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The Effectiveness of Role-Play Techniques in Improving English as a Foreign Language Learners' Speaking Skills

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Abstract:

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using role-play techniques for speaking skills in learning English at a university campus in the south of Vietnam. A descriptive mixed-method approach was administered in this research. It is designed to analyze (1) the common reasons students like to use the role-play techniques and (2) some positive effects of this method in enhancing EFL *(English as a foreign language)* students' conversational ability. The participants of this study were 32 students majoring in English Studies. The research was conducted with different instruments including a questionnaire and interviews to collect qualitative and quantitative research data. The findings indicated that there were a variety of reasons and prominent effects of using role-play techniques as the main factor influencing learners' speaking proficiency. Applying this method could positively impact the development of students' speaking achievement in the process of learning English. The study proved that role-play is one of the effective methods to enhance EFL learners' speaking ability in the research context. The study would help teachers find a suitable strategy to incorporate role-play activities into speaking classes so that students have opportunities to practice English in more active, dynamic, and creative ways.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Role-play Techniques, Speaking Skill, Positive Effects, EFL Learners.

1. Introduction

As an international language, English has become the most important language that should be mastered by all people from different countries (Purnamawati et al., 2015). The basic purpose of learning English is to use and communicate the language as a human communication tool. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, mastering the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing has become a significant and necessary goal for them to integrate into today's multicultural communication environment. Speaking skill is the most important ability to learn English well because it is an interactive process of oral communication in expressing an idea, feeling, and sharing information with others. It is for this reason that enhancing speaking is one of the most crucial skills that EFL learners aspire to achieve throughout their learning process.

Nevertheless, speaking English is not a simple task because there are several components that need to be mastered, namely pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Brown, 1983). Because of the complexity of speaking, there are a few serious obstacles to developing learners' oral communication skills. For Vietnamese students, speaking English fluently is a challenge because they do not use English as their daily communication language. Many EFL students faced a multitude of difficulties in speaking such as fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence (Nakhalah, 2016). They have difficulty pronouncing, some refuse to pronounce because of shyness, and shame when making mistakes. Another reason is the lack of motivation to practice English

in daily conversation, so students cannot speak English fluently. Therefore, teachers need to have appropriate teaching methods in improving EFL students' speaking ability.

There are various strategies and methods that can be implemented to improve students' English-speaking skills, one of which is role-playing. Umam (2011) stated that role-play is very important in the communicative approach because it allows the learners an opportunity to practice how to communicate in different social contexts. In other words, role-play is an effective way to help students apply their English knowledge to real communication situations. Additionally, role-playing has many benefits that can help students solve their problems in speaking. Most students have some difficulties in speaking English even though they can use the grammar structures very well. Besides, teachers have applied traditional grammar-based strategies to develop speaking proficiency, but students have not been able to practice speaking fluently. Some students are not interested in speaking skills because they feel uncomfortable and bored with conventional learning methods. In fact, role-playing makes students more actively involved in the teaching process, as it creates a comfortable and enjoyable learning environment. Therefore, it is one of the effective ways to motivate students to improve their English-speaking proficiency.

The research focuses on "the effectiveness of role-play techniques in improving speaking skills of EFL students at a big university in Vietnam". It is designed to analyze the common reasons and positive effects of the role-play techniques in enhancing students' English conversational ability. The objective of this study is to find out if the implementation of role-playing can develop students' speaking performance. This research is conducted from the perspectives, behavior, and attitudes of EFL students in the context of Vietnam. The researchers hope that this study can be useful for students to expand their knowledge in using role-play techniques to improve their English-speaking skills throughout the learning process.

2. Literature Review

This section introduces the key concepts related to the effectiveness of role-playing techniques in improving EFL learners' speaking skills. It includes (1) the description of speaking skills, (2) the description of role-play, (3) the reasons for using role-play techniques, and (4) the positive effects of role-playing.

2.1 The description of speaking skills

Speaking is one of four basic skills in English. Many linguists have different definitions of speaking skills. Arif et al. (2019) determined that speaking is an effective skill that uses language to convey information from one person to another. Widdowson (1985) stated that speaking is a means of oral communication that provides information related to two factors, namely the speaker who gives the message and the listener who receives the message. In addition, "speaking ability is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts" (Chaney, 1998, cited in Neupane, 2019).

In Vietnam, learning English is considered a second language, so speaking English fluently is actually not easy for most students. The main purpose of learning English is to be able to use English as a communication tool when talking to other people, especially with foreigners.

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Without speaking, people may lack the ability to communicate successfully with others in modern society. In fact, speaking is one of the most important skills that students need to master in order to communicate in English fluently and effectively.

2.2 The description of role-play

Role-play is considered one of the most effective teaching and learning techniques in the 21st century. In the field of education, role-play can be defined and explained in different ways. Firstly, role-playing is a special method by which learners can become different characters to communicate in new situations. In this case, Ladousse (1987) argued that "when students assume a "Role", they play a part (either their own or somebody else) in a specific situation. "Play" means that it is taken on in a safe environment in which students are as joyful as possible". Suyani (2015) indicated that role-play is a technique that can promote and motivate students to speak in the classroom. It is a teaching method in which students are given specific roles and they need to speak and behave based on the roles they receive. Moreover, Saglamel and Kayaoglu (2013) stated that role-play is a drama activity that allows learners to express themselves in creative ways that could be different from their identity. "Role-play is an activity of speaking when you put yourself into someone else or put yourself in an imaginary situation" (Budden, 2006, cited in Wulandari et al., 2019). It is an effective technique to develop students' speaking skills as it provides students with an opportunity to take roles of different persons in real-life situations. Therefore, this technique is really important in teaching speaking because it gives students the opportunity to practice communicating in different social contexts.

2.3 The reasons for using role-play techniques

There are various reasons why EFL students should use role-play activities in improving their English-speaking skills. In the study of Rahimy and Safarpour (2012), the authors observed that students like to use role-play techniques mainly because it is fun. It is a good way to create an interesting and fun learning atmosphere for students to develop themselves in the speaking classes. Another reason is that applying the role-play techniques is more effective than conventional methods (Abdullaeva et al., 2020). It will help students not get bored in the speaking process. This method also attracts EFL students because it provides a learning environment that is "active, interactive, and constructive in practicing the language, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation and comprehension" (Alzboun et al., 2017). It is for this reason that role-playing is an essential learning tool to help students develop their English conversation skills.

2.4 The positive effects of role-play

Several previous studies have been carried out to find the different advantages of role-play techniques in improving EFL learners' speaking skills. A review of some of them has been mentioned in this section.

According to Wulandari et al. (2019) and Akmal (2018), students can actively participate in teaching and learning activities that are carried out using role-play techniques. The study by Gusmuliana et al. (2021) evaluated that role-playing provides a great source of motivation to help students become more confident and active in speaking English. It has been

considered one of the effective methods that have contributed to motivation and confidence in improving EFL learners' speaking ability.

The study of Neupane (2019) revealed that role-play contributes to the development of students' vocabulary in English speaking. Also, the researcher concluded that role-play techniques played an important role in developing EFL students' confidence and dynamism in a public school in the academic year of 2018/2019 in the Lamjung district.

Hence, students are also able to overcome some difficulties in the speaking process through role-play techniques. For example, Lutfi et al. (2019) showed that role-play is a good way to help students dispel their negative feelings such as shyness or lack of confidence. The findings indicated that it is one of the good strategies to teach speaking skills to students with high and low motivation in the research context.

The studies of Muhlasin and Wibowo (2019), and Wicaksana and Fitirani (2020) showed that role-play techniques contributed to creating a relaxing and comfortable learning environment for students to improve their communication skills effectively. It means that providing a pleasant and joyful learning atmosphere will have a positive impact on the development of EFL learners' speaking skills, attention, and participation in the speaking classes.

3. Research Methodology

The study was carried out to examine the influential use of role-playing techniques in improving the EFL learners' speaking skills on a campus of a big university in the south of Vietnam. The official subjects of this research were 32 senior students, majoring in English Studies. The research was conducted by using a descriptive mixed-method approach with a questionnaire and interviews. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from the following research questions:

1. Why do students like role-play techniques to improve their speaking skills?

2. What are some positive effects of role-play techniques on EFL students' speaking skills?

The structured interview was constructed with 13 questions by calling online for qualitative data. A questionnaire with 20 items was applied to collect quantitative data. The interview questions and questionnaire items are designed in Vietnamese to avoid misunderstandings by respondents.

A pilot study was conducted before collecting the main data of this research. After being designed, the interviews and questionnaire were piloted to check their reliability and practicality. A group of 32 English-majored students in the same context participated in the pilot model of this research. After the processes of piloting the questionnaire and interviews had been finished, some modifications were updated to ensure sufficient information for the official versions. Then, the data obtained were checked if the research purposes were satisfied and reliable.

The official participants of this study included 4 interviewees and 32 questionnaire respondents. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection would be conducted if all participants accepted to take part in the research. During the process of official data

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collection, the interview data were collected during the recording of conversations through the Zalo application between the researchers and participants. In the collecting process of the quantitative data, an online version of the questionnaire was sent to the participants through Google Forms. The qualitative data were coded and analyzed according to the method of the unfolding matrix (Nguyen, 2018) while the quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive frequencies.

4. Findings

The findings include research findings and data analysis on the effectiveness of applying role-play techniques in improving EFL learners' speaking skills. The findings of this study will be explained and described by collecting qualitative and quantitative data from participants' perceptions through interviews and a questionnaire. This section presents two contents: (1) the reasons for using role-play and (2) the positive effects of the techniques on students' speaking skills.

4.1 The reasons for using role-play techniques:

Based on participants' responses through two research instruments- a questionnaire and structured interviews, there are various reasons why students use role-playing techniques to improve their English-speaking performance. The collected data indicated the participants want to use this method because they can communicate in different situations naturally. Another reason is that it can create a comfortable and pleasant learning environment for students to improve their communication skills effectively. They expressed that role-playing is less boring than other methods. At the same time, these activities are fun and interesting to help them reduce stress during speaking classes. Findings can be seen in the following extracts:

> "I like to use role-playing in class because it's fun and interesting" [230M04R2]

> "In my opinion, I like to apply role-play techniques because they can help me reduce stress and pressure when speaking English." [155M03R3]
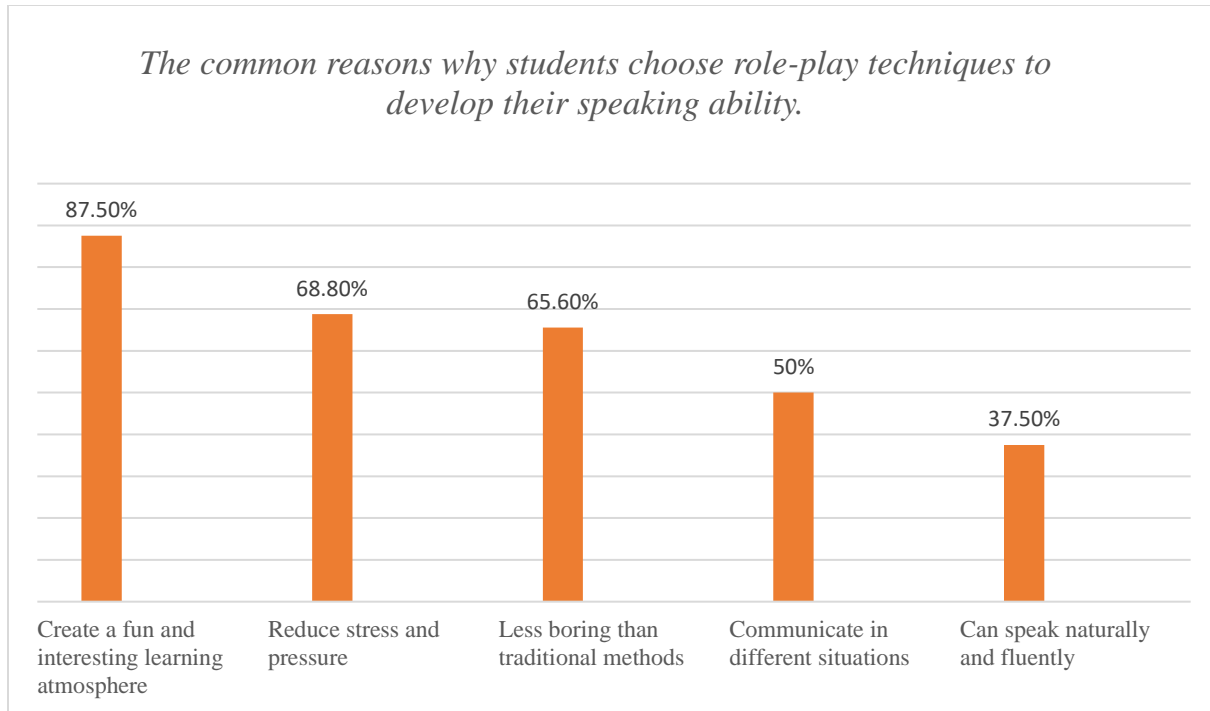
> "I like role-playing activity because it is less boring than other teaching and learning methods." [95M02R1]

> "I like it because it helps me to communicate more naturally when communicating in different situations" [37M01R4]

> "I like acting because it gives me the opportunity to transform into any character, I have the opportunity to communicate in English more naturally." [225M04R4]

The data in the questionnaires show similar reasons for using the role-play method. Graph 1 presents the percentage of EFL learners who applied this technique in different cases for several reasons.
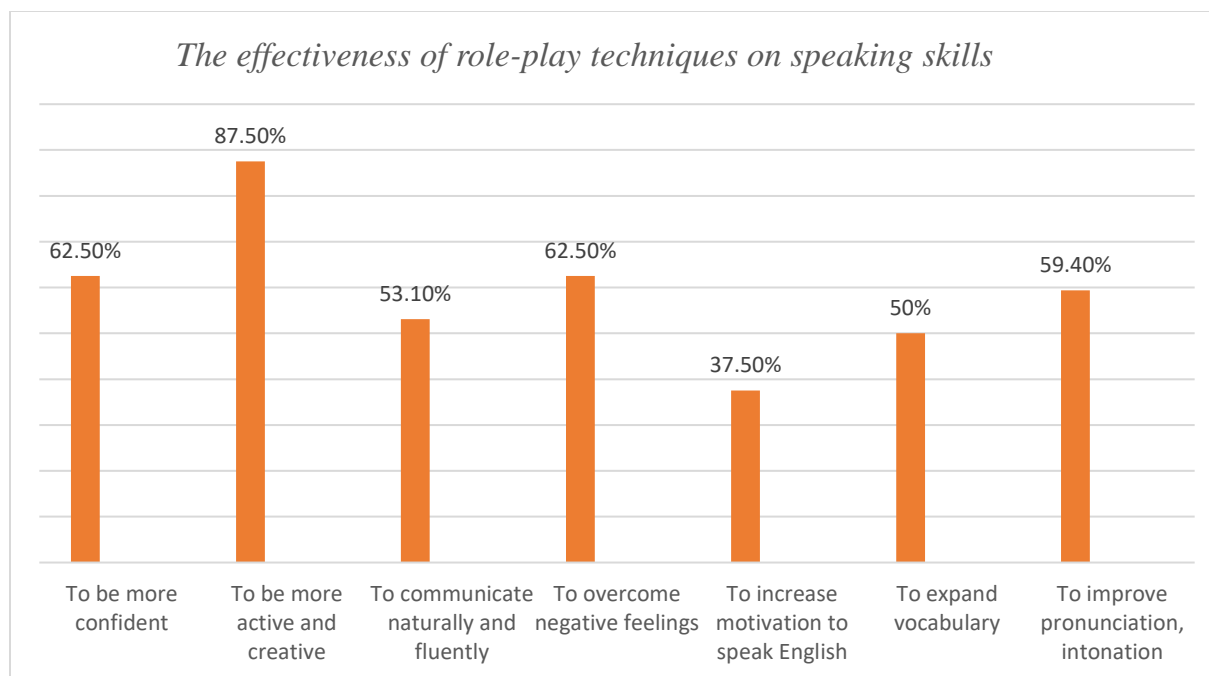
Graph 1: The common reasons why students choose the role-play techniques to develop their speaking ability.

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The common reasons why students choose role-play techniques to develop their speaking ability.

87.50%

68.80%

65.60%

50%

37.50%

Create a fun and interesting learning atmosphere

Reduce stress and pressure

Less boring than traditional methods

Communicate in different situations

Can speak naturally and fluently

Graph 1 illustrates common reasons why students use role-play activities to improve their speaking proficiency from the questionnaire. Most of the participants believe that role-play techniques will be able to create an enjoyable and comfortable learning environment in English-speaking classes (87.50%, n=32). At the same time, students prefer to role-play techniques because it is an opportunity for students to relieve pressure on various issues in the learning process (68.80%). Another important reason is that learners feel this method will be less boring than conventional methods (65.60%). Half of the participants use role-playing since it is a chance for them to communicate in different real-life contexts (50%). This result shows that learners employ role-play techniques in their learning process as it provides many advantages in developing and enhancing their English-speaking skills.

4.2 The positive effects of role-play techniques on students' speaking skills:

Graph 2: The distribution of the effectiveness of role-playing on EFL students' speaking skills.

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The effectiveness of role-play techniques on speaking skills

	87.50%					
62.50%			62.50%			59.40%
		53.10%			50%	
				37.50%		

| To be more confident | To be more active and creative | To communicate naturally and fluently | To overcome negative feelings | To increase motivation to speak English | To expand vocabulary | To improve pronunciation, intonation |

One of the findings regarding the positive impact of role-playing on students' speaking skills from two research tools was about creativity and initiative in the learning process. Thanks to this method, students can be more active and creative to participate in speaking activities in front of the class. It was cited clearly in the following extracts: "I can exercise creative skills in the speaking process, and I can participate in activities more actively" [54M01E5], "For me, it encourages creativity, develops creative thinking when speaking, and becomes more proficient in using language to express ideas dynamically" [262M04E5].

Similarly, the quantitative data in the questionnaire demonstrates the positive impact of role-play techniques on students' speech development through Graph 2. Based on Graph 2, the leading advantage of applying role-playing techniques is to improve students' creative thinking ability and dynamism when participating in classroom activities (87.50%, n=32). It is a good way for students to develop their speaking skills more effectively in an English-speaking learning environment.

In addition, through qualitative data obtained from interviews, this research shows that role-play techniques also help EFL students overcome their own fears and especially gain confidence in the speaking process. This means that using role-play activities will help students forget negative feelings such as fear of crowds, low self-esteem, fear of grammar mistakes, lack of vocabulary, and so on. At the same time, they can be more confident to express their opinions and views in front of other people. These qualitative findings can be found in the following extracts:

"Besides, it will help learners become more confident when standing in front of a crowd" [60M01E1].

"I can practice more confidence after applying role-playing activities in my class" [100M02E1]

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"I feel more confident and less shy" [160M03E1].

"In my opinion, role-playing is an effective and necessary way of learning because it helps students become more confident." [237M04E1]

"At the same time, I feel it helps me forget my fear of speaking English such as fear of crowds, fear of being laughed at by my friends when I say the wrong thing." [232M04E9]

According to Graph 2, the research presents the distribution of the effectiveness of role-playing on EFL students' speaking skills. It shows that the majority of participants assessed that applying role-playing activities can help them become more confident and forget about negative feelings in the process of speaking English. Both advantages have an equal percentage (62.30%, n=32). This result shows that role-playing is an appropriate method to help students overcome difficulties and obstacles in the process of speaking English.

Based on participants' perceptions, one of the other positive aspects of applying role-play techniques is to help students communicate fluently and naturally. One of the students who participated in the interview replied that "Besides, I think it can be applied in real situations. Students can speak English more fluently and will communicate more naturally" [115M02E2]. Therefore, they find it interesting and enjoyable to interact in the English language. One participant said that "I find it very fun and interesting, so I have a lot of motivation in speaking English, and I also try to express my opinion in the process of speaking" [151M03E8]. According to the quantitative data in graph 2, more than half of the participants agreed that they were able to interact and communicate more freely and naturally after applying the role-playing activities (53.10%, n=32). They also believe that role-playing activities also provide an opportunity to increase motivation to practice English in speaking classes (37.50%). The findings show that students' speaking skills have improved significantly after the application of role-play techniques.

Another advantage of using role-play techniques is to practice essential skills related to learners' speaking ability such as pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary. Participants said that this is a convenient method that can help them improve the requirements needed to support the process of speaking English better. Some learners clarified as follows:

"I feel like I can emphasize the intonation of a sentence better" [238M04E4].

"For me, students can practice speaking through dialogue and practice pronunciation at the same time" [114M02E3]

"At the same time, I also learned more vocabulary while playing the role of specific characters" [56M01E6]

Similarly, in the survey, the participants revealed that the application of role-play techniques can be useful for crucial skills in developing EFL learners' conversational abilities. Graph 2 presents that the percentage of using this technique which can help students improve their pronunciation and intonation is 59.40% (n=32). Additionally, the proportion of participants who use role-playing to expand their vocabulary is 50%. Therefore, this method is very suitable for developing learners' English skills.

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Overall, based on qualitative and quantitative data indicate the importance of role-playing activities in the development of learners' speaking skills. The findings show that most students in the research context have a positive perception of this method in developing their speaking skills. It provides many effective benefits to provide opportunities for learners to improve and enhance their oral communication skills in an English learning environment. Therefore, it is one of the effective learning methods for EFL students to enhance their communication skills.

5. Discussion

From the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data of both research instruments, the findings were presented as (1) the reasons for using role-play and (2) the positive effects of this technique on students' speaking skills. Of all these findings, several prominent ones are discussed in accordance with different aspects of previous studies in various contexts.

One finding of the reasons for using role-play techniques in this study is compatible with Rahimy and Safarpour (2012). The study revealed that participants like to use role-play techniques mainly because they can be fun. It is for this reason that students feel the lesson will be more exciting when applying role-play activities in the speaking classes. It is a good way to create an interesting and fun learning atmosphere for students to develop their English-speaking ability. Based on the views of learners in this study, they are interested in role-playing activities because it facilitates them to reduce stress and pressure about difficulties in the learning process. Another reason is that applying role-play techniques will be less boring than traditional strategies. It is also compatible with the research of Abdullaeva et al. (2020), which indicated that this method will be more effective than conventional methods because it gives students more interest in the speaking process. Based on the data obtained, a new reason occurred in this investigation. Students like to apply role-playing activities because they want to be different characters and communicate in real-life situations. It is for this reason that they can speak English more naturally and fluently.

There are a lot of positive advantages that students can get from the implementation of role-playing in teaching and learning speaking. Firstly, when applying role-play techniques, students can be more active and creative to participate in speaking activities in front of the class. This advantage is consistent with the study conducted by Alzboun et al. (2017), Akmal (2018), and Wulandari et al. (2019). These studies showed that students are more motivated to actively participate in-class activities, even though they are still weak in English speaking ability. Secondly, according to learners' perceptions, role-playing can help them boost their confidence level. The study by Gusmuliana et al. (2021) evaluated that role-playing provides a great source of motivation to help students become more confident and active in speaking English. Moreover, this paper shows an interesting effect of role-playing in helping students overcome the problems and difficulties that they have encountered in the speaking process. Role-playing is a good way to help students dispel negative feelings such as shyness, lack of confidence, or fear of crowds (Lutfi et al., 2019). In addition, this method also contributes to the development of students' vocabulary in English speaking (Neupane, 2019). From the participant's point of view in this paper, learners not only expand their vocabulary but also improve their pronunciation and intonation through communication in the English language. Besides, role-playing also provides an opportunity to increase motivation to practice English

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in speaking classes. It is compatible with the study of Ramadhan (2020), which expressed that the application of role-playing strategy helps students overcome difficulties to have more motivation to practice speaking English regularly. Finally, a new advantage of this research is that participants can interact and communicate more freely and naturally after applying the role-playing activities.

Based on previous studies, which talked about improving students' speaking skills through role-play techniques, a significant improvement in students' ability in English speaking was identified. It can be concluded that role-play techniques should be often used in the teaching and learning speaking process because of their effectiveness in improving EFL learners' speaking skills.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

This research focused on answering two main concepts (1) the reasons for using role-play techniques and (2) the positive effects of using this method on EFL students' speaking skills.

Firstly, various reasons for using role-play techniques in the research context have been found. Participants tend to use role-play techniques because it creates a fun and enjoyable learning environment. Another important reason is that learners recognize this method will be less boring than conventional methods. It's a good way to help them reduce stress and pressure during English speaking practice. At the same time, learners enjoy role-playing activities because they can become different characters to communicate in real-life situations. Therefore, this is a great condition for them to practice speaking English more naturally in a foreign language learning environment.

Secondly, there are various positive effects of using role-play techniques in enhancing EFL learners' speaking proficiency. It gives opportunities for students to express their creativity in the English learning process. Students can be more active and creative to participate in speaking activities in front of the class. This method helps learners to boost their confidence level and overcome their negative feelings in the process of communicating with others. Another advantage of using role-play techniques is to practice essential skills related to learners' speaking ability such as pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary. The regular practice of role-playing makes learners fluent in English. It is also a good way to help learners have more motivation to speak English and be able to communicate fluently and naturally. Thanks to the use of role-play techniques, it can provide many effective benefits to create opportunities for learners to improve and enhance their oral communication skills in an English learning environment.

In short, based on the findings and discussions of this study, it can be concluded that using role-play techniques can significantly improve the students' speaking ability. Applying a role-play strategy can positively impact the development of students' learning outcomes and achievement in the process of learning the English language. The study proves that role-playing is one of the effective methods to enhance EFL students' communication skills in the research context.

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Limitations

The research contains some limitations that should be noted. Firstly, the study sample was quite small, so it can be difficult to accurately assess the effectiveness of role-playing in improving the speaking skills of EFL students. Secondly, due to limited time, the study only interviewed a few students about applying role-play techniques, so the results may not be diverse and varied. At the same time, having only 32 participants for quantitative research would not be enough for the author to draw a general conclusion about the study's purposes with a large effect size. Therefore, the values of this study would be noticeable if the size of the population and the sample methods were different.

Suggestions

Hopefully, the mentioned limitations will help others researchers have some useful experiences in their further related studies. The next researchers should enlarge the number of research participants in order to obtain more reliable results. Future authors should add more specific and detailed aspects of the application of role-play techniques in the speaking learning environment. It is hoped that these suggestions will help further researchers have better experience in their studies. In addition, teachers should have appropriate teaching methods to integrate role-playing activities into English-speaking lessons. Students should pay more attention to the pronunciation in their role-play performance so that other people can understand the conservations clearly. It can be suggested that role-play techniques should be considered and applied more widely to English classes in Vietnam.

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