Improving Speaking Skills of 11th Graders at Nguyen Trai High School Using Role Play: Students’ Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the efficacy of role-play as an instructional strategy for improving speaking skills and investigates students’ attitudes towards this technique. Conducted at Nguyen Trai High School, the research adopted an action research approach, encompassing planning, execution, observation, and reflection within a single cycle. A cohort of 40 eleventh-grade students during the 2022/2023 academic year participated. The study employed direct observation to gauge student attitudes towards role-play and its impact on speaking abilities. Additionally, a questionnaire survey was administered to collect student opinions on the role-play method and speaking skills. Further insights were gleaned through interviews with select students, aimed at delving deeper into their questionnaire responses and validating the accuracy of feedback. This mixed-methods approach facilitated an assessment of role-play’s effectiveness in enhancing speaking skills, with findings suggesting a significant improvement in students’ speaking competence.

Keywords: Action research, role-play, speaking skills, student perceptions.

1. Introduction

In the realm of language education, practical engagement through role-play has been identified as a vital strategy to enhance communicative competencies among learners. Traditionally, language learning was predominantly passive, focusing on rote memorization and repetitive tasks. However, the advent of communicative language teaching has shifted the focus toward interactive techniques that mimic real-life interactions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Role play, in particular, is celebrated for its ability to simulate realistic scenarios, thereby providing students with a practical context to employ their language skills dynamically (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013).

Nguyen Trai High School, like many educational institutions worldwide, has integrated role play into its 11th-grade curriculum to bolster English-speaking skills. This pedagogical shift aligns with global educational trends aiming to enhance oral proficiency and build confidence in language use in authentic settings (Wulandari et al., 2019). Students’ perceptions of these methods are crucial in evaluating their effectiveness and further refining teaching strategies. Positive student feedback often correlates with higher engagement and better language retention (Lee, 2009).

Furthermore, empirical studies suggest that role play can significantly enhance linguistic skills, including vocabulary retention, syntax improvement, and pronunciation skills, which are critical in mastering a new language (Selvakumar et al., 2022). By adopting the roles of various characters, students are compelled to adapt their language use contextually, which promotes a deeper understanding and application of the language studied (Goldstein & Winner, 2012).

Given the potential benefits outlined, this study focuses on the implementation of role-play in English-speaking classes at Nguyen Trai High School from the students’ perspective with the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of learners towards the implementation of role-play techniques in their English-speaking classes?
2. In what ways, can role-play exercises enhance the speaking abilities of learners?
These questions aim to uncover the subjective experiences of the students and the objective improvements observed in their speaking skills, providing a comprehensive overview of the role play’s effectiveness in educational settings.

2. Literature Review

Teaching and learning English speaking skills are essential for students to communicate effectively and express themselves in a foreign language. Despite its fundamental role in improving overall language proficiency, many learners are hesitant to engage in speaking activities due to fears of making mistakes, limited exposure outside the classroom, and inadequate opportunities for practical application (Levis & LeVelle, 2015).

Speaking encompasses more than just forming correct sentences; it includes managing colloquial expressions, understanding varying speech speeds, and using proper intonation (Thornbury, 2015). These complexities can make speaking in a second language daunting for students, who often prefer to revert to their native language during class activities (Salma, 2022).

A key factor in overcoming these challenges is motivation, which can be significantly boosted by engaging classroom activities like role plays (Ihsan, 2016). Role play has been recognized for its effectiveness in encouraging active participation and improving speaking skills (García-Carbonell et al., 2001). Moreover, fostering a supportive classroom environment where errors are treated as learning opportunities can help reduce anxiety and promote communication (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Role-play activities provide dynamic platforms for practicing speaking competencies, offering real-life scenarios that enhance oral competence through experiential learning (Oxford, 2015). These activities are categorized into fully scripted, semi-scripted, and non-scripted scenarios, each supporting different learning styles and proficiency levels (Harper-Whalen & Morris, 2005). By simulating authentic interactions, role play helps learners express themselves, negotiate meaning, and engage in culturally appropriate communication (Bailey, 2016).

Beyond linguistic skills, role play contributes to social and cognitive development. It is an integral part of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes practical language use and encourages learners to think critically and solve problems creatively (Richards, 2015). This method not only improves vocabulary and pronunciation but also prepares students for real-world communication challenges (Morgan & Rinvoluci, 2019).

Additionally, role play creates engaging and collaborative learning environments that promote cultural awareness and interpersonal interaction. Such activities support holistic educational outcomes by integrating language skills with social and emotional learning (Kumaravadiel, 2016). The interactive nature of role-play also builds community within the classroom, inspiring students to experiment with language and reflect on their learning experiences in a supportive atmosphere (Dewi, 2017).

In conclusion, the use of role-play in language classrooms has proven to be a versatile and effective method for enhancing communicative abilities. The current study seeks to explore the impacts of role play on the speaking skills of 11th-graders at Nguyen Trai High School, motivated by previous findings that highlight the potential benefits of this pedagogical approach for language education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context of the Study

This study investigated the perspectives of 11th-grade students regarding the use of role-playing activities during English language classes at Nguyen Trai High School in Ho Chi Minh City. Located in District 4, Nguyen Trai High School serves students whose English proficiency is generally lower compared to peers at other public schools. Consequently, the findings may primarily be applicable within the context of Nguyen Trai High School but may also hold relevance for similar educational settings.

3.2. Participants

The research cohort consisted of 40 eleventh-grade students (20 male and 20 female) from the same class at Nguyen Trai High School during the 2022/2023 academic year. All participants possessed a homogenous proficiency in English, categorized at an elementary level.

3.3. Research Method

The methodological approach adopted for this study is Action Research, a systematic process described by Creswell (2012) for educational enhancement through direct intervention and reflection. Following Arikunto and Suhardjono (2010), this process comprises planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, iteratively applied in cyclical phases.

3.4. Research Instruments

Observation: Observation, as delineated by Robson (2003), serves as a principal method for data collection, enabling the capture of non-verbal expressions and student interaction dynamics. An observation checklist will facilitate structured data recording.

Questionnaire: A questionnaire, as characterized by Bryman (2001), and further endorsed by Gillham (2000) and McClure (2002), will serve to quantify student perceptions and the impact of role-play on their speaking skills.

Interview: Semi-structured interviews, as posited by McClure (2002), will complement questionnaire data, offering nuanced insights into student experiences with role-play activities.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

A singular research cycle, spanning six sessions, was conducted from August 20th to September 24th. Following initial observations, role-play was integrated into subsequent sessions. Data collated from questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS, while observations informed iterative adjustments to teaching methodologies.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to, with informed consent obtained from all participants, and a commitment...
TABLE I: Progress of Students Across Six Research Meetings Based on Observation Checklists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Meetings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students are motivated and willing to be cooperative in groups during the activity.</td>
<td>6 (15%) 10 (25%) 17 (42.5%) 20 (50%) 23 (57.5) 28 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Students actively speak English language during the teaching and learning process.</td>
<td>4 (10%) 7 (17.5%) 13 (32.5%) 15 (37.5%) 20 (50%) 26 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students are enthusiastically involved in oral performance in front of the class.</td>
<td>7 (17.5%) 10 (25%) 13 (32.5%) 15 (37.5%) 17 (42.5%) 25 (62.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Students voluntarily do a role play demonstration in front of the class.</td>
<td>5 (12.5%) 9 (22.5%) 14 (35%) 16 (40%) 19 (47.5%) 27 (67.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Students speak loudly, clearly, fluently and confidently in the front of the classroom.</td>
<td>4 (10%) 6 (15%) 11 (27.5%) 13 (32.5%) 18 (45%) 26 (65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to confidentiality maintained throughout the research process.

4. Results

4.1. Observations

During the first class, students displayed a marked lack of readiness and motivation, primarily exhibiting reluctance to actively participate using English as the medium of instruction. This hesitancy was especially noticeable in oral activities where students showed significant anxiety, often pausing, using non-verbal cues like smiling or reverting to Vietnamese rather than speaking in English. These behaviors were meticulously documented via an observation checklist, underscoring a pervasive disengagement and apprehension towards oral English exercises and highlighting a dependency on the instructor for motivation.

4.2. Subsequent Improvements

Contrastingly, subsequent classes showed a substantial increase in student engagement and linguistic confidence, as evidenced by enhanced participation in group, paired, and individual tasks. Students progressively took greater initiative and displayed more enthusiasm in using English, extending beyond the classroom into their preparatory work at home. Notably, the use of role-play exercises contributed significantly to these improvements. Students became more willing to volunteer for role-plays, showing increased ease, clarity, confidence, and fluency in their speech. The decrease in nervousness and anxiety was significant, indicating improved linguistic skills and greater comfort with the English language. These observations suggest that interactive and practical activities are crucial for boosting linguistic competence in language learning environments.

The data in Table I quantitatively tracks student engagement and competency across six meetings, illustrating significant improvements in language skills and classroom participation due to effective pedagogical strategies.

Initially, only 15% of students were motivated to participate in group activities; by the final observation, this increased to 70%. This growth indicated a shift towards a more collaborative classroom environment. Similarly, active English usage rose from 10% to 65%, reflecting both enhanced language proficiency and a greater willingness to use English for learning.

There was also notable progress in students’ willingness to engage in oral performances, with participation increasing from 17.5% to 62.5%. This suggested increased comfort and eagerness to engage in such activities, which are crucial for language acquisition. Participation in role-play, which aided practical language use, grew from 12.5% to 67.5%, indicating a rise in linguistic confidence and a readiness to explore different perspectives.

Furthermore, the proportion of students who could speak in a loud, clear, fluent, and confident manner increased from 10% to 65%, showcasing a significant shift from reticence to self-assurance in public speaking.

Overall, these trends demonstrated the success of the teaching methods employed, with marked improvements in student motivation, engagement, language use, oral performance, and public speaking confidence. These results underscored the effectiveness of the instructional strategies in fostering communicative competence in an immersive learning environment.

5. Questionnaires

5.1. Students’ Perceptions of Role-Play Techniques in English Language Speaking Classes

The analysis presented in Table II highlights the favorable perceptions students hold regarding the use of role-play techniques in English-speaking classes. A significant majority, 65%, of the students found role-play activities engaging, as indicated by a mean score of 3.60, suggesting a strong interest in these types of exercises. Furthermore, 75% of the participants acknowledged that role-playing effectively alleviated their public speaking anxiety, with a mean score of 3.93.

Additionally, 80% of the students appreciated the role-play method for creating a relaxed and conducive learning environment that enhances the acquisition of speaking skills, reflected by a high mean score of 4.10. About 70%
of the students described the role-play activities as fun and motivating, with a mean score of 3.80, highlighting the emotional benefits of this approach.

Moreover, 72.5% of the respondents agreed that role-play techniques provide more opportunities for exchanging ideas with peers and practicing speaking skills during lessons, as evidenced by a mean score of 3.78. This indicated that role-play not only supported individual skill development but also fostered interactive learning experiences. These results collectively affirmed that role-play was an effective educational tool in English-speaking classes, enhancing both student engagement and speaking proficiency.

Table III revealed that a significant majority of students perceived role-play activities as beneficial for enhancing their English-speaking skills. Specifically, 60% of participants reported improvements in natural spoken English from engaging in role plays (mean score: 3.50). Additionally, 67.5% believed that these activities enhanced their accuracy in speaking English (mean score: 3.70), while 65% felt they speak more fluently as a result (mean score: 3.68).

Moreover, a significant 75% of students supported the use of role-play as an effective teaching strategy that enhanced their engagement and self-assurance in speaking English, with an average rating of 4.00. Impressively, 80% of the students acknowledged role-play as a beneficial approach for improving their English language abilities, reflected in a higher average score of 4.08.

Overall, the data strongly supported the effectiveness of role-play in improving English-speaking abilities among learners.

6. Interview

The positive feedback from all five students regarding the use of role play activities in speaking classes highlighted its effectiveness in enhancing English speaking skills. These students initially found speaking challenging due to limited vocabulary and inadequate prior exposure to conversational English, primarily focusing on grammar for examinations. However, they appreciated the role-play activities as enjoyable and relaxing, which facilitated a natural and engaging learning environment. This method allowed students to simulate real-life situations, improving their adaptability and performance in speaking tasks.

Common benefits identified by the interviewees include a more relaxed atmosphere conducive to learning, where even reserved students felt encouraged to participate. The role-play method provided diverse opportunities for practicing speech, expanding vocabulary, and building confidence and fluency in English. Moreover, the participants noted significant improvements in speaking accuracy and fluency, attributing these to the collaborative nature of role plays which fostered effective group interactions and peer learning.

Overall, the unanimous endorsement by the students confirmed the utility of role-play in developing speaking competencies. The researchers were therefore justified in
employing this pedagogical strategy to advance English-speaking skills in educational settings.

7. Discussion

The study investigated the implementation of role-play in speaking classes and its impact on improving oral communication skills among 11th graders at Nguyen Trai High School, focusing on two main questions. The first part of the discussion addresses students’ attitudes towards role-play techniques. The findings indicated a positive reception; students reported increased opportunities to practice speaking and a significant boost in oral competence, corroborating Afdillah’s (2015) findings that role-play expanded communication skills and reduces public speaking anxiety, a result supported by P’Rayan and Shetty (2008). Furthermore, Shankar et al. (2012) and Qing (2011) have also identified role play as a beneficial tool in real-life scenario preparation and social interaction, enhancing vocabulary acquisition and situational handling.

The second part examined the impact of role-play on students’ speaking abilities. The data suggested improvements in expressive skills and grammatical understanding post-implementation, supporting Nguyen and Do’s (2017) study that highlighted the positive effects of role play on EFL learners’ speaking skills. This aligned with findings from Mendoza (2014) and Sofyan et al. (2018), who noted enhanced oral abilities through role-play. Observations indicated that continuous practice led to fewer linguistic errors and increased self-monitoring among students, suggesting that role-play not only improves fluency and accuracy but also fosters conscious linguistic development.

Overall, this study confirmed that role play is an effective pedagogical strategy for enriching language instruction, offering diverse and meaningful opportunities for student engagement and language use in the classroom.

8. Conclusion

The study conducted at Nguyen Trai High School has significantly demonstrated the effectiveness of role-play activities in enhancing the speaking competencies of 11th-grade students. This research underscores the role of such interactive tasks in improving vocabulary acquisition, reducing communication apprehension, and fostering a more confident and motivated learning environment. Students not only became more fluent but also developed the ability to handle real-life conversational scenarios more adeptly. However, the study faced limitations including the small sample size and the brevity of the intervention period, which was restricted to a single-action research cycle. Future studies could benefit from multiple cycles to compare outcomes over time and a broader participant base to generalize the findings more reliably. The implementation of pre-tests and post-tests would further refine the understanding of students’ progress.

Moving forward, it is recommended that similar research be expanded across diverse educational settings and student demographics to explore the universal applicability and potential of role-play in language education. This could ensure that role-play techniques are optimally integrated into English speaking curricula, preparing students more comprehensively for various communicative challenges.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


