were no statistically significant differences in the pretest English achievement test scores for learners in both the control and experimental classes. The results of this study suggest that the learners had the same background at the time of implementing the strategy, hence making it certain that the gains shown in the improvement in EFL learners' achievement was due to the role-play strategy. As such, the role-play strategy was deemed effective in terms of its strength in influencing EFL learners' outcomes

The current study's findings are consistent with the findings reported in other studies such as Najjzade (1996), investigating the impact of role play in the process of language acquisition, especially in learning English language structures. That study found that role play is fundamental in learning as it encompasses real language situations

within classroom settings, hence leading to an improvement in foreign or L2 learning. In another study, Alzboun and colleagues (2017) found that role play was one of the most effective strategies, having great capacity to enhance learners' speaking skills. According to Keneth (2008), the role-play strategy is perceived as the type of behavior in which learners act out their roles according to specific contexts. Gardner (2001) recommended the adoption of a well-structured role-play lesson plan as essential in the creation of effective teaching and language learning. Gardner further stressed the creation of appropriate imaginative contexts that offer learners the opportunity to develop cognitive structures and autonomy to invent and use linguistic inputs they had previously found to be interactive and interesting. Role play involves the evaluation of the manner in which learners act out roles in situations that need similar problem-solving skills (Holt & Kysilka, 2006). In role play, learners are able to use the same skills they learned during their role-play activities in the solution of real-life situations. According to Cornett (1999), learners benefit from role play as it helps them improve their language fluency and oral interaction as well as effective communication skills when they communicate face to face. Cornett also noted the value of role play as an effective strategy in the acquisition of language structures due to learning through a task-based foundation. Holt and Kysilka (2006) also noted that role play enhances EFL learning as well as improving learners' interest. Richards and Rodgers (2001) contended that role play requires the participation of both teachers and learners through a process guided by social and interpersonal dynamics. It also promotes collaborative and creative learning in teachers and students, and improves students' confidence in expressing their ideas and feelings using EFL (Castro & Villafuerte, 2019).

Findings of Observational Data

I used the Kruskal-Wallis evaluation system to determine the comparative effects of two methods of teaching on students' communication skills in two learning settings. Each session was video-recorded in both the control and experimental settings. Analysis deliberated on the videos to determine the impact of the methods used and the environment created on English learning outcomes. I conducted eight Kruskal-Wallis evaluations to determine the extent to which communication skills were impacted.

Table 4. Tests of Between-Group Effects on Communication Skills

Communication Skills	N	X ²	P
1- Main statement during the role-play strategy	4	9.13	.574
2- Imitation	4	12.38	.001
3- Explanation	4	8.75	.828
4- Repetition	4	12.19	.002
5- Clarification	4	8.69	.854
6-Confirmation	4	12.13	.002
7- Responding to colleagues	4	12.10	.002
8- Giving examples	4	12.50	.001

Discussion

I evaluated students' communication skills under the two conditions using eight Kruskal-Wallis tests. The testing approach focused on recorded communication frequency for the control and experimental situations. The findings reveal a significant difference in the learners' outcomes for repetition, $X^2(1, n = 4) = 12.19, p = .002$; imitation, $X^2(1, n = 4) = 12.38, p = .001$; confirmation $X^2(1, n = 4) = 12.13, p = .002$; giving examples, $X^2(1, n = 4) = 12.50, p = .002$; and responding to colleagues, $X^2(1, n = 4) = 12.10, p = .002$. A contrasting observation was made when the role-play strategy was used as there were nonsignificant variances in making a main statement, $X^2(1, n = 4) = 9.13, p = .574$; clarification, $X^2(1, n = 4) = 8.69, p = .854$; and explanation, $X^2(1, n = 4) = 8.75, p = .828$.

The findings reveal that students under the experimental condition performed better in communication skills such as repetition, imitation, confirmation, responding to peers, and giving examples than students in the control environment. Communication outcomes of students in the control environment differed because these students performed better in main statement, clarification, and explanation compared to those in the experimental condition.

This study's findings reveal that students who experienced the role-play strategy interacted and communicated with each other more than their peers who were taught using the traditional approach. Role-play students were exposed to different lessons in which they were expected to discuss and interact. It was an essential aspect of the learning process because they were expected to constantly be engaged in the task, understand their differences, and agree.

However, the students in the experimental setting demonstrated greater comprehension of the need to interact with their peers than those in the control condition. This assertion is supported by their better performances in imitation, repetition, confirmation, giving examples, and responding to colleagues compared to those in the control environment. Communication can be efficient only if learners can provide needed information to their peers, seek explanations, and give explanations (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). Learners who can explain to their peers can significantly influence their peers.

A distinction should be drawn between instrumental and executive help-seeking (Fall et al., 2000). Executive help-seeking is simply seeking an answer, while instrumental help-seeking refers to seeking an explanation. According to Fall and colleagues, classifying correct data as aiding behavior within a comprehensive coding system distinguishes poor and high communication aiding behavior when finding, giving, and implementing help. Krebt's (2017) results showed that there was a significant improvement in speaking skills as a result of the role-play technique.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I employed mixed methodology for 8 weeks to investigate the effects of a role-play learning strategy on EFL learners' communication skills in a Saudi Arabian public elementary school. This study aimed to evaluate the effect of the role-play strategy in improving the English communication skills of EFL learners who used English as an L2. I found an apparent statistical difference in the outcomes for EFL learners when the role-play strategy was applied compared to when traditional methods were used. The study also aimed to identify the benefits of the role-play strategy on EFL learners' communication skills. The data indicate a significant difference between the experimental and control conditions with better communication skills outcomes in imitation, repetition, confirmation, responding to colleagues, and giving examples for students in the experimental condition than for students in the control condition.

In contrast, the students in the control condition made more gains in main statement, explanation, and clarification than their peers in the experimental condition.

About the Author

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