

Saudi EFL Students' Perceptions and Effects of Role-Play on Their Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is a key skill in both language learning and teaching. One of the teaching strategies that has enhanced students' speaking ability has been role-play. The study is designed to investigate (a) Saudi EFL students' perceptions of role-play and (b) explore the positive effects of adopting role-play activities on their speaking skills. This research study adopted a mixed methods approach, utilizing a questionnaire for quantitative data and semi-structured interview-based methodology for qualitative data, consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The population selected for this study was 49 female university students at the undergraduate level majoring in the English Language and Translation program at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU), Saudi Arabia. The findings of the participants' perceptions displayed a positive impact on their speaking proficiency, contributing to improved motivation, communication skills, confidence, emotional resilience, overcoming fear, shyness, and negative feelings associated with speaking English in EFL contexts. A vast majority of respondents emphasized the significance of role-play activities as a pedagogical tool for enhancing EFL speaking skills and fostering socio-emotional development, thereby highlighting role-play's recognized value in practical language learning and communication. Respondents valued the engaging nature of role-play for promoting real-world communication abilities, contributing

to a more confident and resilient outlook during these activities. Integrating role-play activities into Saudi EFL curricula can maximize learning and cultivate a more learner-centered and participatory environment conducive to holistic language development.

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INTRODUCTION

English, the most popular language, is spoken by millions of individuals across the globe. In contemporary times, the evolution of English persists as it assimilates new words, expressions, and dialects from a wide range of linguistic sources. Undoubtedly, English holds the distinction of being the most widely spoken language worldwide, surpassing other languages in terms of its global reach and influence. Despite the importance placed on English, many students around the world face challenges in effectively communicating in English, particularly in speaking. Various factors contribute to these difficulties, with the most prominent factor being the limited possibility of practicing speaking daily outside of the classrooms or lecture halls. Hence, there is an urgent need to tackle this challenge and create opportunities for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to overcome hurdles posed in speaking skills.

Speaking skill is an interactive process of oral communication, which expresses perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and helps share knowledge with others (Vân et al., 2022, p. 2522). However, it is important to note that the spoken language differs from the written language in several ways, which poses additional challenges and demands. Speaking is a key skill in both teaching and learning. According to Chaney (1998), speaking ability is the process of sharing and making meaning while using spoken and non-spoken signs. Speaking plays a dominant part in foreign language contexts, and it is a skill that needs improvement

through continuous practice, as it consumes time to speak fluently or become adept at speaking. In order to hone students' speaking ability, instructors play a vital role in disseminating various strategies to enhance this skill. One of these teaching strategies is role-play.

Role-play activities involve taking on a particular role in a simulated setting, enabling students to explore various perspectives and participate actively in real-life situations. According to Russell and Shepherd (2010), role-playing is defined as "a form of experiential learning where students adopt different personas and work through a given scenario together, interacting in their assumed roles" (p.992). As a dynamic teaching strategy, it enhances both speaking skills and communication abilities, promoting lively interaction. By enacting the shoes of a specific character during role-play, students as actors or actresses communicate, interact, develop, learn, and partake in settings adapted from real-life scenarios. Furthermore, role-play is an excellent way for students to expand their English knowledge and understanding, equipping them with a deeper comprehension (Vân et al., 2022).

Role-play activities can provide an enjoyable and interactive learning platform. By portraying real-life scenarios, students gain valuable insights into how language is employed in different contexts, allowing them to enhance their linguistic abilities as well as communicative competence. The role-play technique has benefited learners in diverse ways. In addition to

a variety of multidimensional teaching strategies that persist today, the role-play technique stands out as unique, for it facilitates the development of oral fluency, promotes interactive speaking and listening skills, creates opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges, teaches problem-solving abilities, builds an environment for language acquisition, and encourages socio-cultural dynamics of communication.

Role-play exercises seek to provide an in-depth understanding of the course content through their practical application of the acquired knowledge and skills. Role-play enables students to put their knowledge to use in a situation that is like their daily activities and routines. The communication skills that we employ in our daily lives, such as interactions with family members, colleagues, friends, relatives, or conversations, or negotiations at hospitals, stations, airports, shopping centers, supermarkets, cafes, etc., offer real-world scenarios. Students as learners deduce meaning from these scenarios, or social environments, which assist in reinforcing their language learning journey. During role-play, students practically utilize the foreign language, and that helps them understand how the foreign language is applied in real life. Consequently, this propels EFL learners to practice speaking in English more frequently and without any inhibitions.

However, in spite of varied teaching strategies, it is no wonder that teachers at times can be selective, reluctant, or dispassionate in integrating them into

language learning classrooms. Hence, it is pivotal to acknowledge the necessity to enhance teachers' current teaching practices in EFL settings, as they promote diversified approaches to teaching and generate interactive teaching-learning environments. In addition, the usage of teaching strategies improves the quality of teaching, makes the process of teaching effective, and significantly emphasizes practical ways of learning. Furthermore, resistance to employing appropriate strategies by teachers could impact students' academic achievement. Teaching strategies, in a way, make learning interesting by fostering a community of responsive learners interacting socially, intellectually, and emotionally.

Studies on effective teaching strategies, especially the role-play techniques, are prevalent. However, there is scant attention given specifically to the impact of the role-play technique on students' speaking proficiency in the Saudi EFL context. While it is noteworthy to see studies documenting this technique in the health sciences stream in Saudi Arabia, there exists a gap in the EFL context. Consequently, underscoring the need to explore Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of the role-play technique on their speaking skills is vital in advancing this gap and fostering experiential learning approaches to language teaching. Hence, this research study aims to examine this gap by contributing to the existing studies and providing useful knowledge to language practitioners to improve their teaching techniques.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study addresses the sociocultural theory of cognitive development propounded by Lev Vygotsky (1962) and the experiential learning theory, specifically the learning cycle proposed by David Kolb (1984). Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1962) emphasized that social interaction is fundamental to learning and believed that language, humans' greatest tool for communicating, develops from these social interactions, facilitating mental functions like abstract thinking, planning, and problem-solving. Vygotsky's (1962) social development theory focuses on the idea that cognitive functions are the products of social interactions. The Vygotskian approach also addresses collaborative learning and calls for both the teacher and the students to take non-traditional roles in collaborative learning (as cited in McLeod, 2024a). The role-play technique vividly promotes collaborative learning, social interactions, and interpersonal skills among students as proposed by Vygotsky. In a similar vein, the American educational theorist and psychologist David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, considered as one of the most widely influential frameworks, states that learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (as cited in McLeod, 2024b). In essence, Kolb suggests four stages in the cycle of experiential learning, namely *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualization*, and *active experimentation*, which begin

with a student's concrete experience (of a situation or existing/new experience) and end with the knowledge gained through active experimentation (as cited in McLeod, 2024b). With role-play acting as a tool for the application of knowledge, it undoubtedly is a vital technique in the learning process, as stated in Kolb's model of four stages of learning. In this sense, efficient learning involves interactive learning strategies rather than relying solely on lecture-based or didactic approaches. Hence, role-play as an effective learning tool indisputably supports the execution of theory to practice as advocated by Vygotsky and Kolb.

Role-play's crucial role in enhancing the speaking skills of EFL learners is being rapidly acknowledged. According to Khasbani and Seli (2021), speaking has been generally regarded as the core element of English language learning. They believe that students' success in learning English is often assessed by how well they can articulate and express themselves orally. Khasbani and Seli's (2021) study points out that, in English language classrooms, the demand for students to be fluent and skillful English speakers started to increase over the course of the last few decades. However, students often battle to master their speaking skills. Various factors contribute to the lack of proper speaking skills among EFL students in general, and Saudi EFL students in particular. Either students are uncomfortable, disinterested, or bored with the traditional learning methods (Vân et al., 2022), or speaking English in public becomes a stressful ordeal, as they fear

being looked down upon by others (Yen et al., 2015). In Saudi Arabia, EFL students have faced challenges in English-speaking proficiency, as they fail to practice speaking. The important reason is that these EFL learners have little chance to speak or use English in their day-to-day interactions. This shortage of interaction deprives the learners of a suitable communicative environment as well as adversely affects their development of language learning skills. Certain studies have found that the interference of spoken Arabic in the class (Hamad, 2013), lack of intrinsic motivation and encouragement (Al-Seghayer, 2011; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015), and scarce opportunities to practice speaking (Alrasheedi, 2020) pose as hindrances for EFL students in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, active teaching strategies such as role-play are recommended to improve students' oral skills and overcome hurdles in speaking.

Previous studies on role-play techniques or activities at the school and college levels showcased that it enhanced students' speaking ability (Ferawaty, 2018; Khasbani & Seli, 2021; Phuetchon et al., 2012; Vân et al., 2022), motivation levels (Faqih, 2017; Hamdi, 2023; Lutfi et al., 2018; Maulana & Lolita, 2023), and encouraged peer interaction (Phuetchon et al., 2012). The positive impact of role-play on language proficiency, especially speaking skills, is discussed in the following research studies. In a study from Indonesia, the researchers facilitated the opportunity for forty-eight students at a vocational school to use their target language and display their speaking ability using role-play. The participants

exposed to role-play teaching showed improvement in their speaking performance test results compared to those who adopted the traditional presentation techniques (Khasbani & Seli, 2021). A research study from the southern part of Vietnam showed role-play techniques' positive impact on EFL learners' speaking. The findings indicated a variety of reasons, like comfortable learning environments, being less boring than other teaching methods, fun activities lessening stress, in addition to role-play techniques influencing learners' speaking proficiency (Vân et al., 2022). Another study based on the quantitative data results from Indonesia exhibited that the role-playing method drastically improved students' English-speaking ability by 11.8% in comparison to the traditional method, which was at 5.2% (Maulana & Lolita, 2023). On the other hand, researchers Lutfi et al. (2018) argued that despite the fact that students are taught to develop their speaking skills in schools, it is not very often that this process is presented to them using an attractive method. Similarly, Losi and Nasution (2022) argued that it is important to implement some engaging classroom activities to improve students' speaking skills. Furthermore, the findings of a study on Iraqi EFL students' speaking skills highlighted the instructors' role, suggesting that instructors should be involved in role-play activities and that they should discuss different topics when implementing this method. The researcher also mentioned that they should discuss different human emotions and the situations in which those emotions would be present

(Krebt, 2017). An interesting study aimed at investigating the usage of unscripted role-play activities to improve the speaking ability of Thai EFL college students in the English for Communication course showed positive student satisfaction, enabling them to communicate independently, feel comfortable during topic discussions, in addition to fostering interaction with peers (Phuetphon et al., 2012). Yen et al.'s (2015) study from Taiwan examined an EFL instruction course by merging Facebook and Skype as platforms through which students performed role-play activities. The results showed an improvement in students' speaking skills. Additionally, Katemba and Grace's (2023) study asserted that role-play bridges the gap between textbook dialogues and common usage as well as between classrooms and real-life circumstances (p.249).

Numerous studies underscored the value of role-play as an effective instructional strategy in EFL environments, promoting student engagement (Nfor, 2020), building confidence and cooperation (Rayhan, 2014), and overall language proficiency (Lestari & Sridatun, 2020; Krebt, 2017). Nonetheless, role-play activities also addressed negative effects as noted from teachers' perspectives such as time constraints (Ments, 1994; Kumaran, 2017), inappropriate classroom management, inadequate availability of role-play materials, difficulty in controlling the class, a few learners' refusal to participate (Kumaran, 2017), noise, laughter, disorder and disturbance (Rojas & Villafuerte, 2018).

In the Saudi Arabian EFL context, studies on the influence of role-play on speaking skills have addressed different concerns. Focusing on the effect of role-play on the development of dialogue skills among learners of Arabic as a second language at a university in Saudi Arabia, Daif-Allah and Al-Sultan's (2023) study results displayed a positive effect of role-play in terms of self-esteem, good listening, expressing opinions, in addition to admiration for others. On the other hand, a study from the southern province of Saudi Arabia stated that not using strategies like role-play and debates by instructors, not using language labs, devoting more time to listening than speaking skills, lack of assignments that develop speaking skills and the need to increase teaching hours for listening & speaking courses were some of the factors that negatively affected the speaking skills in Saudi colleges for female students (Hamad, 2013). Another study from Riyadh dealt with the efficacy of role-play as a teaching strategy and its impact on the formative assessment among English major students in a Saudi University (Keezhatta, 2020). This study displayed it as an effective technique that increased students' English language proficiency. In a similar vein, Alghamdy's (2022) study, which investigated the effectiveness of role-play vs traditional methods on EFL students' English communication skills from the southwestern part of Saudi Arabia, largely favored the role-play strategy.

A review of the previous studies in Saudi Arabia have tended to focus on improving the acquisition of overall

language proficiency or communication abilities through role-play or solely focus on factors influencing the speaking performance of learners. However, studies that have been conducted exclusively on the impact of role-play on students' speaking skills in a Saudi EFL context are minimal. To address this research gap, this study endeavors to depict Saudi EFL students' attitudes towards role-play activity to determine if the teaching strategy is effective in improving their speaking skills. It is also interesting to note that the presence of previous studies and explorations on this topic were mostly carried out in Asian EFL settings, as English is not their native language. As the results of prior research studies in these settings have shown improvement in EFL students' speaking skills, it persuaded the researchers of this current study to investigate the topic and to ascertain the effectiveness of the role-playing technique on the speaking proficiency. Additionally, if this method is proven to be effective in changing teachers' roles to a less dominant one, as suggested by Alzboun et al. (2017), then it could also be beneficial, as it will make their job easier and reduce their workload. The concept of role-play discussed above highlights the objectives of this current study and aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are Saudi EFL students' perceptions of role-play activities on their speaking skills?

RQ2: What are the positive effects of adopting role-play activities on the speaking skills of Saudi EFL students?

METHODS

Research Design

Researchers J.W. Creswell and J.D. Creswell (2018) stated, mixed methods research is “an approach to inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using a distinct design” (Chapt.1). This research study used a convergent mixed methods design, where both types of data provide information, (about views of participants qualitatively and scores on instruments quantitatively) yielding similar results, and the findings based on the analysis note whether there is convergence or divergence between the two forms of data (J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018, Chapt.10). In this research design, both quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed independently and then merged to see where they complement, align, or diverge. Moreover, as noted by J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell (2018), differences in a few concepts, themes, or scales exist, and divergence in this type of approach can be mentioned as a limitation without further follow-up (Chapt.10). However, the convergence of the results enhances the validity of the overall research study by demonstrating consistency across methods. Apart from collecting numerical data (descriptive frequencies) through the quantitative approach, this study wanted to explore additional information to seek in-depth perspectives on role-play activities, capture varied experiences of participants about role-play, their feelings, and opinions in the form of qualitative data. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire comprising

closed-ended questions and semi-structured interviews comprising open-ended questions to investigate their attitudes towards this technique. By integrating the two forms of data, mixed methods research provides insight beyond the information provided by any of these data alone (J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2007) asserted that the “mixed methods research is an intellectual and practical synthesis based on qualitative and quantitative research,” and seeks to “provide the most informative, complete, balanced, and useful research results” (p.129). Hence, this mixed methods approach was deemed appropriate to gain a holistic picture and answer the research questions of this study. This approach aligns with exploring the experiential aspects, attitudes, and effects of role-play in EFL classes by capturing both the numerical data and the nuanced, personal experiences of learners. Comparing and integrating quantitative and qualitative findings enhances consistency, which is further reinforced by comprehensive feedback from students, thereby offering deeper insights into their attitudes and practices. By integrating both types of data, the findings can be cross-validated to ensure a more robust understanding. By utilizing the convergent mixed methods design, both forms of data can be simultaneously gathered to determine the tangible effects of role-play.

The Participants

The population selected for this study was 49 female Saudi university students

at the Department of English, College of Science & Humanities, Jubail, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University (henceforth IAU), Saudi Arabia. The participants are Level 4 students majoring in the English Language and Translation program at the undergraduate level. The program has eight levels spread over a period of four years. The reason for selecting these participants was that they participated in the role-play activity offered to them during their second year at the Department of English. Also, the study adhered to the strict guidelines on ethical procedures. Ethical approval was obtained by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University, with ref no: IRB-2024-28-424.

Data Collection Instruments

This study employed two instruments for the purpose of data collection—a questionnaire comprising closed-ended questions and semi-structured interviews comprising open-ended questions. Questionnaires are one of the most prevalent and extensively used methods of collecting data concerning the views, beliefs, or attitudes of a large number of people (Curle & Derakhshan, 2022, Chapt.3). Furthermore, they are particularly efficient in terms of the researchers’ time, effort and financial resources, as the instrument is quick and fast in employing and processing the data (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p.6). Likewise, in qualitative research, Punch (2009) asserts that interviews are considered the most vital data collection tools.

Pilot Testing

Pilot testing is an essential aspect for improving the design of the research instruments. It is a vital stage for ensuring “high quality (in terms of reliability and validity) of the outcomes” (Dörnyei, 2007, p.75). Dörnyei (2007) emphasizes the pivotal importance of piloting research instruments before they are administered, to protect against potential methodological and organizational problems (p.75). The pilot model was administered to a sample of 21 students (who were not part of the current study) majoring in the English Language & Translation Program to test the validity and authenticity of the instruments. After the process of piloting the questionnaire (quantitative data) had been done, modifications were applied to the 20 questions or items based on the participants' comments involved in the pilot testing. The preliminary analysis of results was carried out to check the precision of the questions and whether their purpose served to answer the research questions. Considering the feedback offered, some questions were deleted as they appeared repetitive, while some were modified and restructured. Therefore, the updated questionnaire included a total of 14 items. The same process was followed for the 5 semi-structured interview questions (qualitative data). After pilot testing, 2 questions were deleted and 4 were added to make a total of 7 questions. The finalized online survey questionnaire consisted of 14 items, while the semi-structured interview questions consisted of 7.

Data Analysis

This research study participants partook in a role-play activity during the academic year 2023-24. For quantitative data, most of the questions were written by the authors specifically for the study, while a few were borrowed from existing questionnaires (Alrasheedi, 2020; Losi & Nasution, 2022), which discuss the topic of role-play and its impact on EFL students' speaking skills. As for the qualitative data, the same method was followed to frame the questions for semi-structured interviews (open-ended). Some were customized, while others were borrowed from Mehdiyev's (2020) study. Non-probability convenience sampling method was employed for the online questionnaire, and the purposive sampling method was utilized for selecting the interviewees.

An informed consent form was collected from each participant during the initial stage of the online data collection process. Participation in this research study was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any moment. A short description at the beginning of the questionnaire detailed the reasons for conducting the research, the type of questions, and the confidentiality of responses.

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire on Google Forms, which analyzed the data into percentages and graphs. The link to the online questionnaire was sent through a WhatsApp group chat to 49 EFL students. There were 14 closed-ended

questions on a 5-point Likert scale, split into two sections. This online questionnaire consisted of 7 items on speaking skills relating to student's engagement in role-play activities in EFL classrooms, their participation, influence on their speaking skills (pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, communication, recitation of dialogues, memorization and so on) and 7 items on positive effects (motivation, confidence, identifying weaknesses and strengths, overcoming fear and shyness, feelings of stress), in addition to their personal information. The main purpose of collecting the personal information section (which included the participant's name, student ID, and email ID, along with a statement asking if they wished to participate in the semi-structured interviews) was to ensure that the data was authentic and that the link was not shared elsewhere.

Qualitative Data

Researchers Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested analyzing qualitative data with a systematic approach to uncover patterns and themes within the dataset. The choice of semi-structured interviews was intended to create a comfortable environment, facilitating free discussions on the research topic. Through face-to-face interviews, participants or respondents shared their perceptions and insights on the role-play activity based on their own involvement and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 interviewees to understand their perspectives and provide more insights into the study. These were

a specific group of participants who consented to be interviewed and agreed to share their experiences with us. To ensure accurate documentation of the interviews, the researchers used the Voice Memos application. The individual interviews were conducted in the department's meeting room, with each session lasting approximately 25-30 minutes. Following the completion of the interviews, the researchers personally reviewed all the recorded discussions to provide the most accurate description of the results. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were then coded and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, which involved identifying repeated patterns of meaning in the interviews, focus groups, or other textual sources, to gain further insights and address the research questions of the study.

RESULTS

The findings elucidate the effectiveness of incorporating role-play activity in improving Saudi EFL learners' speaking skills. This section is structured to cover two main aspects:

- (1) Perceptions of Role-play activities on Saudi EFL students' speaking skills and
- (2) The Positive effects of adopting Role-play activities on the speaking skills of Saudi EFL students.

Perceptions of Role-Play Activities on Saudi EFL Students' Speaking Skills

The participants filled out the data online, and anonymity and confidentiality for

each participant were maintained. The online survey questionnaire was filled out by 49 participants, accounting for 100% participation. Hence, the total respondents of this study included 49 questionnaire respondents and 10 interviewees. The results (descriptive frequencies) of the first section of the questionnaire related to RQ1 are detailed in Table 1 below:

The responses of ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’ were tabulated as positive outcomes, while the responses of ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Disagree’ were tabulated as negative outcomes. The questionnaire results for RQ1 indicated that most students preferred role-play activity as a classroom learning method, and it impacted their speaking skills (Figure 1). All the respondents confirmed that they participated in role-play activities in their English language classes for Item 1. Items 2 and 3 addressed the impact of role-play on fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary. 90% of respondents agreed with

item 2, suggesting that they found role-play helpful in developing their fluency and improving their pronunciation, while 86% indicated enhanced vocabulary usage after indulging in the activities for item 3.

Similarly, 86% of respondents in item 4 agreed that role-play, while time-consuming in reciting dialogues, contributed to improved listening and speaking skills, allowing them to engage actively. Item 5 assessed whether role-play provided opportunities to practice their speaking skills, which accounted for 98% high agreement amongst the respondents. Lastly, items 6 and 7 focused on the application of role-play in debating, public speaking, and general communication skills, which can be employed and practiced outside EFL classrooms. 88% of respondents agreed that role-play helped improve these skills for item 6. There was agreement of 92% and disagreement of 8% for item 7. Overall, these results suggest a high level

Table 1
Responses of perceptions towards role-play activities on a 5-point Likert scale (N=49)

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. I participated in role-play activities during English language classes.	56%	44%	0%	0%	0%
2. Role-play had an impact on my fluency and improved my pronunciation in EFL classes.	42%	48%	2%	8%	0%
3. Role-play improved my vocabulary usage after engaging in the activities in EFL classes.	38%	48%	4%	10%	0%
4. Though role-play activities consume time to recite the dialogues, they helped me improve my listening & speaking skills.	26%	60%	6%	8%	0%
5. Role-play activities provided opportunities to practice my speaking skills.	30%	68%	0%	2%	0%
6. Role-play has improved my communication skills. e.g., speaking in public, communicating, debating, etc.	32%	56%	4%	8%	0%
7. I will use this communicative language learning to practice English outside the EFL classrooms.	34%	58%	0%	8%	0%

Note. SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

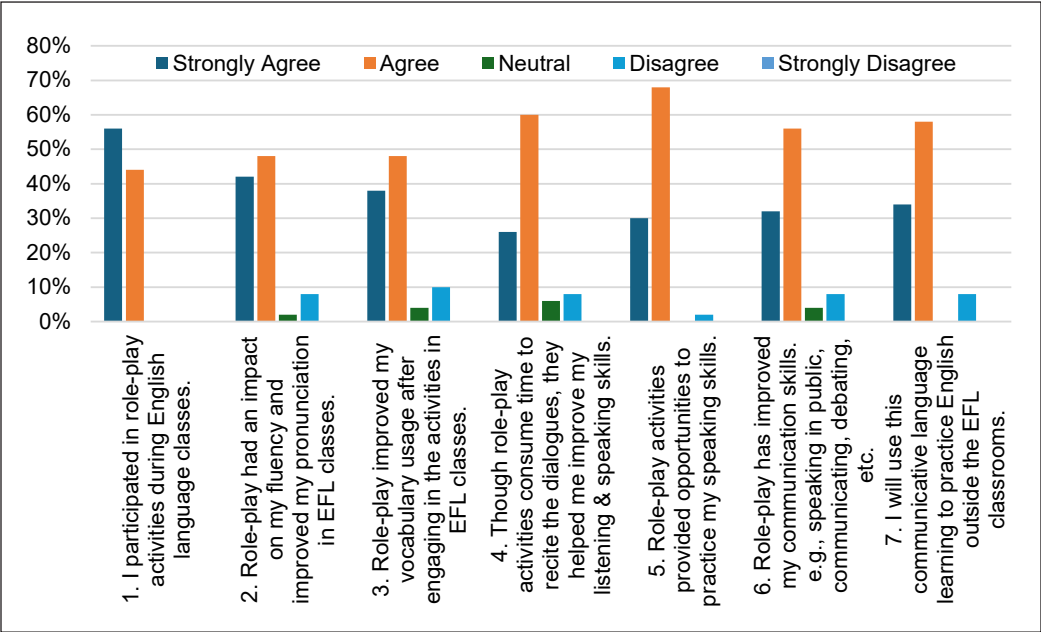


Figure 1. Responses of the questionnaire summary on perceptions of role-play activities on a 5-point Likert scale

of agreement (85% and above) among Saudi EFL participants regarding perceptions of role-play in enhancing their English-speaking skills.

The inclusion of qualitative data in this study was to search for common patterns of meaning and align the compatibility within the datasets that inform the two research questions. Furthermore, by analyzing the interview responses (qualitative data) from the 10 interviewees for RQ1, the researchers observed the following insights. In response to the first interview question, whether they encountered any problems during the application of the role-playing technique, they stated:

Not really, but the only problem was I was nervous, and my partner was not that good. [L4P1]

During the application of role-playing technique, I did not have any significant problems, and the process went smoothly. [L4P2]

Yes, finding suitable words and maintaining a formal conversation was hard for me. [L4P3]

Yes, during the role-play one challenge I faced was staying in the character. It took some practice to embody the role effectively. [L4P8]

No major problem, the process was actually fun and interesting. [L4P9]

Almost faced stress and uneasy gut feeling. [L4P10]

Secondly, in the interviewee’s responses to the question about real-life situations

where engagement in role-play activities helped overcome language barriers, they said:

There is no specific situation, but I like it when I practice my language with others by doing role-play. [L4P1]

I have definitely become more confident in participating during lectures, and also more confident in participating in social activities. [L4P2]

Before, I was shy and did not participate, but after my first role-play, I gained the trust to speak. [L4P3]

Role-play activities helped me practice real life scenarios and be more confident while ordering food or asking for directions. [L4P8]

During the role-play I suddenly forgot a line, and I didn't remember what it was, so I improvised, and it was a lot better than what I memorized. [L4P9]

Furthermore, in response to the third interview question about which method was quicker and easier to learn between traditional textbook-based techniques and role-play, the majority of participants favored the role-play method by saying:

The role-play method is more fun than the traditional textbook method. [L4P2]

The role-play method is easier in my opinion. Practising the role-play is more effective, because you will learn your weaknesses and practice to improve your skills. [L4P3]

The role-play, because it is quicker and easier to learn, and it is more flexible and helps me memorize new words. [L4P4]

The traditional textbook method because I love books. [L4P7]

The role-play method was easier and quicker for me to memorize the whole script. [L4P9]

Textbooks were different because the story was already written, but in role-play, you have to act seriously and also write the story. [L4P10]

Finally, in response to whether the role-play technique is an effective method for improving the acquisition of speaking skills in EFL classes, all respondents (100%) unanimously agreed. The reasons cited include – increased usage and engagement with the English language, confidence to speak, opportunities to practice and overcoming fear of presentations as stated in the following extracts:

Yes, speaking has always been the first thing to improve any language. Talking to classmates and doctors is helpful. Role-play played a big part in improving my speaking skills. [L4P3]

Yes, it helps to develop speaking, listening, and sharing ideas wonderfully and easily. [L4P4]

Yes, it made a lot of improvement in overcoming the fear of presentation in other courses. [L4P9]

The qualitative findings of the first research question (RQ1) suggest a positive perception of role-play activity as an effective tool for improving speaking skills among Saudi EFL learners. While 50% of the interviewees did not encounter any issues during the application of the role-play technique and found the process easy, helpful, fun, and interesting, 50% expressed nervousness, a partner's proficiency as a potential challenge, difficulty in finding suitable words, sustaining their character, and even physical symptoms such as uneasiness in the stomach. These challenges can be attributed to the minimal disagreement in the questionnaire items 6 & 7 of the quantitative data, where some participants encountered challenges in public speaking, and the lack of communicative practice outside EFL classrooms might have led to these difficulties. These responses indicate a mixed perception, which can be attributed to differences in individual comfort levels and personal experiences in public speaking.

However, 80% of the interviewees expressed a positive impact in overcoming language barriers, mentioning increased confidence, improvisation, and significant transformation by overcoming shyness after engaging in role-play. On the other hand, 20% were neutral as they did not perceive

significant practical advantages. These findings align with previous observations, complementing the findings from items 2 and 3 of the quantitative data. Participants who noted improvements in fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary usage likely benefited from role-play activities, as they felt confident and practiced speaking skills in a conducive environment.

In addition, 80% of the interviewees expressed a preference for role-play due to its effectiveness and ease of learning and improvement in their speaking skills, while 10% explicitly favored both the traditional textbook and role-play methods, and 10% indicated a preference for the traditional textbook approach only. On the whole, these perceptions add up to the unanimous agreement of this technique's effectiveness in the acquisition of speaking skills in EFL classes, thereby complementing the quantitative findings of items 4 and 5.

The Positive Effects of Adopting Role-Play Activities on the Speaking Skills of Saudi EFL Students

The results (descriptive frequencies) of the second section of the questionnaire related to RQ2 are detailed in Table 2.

The questionnaire results indicated that most of the respondents experienced a positive impact of adopting role-play activities on their speaking skills (Figure 2). Firstly, item 8 demonstrated that role-play can be a valuable teaching technique for developing speaking skills. 90% of respondents agreed with this statement, citing this method to engage and promote

English speaking. Item 9 examined whether role-play helped overcome learners’ fear and shyness in EFL classes. As per the data, 84% agreed, while 14% disagreed with this item. Item 10 focused on boosting students’ conviction in generating creative words through role-play, with 88% agreement of respondents.

Table 2
Responses of positive effects of adopting role-play activities on a 5-point Likert scale (N=49)

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
8. Role-play to promote English speaking is a useful teaching technique for learning English.	36%	54%	4%	6%	0%
9. Role-play helped me to overcome my fear and shyness in EFL classes.	30%	54%	2%	14%	0%
10. Role-play helped me to generate more creative words while speaking English.	36%	52%	4%	6%	2%
11. Role-play has motivated me to participate and engage in real-life conversations.	36%	50%	4%	6%	4%
12. Role-play activities enhanced my English-speaking skills and made me more confident in every participation.	34%	48%	4%	12%	2%
13. After participating in role-play activities, I can identify my weaknesses and strengths.	36%	58%	2%	4%	0%
14. Role-play inside classrooms has helped me feel less stressed.	32%	48%	4%	10%	6%

Note. SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

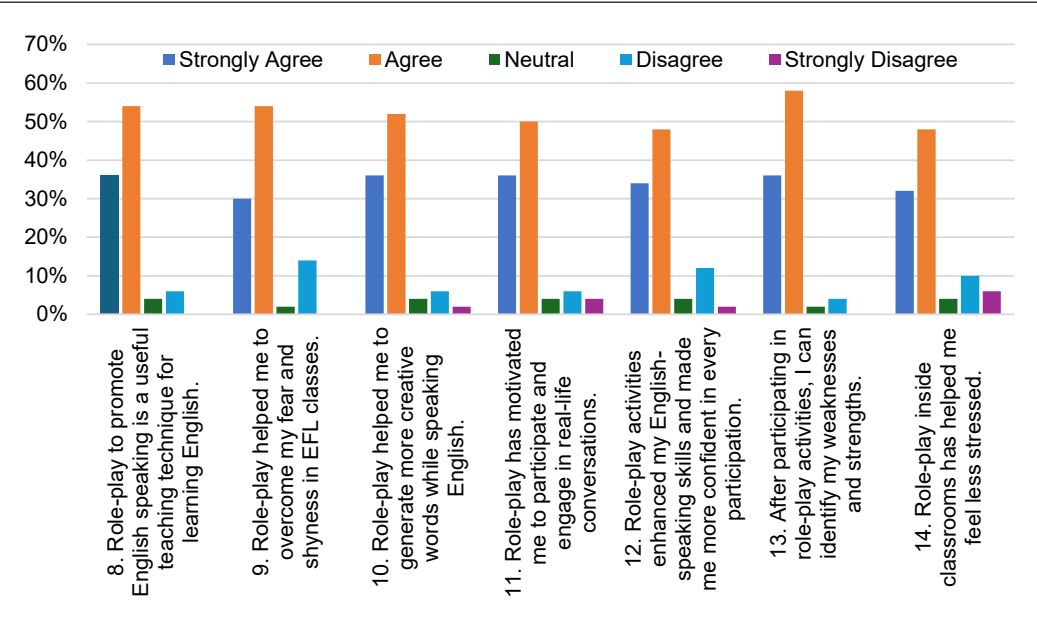


Figure 2. Responses to questionnaire summary on positive effects of adopting role-play activities on a 5-point Likert scale

Items 11 and 12 explored motivation and whether respondents enhanced their confidence through role-playing activities. The results showed that 86% respondents agreed with item 11, while 82% agreed with item 12. Furthermore, items 13 and 14 examined the respondents' ability to identify their weaknesses and strengths and whether they felt less stressed through classroom role-play. 94% displayed high agreement, pointing to the fact that the learners were able to assess and figure out any hindrances they might face (item 13). In addition, by feeling less stressed (item 14), they could experience a comfort zone and enjoy the activity (80%).

Overall, these results suggest a good level of agreement (80% and above) regarding the positive effects of adopting role-play activities among Saudi EFL learners, as they promote personal growth and social interaction. However, additional support may be needed for some learners to fully benefit from these activities, as the percentage of respondents who disagreed on some items, though minimally, cannot be ignored. Both items 9 and 12 displayed 14% equal disagreement citing the fact that some respondents were not quite confident in every participation and experienced fear. This aspect of fear can also be linked to item 14 concerning stress, where the respondents felt stressed, probably because of fear and shyness.

The qualitative data findings (interview responses) in relation to RQ2 reveal the following insights. Firstly, in response to what positive changes the respondents

noticed about themselves during role-play, they noted:

It's not always been easy to talk in front of people, but with practice it became easier to talk. I felt less stressed and anxious. [L4P3]

Role-play has improved my social skills. After role-play, I have gained more confidence in speaking with others in English. [L4P8]

There were major and noticeable improvements in my public speaking skills and in my pronunciation skills. [L4P9]

Usually when I talk, I don't raise my voice, but after role-play I did. I felt confident and sensed it's happening for real. [L4P10]

Secondly, in response to overcoming negative feelings after participating in role-play techniques, most respondents reported dealing with various fears and anxieties related to communication. As stated by them:

Participating in role-play techniques has helped me overcome negative feelings such as the fear of interacting with native speakers. [L4P2]

It is okay to make mistakes and learn from them. The fear of being made fun of is common, but no one is perfect. This idea is what made me less stressed and helped me

through the role-play experience. [L4P3]

I have overcome stress, confusion, anxiety, and shyness. [L4P4]

I was kind of scared of speaking in front of my classmates and making mistakes. [L4P7]

I overcame the fear and actual anxiety of speaking in front of many people. Also, the fear of looking ridiculous while speaking. [L4P9]

I was afraid to commit mistakes due to stress. [L4P10]

Thirdly, in response to how one's confidence in speaking English has been affected through involvement in role-play activities, they reported:

I became more confident, and I think if I practiced more, I will be better. [L4P1]

My confidence has become high, and it has become easy for me to speak in front of a large number of people. [L4P4]

My confidence actually increased by a lot and all the obvious tension in me disappeared. [L4P9]

For the first time it was very good but the second time it was much better than the first. [L4P10]

The qualitative findings of the second research question (RQ2) suggest that

the adoption of role-play activities has multifaceted positive effects, not only on students' speaking skills but also in building confidence, emotional resilience, and overcoming negative feelings associated with language learning. All of them (100%) stated that they experienced improvements in various aspects. They reported specific improvements in areas such as pronunciation and social skills, reduced stress and anxiety in public speaking situations, enhanced listening and speaking abilities, and heightened attention during conversations. These findings collectively underscore the effectiveness of role-play in facilitating skill enhancement across various communication domains, which can be attributed to the results of items 12, 13, and 14 of the quantitative data.

In response to whether role-play helped in overcoming negative feelings, 60% revealed gaining control over the fear of making mistakes or being ridiculed, and overcoming fears of interacting with others, including native speakers. They also cited overcoming feelings of stress, confusion, anxiety, and shyness, while 40% did not overcome fears of performing in front of the class or making mistakes and felt stressed in the process of performing well. These findings highlight the role of role-play techniques in helping learners conquer their negative feelings associated with communication and performance anxiety. These responses complement the findings from items 9 and 12 of the quantitative data.

Lastly, all respondents reported a positive impact on their confidence levels.

Specifically indicating ease in speaking to strangers, using new words, constructing sentences, and speaking in front of large groups. These qualitative findings highlight the way role-play activities bolster learners' confidence levels and improve their ability to communicate effectively in English-speaking situations.

DISCUSSION

The current study investigated female Saudi EFL students' perceptions and experiences of the application of role-play activities and their vital role or impact on their speaking skills. The findings of this research revealed that Saudi EFL learners at IAU perceived role-play to be effective and acknowledged its usefulness in enhancing their speaking proficiency.

In line with previous research, our findings corroborate the results of Razali and Ismail (2017), Vân et al. (2022), Khasbani and Seli (2021), and Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) about the positive outcomes of role-play activities in enhancing speaking skills in English language learning. Our study displayed a positive effect of this technique on their fluency and pronunciation, which shares similar agreement with Thai and Nepalese EFL students' improvement in fluency and pronunciation accuracy (Neupane, 2019; Phuetphon et al., 2012). In addition, role-play also enhanced students' vocabulary usage (through a selection of their own words and phrases), which goes with the results of other studies from Iraq, Nepal, and Vietnam (Krebt, 2017; Neupane, 2019; Vân et al., 2022). Role-play allowed

students to cast themselves in different situations, act as different characters, and think in different ways, which propelled them towards the usage of new vocabulary.

A vast majority of respondents asserted that role-play activities provided opportunities to practice their speaking skills. Role-playing activities are usually liked by students because they are enjoyable and improve their conversational skills. Our study respondents believed that participating in role-play activities promotes English speaking and is a useful teaching strategy for learning English. This is compatible with Losi and Nasution's (2022) views on implementing some engaging classroom activities to improve students' speaking skills. The respondents also displayed interest in participating in role-play because it made them feel less stressed, which agrees with Vân et al.'s (2022) research study, and less fearful and less reserved or shy, which is compatible with Lutfi et al.'s (2018) research study. When learners overcome some negative aspects, their confidence level also increases. Role-play activities also boosted our students' confidence through enhanced speaking skills that stand in line with the results of other findings by Khasbani and Seli (2021), Vân et al. (2022), Nikmah and Zami (2019), and Losi and Nasution (2022). It is pivotal to state that these positive outcomes are perceived and not quantifiable by tests.

Feelings associated with fear, shyness, stress, and not being confident are some of the negative aspects that hinder a student's speaking proficiency. One notable study

by Alrasheedi (2020), which investigated the psychological factors influencing the speaking performance of Saudi EFL learners, found that students are prone to hesitation, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and confronting criticism, which adversely affect their speaking abilities. Through the analysis of our study's interview responses, a nuanced understanding of the difficulties and benefits associated with the role-play approach emerged. The diverse display of experiences among participants highlighted the versatile nature of role-play as a language learning tool. While some learners encountered difficulties such as nervousness, difficulty in maintaining formal conversations, and language proficiency issues, others found the process of role-playing easy. The negative outcomes associated with fear in our study deal with performance anxiety in front of the class, which corresponds to Alrasheedi's (2020) and Aljumah's (2011) study results. A minority of our respondents encountered fear, which made them feel stressed and anxious, affecting their confidence and speaking performance. This discrepancy in experiences may be credited to factors such as individual language proficiency levels or first-time exposure to role-play activities. However, despite these varying challenges reported, there was a high consensus among participants regarding the benefits of role-play in fostering engagement and providing an interactive platform for language practice. Our study's findings in the Saudi EFL context led us to appreciate and provide insights into the relationship between students' engagement

and their speaking performance during role-play, which leads to a discussion of the significance of peer work or collaborative learning. Through group work or teamwork, students are empowered to become interpersonal communicators, mutual learners, multitaskers, peer correctors, and socially competent people.

Furthermore, our respondents' preference for the role-play method over the traditional textbook-based learning approach underscores the need for pedagogical innovation in EFL instruction, and this finding corresponds to the findings of Neupane's (2019), Keezhatta's (2020), and Alghamdy's (2022) study. Also, the unanimous agreement amongst respondents for opting for the role-play technique as an effective method for improving the acquisition of speaking skills in EFL classes and high agreement about role-play providing opportunities to practice speaking skills, highlights role-play's recognized value in practical language learning and communication, thereby boosting their confidence in real-life situations. Respondents valued the engaging nature of role-play for fostering real-world communication abilities and social skills, contributing to a more confident and resilient outlook during language learning activities. Furthermore, our respondents articulated a range of transformative positive experiences, inclusive of emotional development and decreased anxiety when speaking in English. This aspect is particularly significant in EFL contexts, where learners often grapple with performance-related stress, anxiety,

and the fear of committing blunders in front of others. By creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment, role-play activities empower learners to take ownership of their language learning journey and gradually overcome barriers in communication. Additionally, the observed enhancement in communication skills and emotional understanding amongst participants underscores the holistic nature of language learning, which extends beyond linguistic competence to encompass socio-emotional dimensions. Role-play activities not only offer a more dynamic and interesting learning experience but also cater to diverse learning needs. With the surge in digital educational technologies, a transformation in role-play has led to its integration into eLearning platforms through virtual simulations and scenario-based learning (Teachfloor, n.d.). Thus, role-play proves to be a resourceful and adaptable educational tool even in digital teaching and learning environments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this research study at IAU underscore the significance of role-play activities as a pedagogical tool for enhancing EFL speaking skills and fostering socio-emotional development among learners. By providing a platform for experiential learning and collaborative interaction, role-play activities offer a lively approach to English language learning instruction that promotes active engagement, confidence-building, and cultural awareness. Over the years,

previous studies noted that role-playing honed students' practical application of speaking skills when they embodied real-life situations and portrayed varied characters. This immersive experience contributed to an increase in self-confidence, fostering a sense of motivation, and maximized active learner participation in EFL classrooms. Additionally, considerations should be given in addressing potential challenges such as cultural sensitivity and learner motivation to ensure the successful utilization of role-play activities in diverse educational contexts. Finally, this research resonates with the existing literature on active learning strategies in EFL contexts, suggesting that role-play activities can create a dynamic and inclusive English-speaking environment. Integrating role-play activities into Saudi EFL curricula can not only enhance speaking skills but also cultivate a more learner-centered and participatory environment conducive to holistic language development. Proposing the widespread adoption of role-play techniques in Saudi Arabian EFL classrooms is recommended for enriching language learning experiences.

Implications of the Study

This study implies that the role-play environment provided a safe space for learners to enhance language use, gain control over committing mistakes, speak in front of large groups or strangers, thus contributing to the development of emotional resilience and self-efficacy. However, the negative consequences reported in our study call for working on the psychological

aspects, like anxiety and stress. Jacob Moreno's *Psychodrama* (which established the foundations for role-playing psychology) and Albert Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* help heal and address psychological challenges or emotional conflicts through rehearsals or re-enactment practices, thereby highlighting the therapeutic potential of role-play. Further research could explore the long-term impact of role-play activities on language proficiency, particularly linking it to the enhancement of critical thinking skills, cultural interpretation of the target language, and emotional aspects. As emotions strongly charge the students, the process of remembering or storytelling becomes easy. Hence, these emotional aspects of memory retention can aid in the acquisition of the language.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study sample limits itself to female students at the College of Science & Humanities, IAU in Saudi Arabia. However, for future research, both male and female students from different colleges at IAU can be considered, which might result in a larger population sample. Initiatives on the part of the educational practitioners to expand the use of role-play techniques in teaching can strengthen English language learning platforms and encourage stakeholders to routinely incorporate role-play into most of the English-speaking courses in Saudi Arabia, both at the school and university levels. This would enable us to bridge the gap in the Saudi EFL context. This research aims

to provide valuable insights for educators, policy makers, curriculum developers, and future researchers to incorporate innovative and improvised role-playing activities for the acquisition of speaking skills in EFL classrooms. If implemented and used effectively, the role-play method can make a compelling impact in the world of pedagogy.

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APPENDIX

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Did you encounter any problem(s) during the application of the role-playing technique?
2. Could you share any particular real-life situation where engagement in role-play activities aided in overcoming language barriers?
3. Which method was quicker and easier to learn—the traditional textbook-based method or role-play method (in terms of content)?
4. Is role-play technique an effective method for improving the acquisition of speaking skills in EFL Classes?
5. What other positive changes have you noticed about yourself during role-play—e.g. active listening, social and emotional development, etc.?
6. What kind of negative feelings have you overcome after participating in role-play techniques?
7. How has your confidence in speaking English been affected by your involvement in role-play activities?

