

Role Play in English Language Classrooms: Bridging Drama and Pedagogy for Effective Language Learning

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Abstract:

This action research study explores the use of role play as a dynamic pedagogical tool in tertiary English language classrooms, bridging the gap between drama as performance and language pedagogy. Conducted with Polytechnic students, the study investigates how structured role play activities enhance learners' verbal and non-verbal communication, collaboration, and confidence. Drawing on observations, learner reflections, and performance assessments, the research highlights the transformative potential of integrating drama techniques into language teaching. Findings reveal that role play not only improves speaking fluency and pragmatic competence but also fosters learner autonomy and motivation. The study advocates for greater incorporation of drama and theatre practices in tertiary language education, emphasizing their capacity to enrich both the learning experience and pedagogical strategies in contemporary classrooms.

Keywords: Role play in language learning; Drama in ESL classrooms; Drama pedagogy; Learner engagement;

Introduction

Drama has long been recognized as a powerful pedagogical tool in language education, offering learners opportunities to use English in meaningful, context-rich situations. In Indian classrooms, particularly at the tertiary level, English language learners often lack the confidence and communicative competence required for effective verbal expression. Despite the growing presence of drama in curricula, its actual integration in language classrooms remains sporadic and largely underutilized (Choudhury, 2020).

Theatre-based methods like role play can bridge this gap between performance and pedagogy. Role play, when used purposefully, allows learners to step into different communicative contexts, experiment with language forms, and develop fluency in a low-stakes, collaborative environment. Research has increasingly shown that such embodied, interactive approaches enhance learner motivation, reduce anxiety, and improve speaking skills, particularly for low- to intermediate-level learners (Belliveau & Kim, 2019; Stinson & Winston, 2022).

Moreover, current frameworks in communicative language teaching (CLT) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) support learner-centered practices where language is learned through social interaction.

In line with these perspectives, drama activities such as simulations, improvisations, and scripted role plays create a scaffolded space for learners to construct meaning together. According to Winston (2022), drama enables learners to internalize linguistic patterns through experience, gesture, and emotional engagement—features often missing in traditional classroom practices.

In recent years, scholars have emphasized the role of drama in building learner autonomy and verbal agency. Studies by Mercer (2021) and Dörnyei (2020) have documented how performative tasks foster willingness to communicate, especially when learners take ownership of language use within imagined or real-world scenarios. Additionally, in post-pandemic contexts where online or hybrid teaching has become prevalent, performance-based tasks like video-recorded role plays and digital storytelling have provided flexible yet effective alternatives to conventional oral activities (Liu & Lu, 2021; Ahmed, 2022).

This action research study explores how role play, used consistently over a six-week classroom cycle, impacted the spoken English skills of tertiary-level learners in a Polytechnic context in Tamil Nadu. Specifically, it examines changes in learners' fluency, confidence, and communicative competence through thematic analysis of classroom data. The study also aims to reflect on the pedagogic value of drama in the Indian ESL classroom, situating role play at the intersection of performance and language learning—an area where theory and practice often remain disconnected.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative action research approach to explore the role of drama-based pedagogy, specifically role play, in improving English speaking skills among tertiary learners. Action research is particularly suitable for classroom-based investigations as it allows the teacher-researcher to examine and improve their own practice while directly involving learners in the process of change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Context and Participants

The research was conducted over a six-week period in a government polytechnic college in Tamil Nadu. The participants were 30 first-year diploma students (aged 17–19) from various engineering disciplines. Most learners came from rural or semi-urban backgrounds and had limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Their proficiency level ranged between A1 and A2 on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

Design and Procedure

The action research followed a plan–act–observe–reflect cycle. A series of structured role play activities were designed based on common communicative situations such as:

- Introducing oneself
- Asking for directions
- Visiting a doctor
- Attending a job interview
- Ordering food at a restaurant

Each role play session followed a consistent pattern:

1. Pre-task preparation (vocabulary and expressions)
2. Modeling (teacher or peer demonstration)
3. Role play practice in pairs/groups

4. Debriefing and reflection

Learners were encouraged to reflect on their experience after each session through short written reflections or oral feedback.

Data Collection

To capture a comprehensive picture of the impact of role play on learners' spoken English development, a variety of qualitative data collection methods were used. These methods were chosen to provide both immediate classroom-based evidence and reflective insights from learners.

1. Teacher Observation Notes

As the teacher-researcher, I maintained detailed observation notes during and after each role play session. These notes focused on learner engagement, language use (e.g., vocabulary, fluency, interaction), body language, and peer collaboration. Special attention was paid to how students responded to role assignments, the degree of improvisation, and their comfort with speaking in English. These observations allowed for continuous reflection and adaptation of the teaching strategy across the six-week cycle, in line with the action research model.

2. Audio Recordings of Role Plays

Selected role play sessions were audio recorded, with students' consent, to assess changes in language performance over time. Recordings were taken in a natural classroom setting using a mobile phone placed discreetly so as not to interrupt the flow of interaction. These recordings were later used to analyse:

- Fluency and hesitation patterns
- Use of newly learned vocabulary and expressions
- Clarity of pronunciation and intelligibility
- Turn-taking and discourse markers in dialogue

This method allowed for an objective review of spoken language features and supported triangulation of data from teacher notes and student feedback.

3. Student Reflection Sheets

After each session, students were asked to complete a short reflection sheet (in English or Tamil) with prompts such as:

- "How did you feel during today's role play?"
- "What new words or expressions did you use?"
- "What was easy or difficult for you today?"

These reflections offered personal insights into the learners' emotions, self-perceived progress, and challenges. They were especially useful for tracking changes in confidence and self-awareness over time.

4. Informal Interviews

At the end of the cycle, short semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5–6 students from different performance levels. These were done in a relaxed, conversational tone, and included questions such as:

- "Did the role plays help you speak more English?"
- "Do you feel more confident now?"
- "What kind of role play did you like most?"

The responses were noted down and thematically analysed. Interviews helped deepen the understanding of individual learner experiences, and confirmed findings emerging from group trends.

Ethical Considerations

Permission was obtained from the students and they participated voluntarily. They were informed that the study was for academic purposes, and confidentiality was maintained. No grades were tied to their participation or performance in the role play activities.

Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative thematic analysis to interpret the multi-source data collected from classroom observations, student reflections, informal interviews, and audio recordings. This approach was chosen to explore the nuanced shifts in learner behavior, language use, and confidence in a natural classroom setting, following the interpretive lens common in classroom-based action research (Burns, 2019).

1. Thematic Analysis of Observations and Reflections

The teacher's observation notes and students' reflection sheets were reviewed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis. This process involved:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Codes such as “*voluntary participation*,” “*peer scaffolding*,” “*use of target vocabulary*,” and “*emotional expressions*” were clustered into larger themes including:

- Learner Engagement and Willingness to Communicate
- Emotional Safety and Confidence
- Language in Use: Functional and Contextual Speech

Recent literature highlights the value of such qualitative feedback in capturing language learning progress, especially affective factors like anxiety reduction and motivation (Mercer, 2021; Chan, 2019). In particular, learners' written reflections—some in L1 and others in English—revealed increased willingness to take linguistic risks, aligning with Dörnyei's (2020) emphasis on learner agency in communicative contexts.

2. Analysis of Audio Recordings

Audio recordings were analysed for linguistic growth by focusing on:

- Fluency markers (e.g., number of pauses, speech rate, turn-taking)
- Clarity (pronunciation and intonation)
- Appropriateness of language use (formality, relevance, context)

Transcripts from early and later role plays were compared to track growth. While early recordings featured hesitations and monosyllabic replies, later ones showed extended turns and more contextually appropriate expressions—findings consistent with those reported by Kao, Carkin, and Hsu (2011) and more recently by Belliveau and Kim (2019), who document improved spoken fluency through drama-based interventions.

3. Thematic Coding of Informal Interviews

Post-cycle interviews with selected students were thematically analysed, with recurring responses pointing to:

- Improved Confidence in Speaking
- Enjoyment and Reduced Anxiety
- Preference for Active, Role-based Tasks

Students described their experience using expressions like “*not scared to talk now,*” “*learning is fun,*” and “*I can speak freely.*” These student voices resonate with recent research by Winston (2022), which emphasizes drama’s role in creating emotionally supportive and socially engaging learning environments, particularly for low-proficiency learners.

4. Triangulation and Interpretation

Data from observations, student reflections, audio recordings, and interviews were triangulated to ensure validity and coherence. Cross-verification across sources showed consistent improvement in three major areas:

- Increased linguistic output
- Reduced performance anxiety
- Greater learner autonomy and collaboration

This layered data analysis approach supports calls in recent ELT research for more context-sensitive, performative, and socially-grounded pedagogies (Stinson & Winston, 2022; Boudreault, 2020).

Findings and Discussion

The implementation of role play activities over six weeks yielded several noteworthy outcomes in terms of learner engagement, communicative performance, and classroom dynamics. Data gathered through observations, student reflections, and informal interviews revealed a gradual yet consistent improvement in students' speaking skills, confidence, and willingness to participate in English.

1. Increased Learner Confidence and Participation

One of the most evident outcomes was a visible increase in learner participation. Initially, many students were hesitant to speak, often relying on memorised sentences or switching to their mother tongue. However, by the third session, students began taking ownership of their roles, initiating conversations, and responding more spontaneously. Learner reflections confirmed this change, with one student writing, “*I was afraid to speak English before, but in role play I was not afraid because it was fun.*”

This aligns with Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which suggests that a low-stress, engaging environment helps reduce anxiety and improves language acquisition. Role play created such a space, where the pressure of “getting it right” was replaced by the freedom to act and explore language meaningfully.

2. Development of Functional Language Use

Through contextualised role play situations, students began to use English for real-life purposes, such as making polite requests, asking for information, or expressing disagreement. Their use of formulaic expressions improved, and many began to experiment with their own sentence constructions.

This supports Halliday’s (1978) view of language as a social semiotic system, where language use is shaped by context and purpose. In the classroom, role play enabled students to shift from grammar-focused drills to functional language use—applying English meaningfully in communicative settings.

3. Emergence of Non-verbal Communication Awareness

An unexpected but valuable finding was the increased awareness and use of non-verbal cues like gestures, posture, and eye contact. Some shy students, though limited in speech, communicated effectively through

body language. This supports Total Physical Response (TPR) principles (Asher, 1977), and echoes drama theory where communication is not limited to verbal elements.

This outcome also reinforced the embodied nature of learning (Wagner, 1998), showing how role play integrates bodily expression into language learning—an area often neglected in traditional classroom methods.

4. Collaborative Learning and Peer Support

The pair and group work inherent in role play fostered peer interaction and collaborative learning. Students helped each other with vocabulary, corrected pronunciation gently, and even suggested alternate sentences. This promoted a sense of community and mutual support, crucial for learners with low confidence in language use.

As per Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978), learners progressed when guided by more capable peers or the teacher. The role play activities allowed for such scaffolding to naturally occur, building both language and social skills.

5. Challenges and Reflections

Despite its success, the role play approach was not without challenges. Some students were reluctant at first due to stage fright or low proficiency. Grouping had to be done thoughtfully to avoid imbalances in participation. Additionally, role plays required more time than typical textbook lessons, especially during the initial sessions.

However, the overall learner response was highly positive. Most students described the sessions as “fun,” “different,” and “useful.” The teacher-researcher also found the approach more engaging and rewarding, noting deeper student-teacher interaction and higher classroom energy.

Conclusion and Implications

This action research study demonstrated that role play, when used thoughtfully and consistently, can be a powerful pedagogical strategy in the tertiary English language classroom. It effectively bridges the gap between drama as performance and classroom language learning by encouraging learners to speak, act, and interact in meaningful ways. The findings showed that role play helped students gain confidence, improved their speaking fluency, and nurtured their ability to express themselves both verbally and non-verbally. Moreover, it promoted a collaborative and supportive classroom environment, allowing students to learn from one another.

The implications of this study are significant for English language teachers, especially in technical and vocational institutions where students often have limited English exposure. Role play provides a low-cost, flexible, and creative approach that can be adapted to various real-life contexts relevant to students' future professional lives. It encourages active learning, supports learner autonomy, and builds 21st-century skills such as communication, teamwork, and empathy.

Moving forward, more teachers can be encouraged to integrate drama techniques, including role play, into their regular language teaching practice. Teacher training programmes can include workshops on designing and facilitating role play for different proficiency levels. Future research may also explore how digital and hybrid role play formats (e.g., video-recorded skits, online simulations) can further enrich the classroom experience.

In sum, this study not only supports the use of drama in language pedagogy but also highlights the need for more performative, student-centered practices in tertiary education. Drama need not be confined to the stage—it can and should live in the classroom, helping learners find their voice through performance.

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