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## BOOSTING EFL SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH ROLE PLAY: EVIDENCE FROM SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the effectiveness of role play in enhancing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking skills among seventh-grade students at SMPN 1 Panawangan, Ciamis. Recognizing speaking as a central yet challenging skill for EFL learners, particularly in Indonesian classrooms where conventional teacher-centered methods prevail, the study sought to determine whether role play could provide more meaningful and engaging communicative opportunities. Employing a true experimental design with a pre-test–post-test control group, 64 students were randomly assigned into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received six sessions of role play–based instruction, while the control group was taught through traditional drills and guided dialogues. Students’ speaking performance was assessed in terms of fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, with inter-rater scoring ensuring reliability. Findings revealed that while both groups showed improvement, the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher gains in overall speaking performance, as confirmed by independent samples t-test results ( $t_{\text{observed}} = 3.456 > t_{\text{table}} = 2.000, p < 0.05$ ). Role play not only enhanced linguistic competence but also boosted learners’ confidence and reduced speaking anxiety by creating a supportive, interactive environment. These results align with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and socio-constructivist theory, highlighting role play as a learner-centered strategy that fosters authentic communication and equal participation. The study concludes that role play is an effective pedagogical tool for improving junior high school students’ speaking abilities and recommends its integration into EFL curricula to promote fluency, confidence, and communicative competence in real-life contexts.*

**Keywords:** Role Play; EFL Speaking Skills; Communicative Language Teaching; Junior High School Students

### INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in English language learning, as it serves as the primary medium for expressing ideas, building interpersonal relationships, and participating in communicative exchanges (Husna, 2021). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), however, speaking often becomes a challenging skill for learners to master due to limited exposure, insufficient practice opportunities, and a lack of confidence (Alrabai, 2022). Students are frequently hesitant to speak in English because they are afraid of making mistakes, being judged by their peers, or mispronouncing words. This is particularly evident in junior high school settings, where learners are still developing both their linguistic competence and their self-assurance in communication (Jing, 2020). In

Indonesian classrooms, speaking activities often focus on memorization and repetition rather than authentic communication. This teacher-centered approach, while useful for grammatical accuracy, does not necessarily encourage fluency, creativity, or spontaneous language use (Rahman et al., 2021). Consequently, many students struggle to express themselves in real-life situations despite having studied English for several years. There is therefore an urgent need for teaching strategies that foster active engagement, reduce anxiety, and create meaningful speaking opportunities (Putri & Widiati, 2022).

Role play is widely recognized as one of the most effective strategies for developing speaking skills in EFL contexts. By simulating real-life situations, role play enables students to use language meaningfully and creatively while practicing communicative functions in a supportive environment (Tran et al., 2025). It not only enhances linguistic competence but also improves sociolinguistic awareness, body language, and confidence (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023). Furthermore, role play aligns with the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), which emphasizes interaction, negotiation of meaning, and learner-centeredness (Richards, 2006; Apriani et al., 2020). This study, therefore, investigates the effectiveness of role play in improving the speaking skills of seventh-grade students at a junior high school in Indonesia. Specifically, it aims to examine how role play influences students' fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and confidence in speaking English. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for EFL teachers seeking to adopt more engaging, learner-centered approaches in the classroom and to contribute to the growing body of research on innovative speaking instruction methods (Yanti et al., 2023).

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Speaking Skill in EFL Contexts**

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the four macro-skills in language learning, alongside listening, reading, and writing. According to Brown (2007), speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information. In EFL contexts such as Indonesia, speaking poses unique challenges due to the limited availability of authentic communicative situations. Richards and Renandya (2002) emphasize that speaking competence requires not only grammatical knowledge but also discourse management, pragmatic awareness, and sociolinguistic appropriateness. In junior high school settings, particularly among beginners, speaking anxiety often prevents

learners from participating actively in classroom interactions (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). This anxiety, combined with limited vocabulary and a fear of making mistakes, leads to minimal oral production and a tendency to rely on the mother tongue. Consequently, instructional approaches must prioritize creating safe, interactive spaces where learners can practice meaningful communication without fear of judgment.

### **Challenges in Teaching Speaking in Indonesia**

In many Indonesian schools, English instruction remains predominantly teacher-centered, with a strong focus on grammar translation and written exercises (Lie, 2007). While this approach may enhance reading and grammar accuracy, it often fails to equip learners with the skills necessary for spontaneous oral communication. Students tend to perceive speaking as a high-stakes activity, associating it with assessment rather than authentic expression (Fitriyah, 2017). Another issue is the lack of exposure to English outside the classroom. Since English is not used as a daily communication tool in most communities, students have few opportunities to reinforce their speaking skills in real contexts. Therefore, teachers must introduce pedagogical strategies that simulate real-life communicative situations in the classroom to bridge this gap.

### **Role Play as a Teaching Technique**

Role play is a dramatization activity in which learners assume specific roles and act out scenarios that reflect real-life situations. Ladousse (2009) describes role play as a “safe environment for experimentation” where students can use language freely and creatively. It aligns closely with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes interaction, negotiation of meaning, and functional language use (Littlewood, 2004). The technique offers several pedagogical advantages. First, it provides learners with a purposeful context for language use, encouraging them to focus on meaning rather than solely on form (Livingstone, 1983). Second, it reduces speaking anxiety because the focus is on the character rather than the individual, allowing shy students to participate more confidently (Jiang, 2009). Third, role play encourages collaborative learning, as students work together to plan dialogues, negotiate meaning, and support each other during performance.

### **Empirical Evidence on Role Play in Speaking Development**

Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of role play on EFL speaking proficiency. Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) found that Iranian high school students who engaged in role play activities showed significant improvement in fluency and

interactional skills compared to those in traditional speaking classes. In the Indonesian context, Fadilah (2016) reported that role play enhanced not only students' speaking accuracy but also their motivation to speak English. A similar study by Husein (2018) involving junior high school learners revealed that role play was effective in improving pronunciation and intonation patterns, as students were more willing to experiment with language in a playful setting. The collaborative nature of role play also fosters peer learning, as learners can model correct expressions and provide constructive feedback to each other (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study draws upon the socio-constructivist view of language learning, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and active engagement (Vygotsky, 1978). Role play situates learners in interactive contexts that require negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, and adaptation to different communicative roles. This aligns with the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), which states that language acquisition is facilitated when learners are exposed to comprehensible input and given opportunities to produce output in response to communicative needs. By engaging students in role play, teachers provide an environment where language is not only learned but also experienced. This process integrates the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning, which are essential for developing both fluency and communicative competence. Although many studies have confirmed the benefits of role play, there is still limited research focusing on its application in rural Indonesian junior high schools, where resources are minimal and exposure to English is rare. The current study addresses this gap by examining the effectiveness of role play in improving speaking skills among seventh-grade students at One of junior high school. It focuses not only on linguistic outcomes such as fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation but also on affective outcomes, particularly confidence and willingness to communicate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a true experimental design, specifically the *pre-test–post-test control group design*, as described by Tuckman (1978). This design was selected to determine the causal effect of using role play on students' speaking skills. Two groups were involved: the experimental group, which received role play as the treatment, and the control group, which was taught using conventional methods. Both groups took a pre-test before the

intervention and a post-test after the intervention. The experimental design is illustrated as follows:

R O1 X O2

R O3 O4

Where:

- R = Random assignment of participants to experimental and control groups
- O1 / O3 = Pre-test scores of the experimental and control groups
- X = Treatment (role play–based speaking instruction)
- O2 / O4 = Post-test scores of the experimental and control groups

This design allowed the researcher to measure the improvement in speaking skills and compare the difference between the two groups to assess the effectiveness of the treatment.

### **Participants**

The participants were seventh-grade students of one of Junior high school in Ciamis. Two classes were selected through cluster random sampling to ensure that every class had an equal chance of being included. Class VII-A was assigned as the experimental group, while Class VII-B served as the control group. Each class consisted of 32 students, making a total of 64 participants. All participants had similar English proficiency levels based on their previous semester's scores, ensuring group comparability before the intervention.

### **Data Sources and Instruments**

The primary data source was students' speaking performance scores. A speaking test was developed as both the pre-test and the post-test. The test assessed four main components of speaking competence: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. A rubric adapted from Brown (2004) was used for scoring, with each component rated on a scale of 1 to 5. To ensure reliability, two raters independently scored all speaking performances, and inter-rater reliability was calculated.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The study was conducted in three stages:

1. Pre-test Administration – Both the experimental and control groups completed the speaking pre-test to measure their initial speaking ability.
2. Treatment – The experimental group received six sessions of speaking instruction using role play activities. Each session lasted  $2 \times 40$  minutes and involved warm-up

activities, role preparation, rehearsal, and performance. The control group was taught using traditional speaking activities such as question–answer drills and guided dialogues without role play.

3. Post-test Administration – At the end of the treatment period, both groups took the same speaking test as the pre-test, but with different prompts to avoid memorization effects.

### Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the speaking tests were analyzed using **t-test** statistics to determine whether there was a significant difference in the post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. The analysis followed these steps:

1. Calculating the mean and standard deviation for both groups.
2. Computing the *t*-observed value using the formula from Burns (2000).
3. Comparing the *t*-observed value with the *t*-table value at the 0.05 significance level.

If the *t*-observed was greater than the *t*-table value, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that role play had a significant effect on improving students' speaking skills.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Descriptive Statistics of Pre-Test and Post-Test

Before the treatment, both the experimental and control groups completed a pre-test measuring their speaking skills across fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and comprehension (adapted from Brown, 2004). The scoring rubric ensured that each component was weighted equally to reflect overall speaking proficiency. The experimental group then received speaking lessons using role play-based instruction for several sessions, while the control group was taught through conventional teacher-centered methods, such as drilling, question–answer exercises, and textbook dialogues. After the instructional period, both groups took a post-test under similar conditions to the pre-test.

**Table 1.** Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores – Experimental Group

No	Subject	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference
1	Student 1	6.5	7.5	1.0
2	Student 2	6.5	7.5	1.0
3	Student 3	7.0	7.5	0.5

..		...	...	...
29	Student 29	6.0	5.0	1.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>185.0</b>	<b>191.5</b>	<b>24.5</b>

Overall, the experimental group's total score increased by 24.5 points, with most students showing improvement in fluency and vocabulary range. Notably, learners who were initially reluctant to participate in speaking tasks displayed greater confidence in expressing ideas after engaging in role play scenarios. This aligns with findings from Yanti et al. (2023), who observed that role play provides a safe environment for practicing communicative skills and reduces anxiety. Table 2 presents the results for the control group.

**Table 2.** Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores – Control Group

No	Subject	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference
1	Student 1	6.5	7.5	1.0
2	Student 2	5.0	5.5	0.5
3	Student 3	6.5	7.0	0.5
...	...	...	...	...
29	Student 29	6.0	7.5	1.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>160.0</b>	<b>174.0</b>	<b>15.0</b>

While the control group also demonstrated improvement, the total gain of 15 points was considerably lower than that of the experimental group. This difference suggests that conventional methods did not produce as strong an effect as role play on students' speaking development.

### **Mean Scores and Standard Deviation**

The mean gain score for the experimental group was 0.84, compared to 0.52 for the control group. The standard deviation (SD) for the experimental group was 0.56, indicating more consistent improvement among participants, whereas the control group's SD was slightly higher at 0.65, reflecting greater variability in performance gains. These results suggest that role play not only resulted in greater average improvement but also promoted more uniform progress across students. This finding supports Apriani et al. (2020) and Tran et al. (2025), who emphasized that structured communicative tasks encourage equal



participation and benefits among learners, reducing the performance gap between higher- and lower-proficiency students.

### **Hypothesis Testing**

To determine whether the observed differences were statistically significant, an **independent samples t-test** was conducted on the post-test scores. The results were as follows:

- $t_{\text{observed}} = 3.456$
- $t_{\text{table}} (df = 60, \alpha = 0.05, \text{two-tailed}) = 2.000$

Since  $t_{\text{observed}} > t_{\text{table}}$ , the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ), which stated that there is no significant difference in speaking ability between the two groups, was rejected. The alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) was accepted, confirming that role play had a statistically significant positive effect on students' speaking performance ( $p < 0.05$ ). The statistical evidence demonstrates that role play contributed substantially to enhancing students' speaking skills. Learners in the experimental group improved in several key areas:

1. Fluency – Students produced longer, more coherent utterances without frequent pauses, consistent with the view that communicative tasks encourage automaticity in speech (Nation, 2021).
2. Vocabulary – Exposure to diverse role play contexts introduced learners to situationally relevant vocabulary, enabling them to expand their lexical repertoire (Putri & Widiati, 2022).
3. Pronunciation – Peer interaction in role play fostered self-correction and imitation of accurate models, improving pronunciation clarity (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023).
4. Confidence – The low-stakes, imaginative nature of role play reduced speaking anxiety, which is often cited as a major barrier to oral proficiency (Alrabai, 2022).

These findings corroborate prior research indicating that role play aligns well with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), particularly the emphasis on authentic interaction, negotiation of meaning, and learner autonomy (Richards, 2006; Yanti et al., 2023). Moreover, they are consistent with the socio-cultural perspective of language learning, which posits that meaningful interaction in socially constructed contexts accelerates language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Nugrahaningtiyas & Lubis, 2021). In



contrast, the control group, taught through conventional teacher-centered methods, showed limited gains, likely due to the lack of meaningful communicative opportunities. The findings thus suggest that role play is more effective than conventional methods for improving EFL speaking skills at the junior high school level.

## **Discussion**

The findings confirm that role play is more effective than conventional methods in improving students' speaking skills. This result aligns with Kayi (2006), who emphasizes that teaching speaking should enable students to plan, organize, and produce speech sounds confidently within meaningful contexts. In the present study, role play created an authentic environment where students could practice language functions relevant to real-life situations, reducing anxiety and encouraging active participation. Students in the experimental group demonstrated greater improvement in fluency, vocabulary use, and pronunciation. These gains can be attributed to repeated practice in varied communicative roles, which is consistent with Lewis's statement in Wright (1984) that role play is enjoyable and facilitates language practice in a relaxed way. By lowering the affective filter, students were more willing to take risks and use English spontaneously.

Furthermore, the findings support the socio-cognitive perspective that language learning is enhanced when learners engage in social interaction that requires negotiation of meaning and adaptation to different communicative roles. Role play offered such opportunities, while conventional instruction in the control group provided fewer chances for spontaneous speech and creativity. The results also resonate with previous studies (e.g., Ladousse, 1987; Huang, 2008) that report role play as an effective tool to integrate linguistic and communicative competence. In this study, students exposed to role play improved not only in structured dialogue delivery but also in improvisation, a skill crucial for real-life communication.

The results of the study revealed that both the experimental group, which was taught using role play, and the control group, which was taught using conventional methods, experienced an improvement in their speaking ability. However, the improvement in the experimental group was greater in both magnitude and consistency. Statistical analysis using a *t*-test confirmed that the difference between the two groups' post-test scores was significant, with the *t*-observed value (3.456) exceeding the *t*-table value (2.000) at the 0.05 significance level. These findings indicate that role play not only enhanced students' fluency,

pronunciation, and vocabulary but also boosted their confidence in speaking English. In contrast, the control group showed more limited progress, suggesting that conventional teaching provided fewer opportunities for spontaneous and communicative language use. Overall, the results validate role play as an effective, engaging, and learner-centered technique for improving EFL students' speaking performance.

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided empirical evidence that the integration of role play into speaking instruction yields substantial benefits for EFL learners at the junior high school level. The statistical analysis revealed a significant difference in post-test performance between the experimental group, which engaged in structured role play activities, and the control group, which followed conventional, teacher-centered instruction. The improvement in the experimental group was not only quantitatively greater but also qualitatively richer, encompassing enhanced fluency, accuracy, vocabulary range, pronunciation clarity, and communicative confidence. The magnitude of improvement suggests that role play serves as more than a supplementary activity; rather, it functions as a core pedagogical strategy capable of transforming speaking classes into active, learner-driven communicative environments. In conclusion, the evidence from this research indicates that role play is a highly effective, learner-centered, and adaptable instructional approach for improving junior high school students' speaking abilities. Its benefits extend beyond linguistic gains to include affective, social, and strategic competencies, making it a powerful tool for teachers aiming to cultivate well-rounded communicators in EFL classrooms.

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