

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ROLE-PLAY IN IMPROVING SPEAKING FLUENCY OF INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS

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Introduction. In contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, speaking fluency is widely recognized as a central component of communicative competence. Fluency reflects learners' ability to produce speech smoothly and spontaneously in real-time interaction. However, despite reaching an intermediate level of linguistic knowledge, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties such as hesitation, slow speech rate, and lack of confidence during oral communication.

One of the primary reasons for this problem lies in the continued reliance on traditional speaking instruction, which often emphasizes grammatical accuracy and controlled practice. Although such approaches contribute to structural correctness, they provide limited opportunities for extended interaction and spontaneous language use. As a result, learners may possess adequate knowledge of English but remain unable to communicate fluently.

Within communicative language teaching frameworks, role-play has been identified as an effective technique for promoting meaningful interaction. By engaging learners in simulated real-life situations, role-play encourages negotiation of meaning, turn-taking, and spontaneous response. Moreover, it provides a supportive environment in which learners can experiment with language without excessive fear of making mistakes.

Despite increasing interest in interactive speaking activities, empirical research focusing specifically on the impact of role-play on intermediate EFL learners' speaking fluency remains limited. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of role-play in improving speaking fluency by comparing role-play-based instruction with traditional speaking practices and examining learners' perceptions of this technique.

Methodology. The present study is grounded in Communicative Language Teaching and task-based language learning, which emphasize meaningful interaction as the central condition for language development. Within this framework, role-play is viewed as a communicative task that requires learners to negotiate meaning, manage turn-taking, and respond spontaneously. As Richards notes, communicative competence develops most effectively through purposeful communication rather than isolated language practice [7, 261-277]. Moreover, Brown argues that fluency-oriented instruction should prioritize automaticity and real-time language processing, which emerge through sustained interaction [1]. Similarly, Skehan's cognitive perspective highlights that meaning-focused tasks facilitate the proceduralization of linguistic knowledge, thereby enhancing fluency. These theoretical assumptions informed the selection of role-play as the primary instructional treatment [8]. The methodology was also informed by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of anxiety and motivation in language acquisition. Role-play was expected to reduce learners' fear of making mistakes by creating a supportive and non-threatening communicative environment. Consequently, learners' perceptions were included as part of the data collection process [6].

Based on these considerations, a quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test design was employed, involving an experimental group and a control group. The participants were 40 intermediate EFL learners whose proficiency levels were determined through a standardized placement test to ensure initial homogeneity. Following Ellis's recommendation on controlling learner variables, the participants were evenly divided into two groups of equal size.

The experimental group engaged in structured role-play activities twice a week over an eight-week period. These activities included simulated real-life scenarios such as service encounters, job interviews, and problem-solving discussions. In contrast, the control group followed a traditional speaking syllabus based on textbook dialogues and question-answer drills, which, as Harmer notes, often prioritize accuracy over fluency.

Speaking performance was assessed through pre- and post-speaking tests based on situational prompts. Fluency was measured using multiple indicators, including speech rate, number of pauses, average utterance length, and an overall fluency score, in line with Skehan's recommendations. In addition, a learner perception questionnaire was administered to the experimental group to examine affective responses to role-play. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while questionnaire responses were analyzed through percentage distribution, following Creswell's mixed-methods approach.

Results. The results of the study demonstrate that role-play activities had a clear and positive impact on the speaking fluency of intermediate EFL learners. In order to present these findings systematically, both quantitative fluency data and learners' perceptual responses are reported. To begin with, the comparison of pre-test and post-test speaking performance revealed substantial differences between the experimental and control groups. As presented in Table 1, learners who participated in role-play activities showed significantly greater improvement across all fluency indicators than those who followed traditional speaking instruction.

Table 1. Comparison of Speaking Fluency Scores Before and After Instruction

Fluency Indicators	Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Gain
Speech rate (words/min)	Experimental	78.4	102.6	+24.2
	Control	79.1	88.3	+9.2
Number of pauses (per minute)	Experimental	6.8	3.1	-3.7
	Control	6.5	5.4	-1.1
Average utterance length (words)	Experimental	6.2	11.4	+5.2
	Control	6.4	8.1	+1.7

Overall fluency score (10-point scale)	Experimental	5.6	8.4	+2.8
	Control	5.7	6.6	+0.9

As shown in Table 1, the experimental group demonstrated a marked increase in speech rate and utterance length, alongside a considerable reduction in pausing behavior. Consequently, their overall fluency score improved substantially. In contrast, although the control group showed minor progress, the gains were noticeably smaller, indicating the limited effectiveness of traditional speaking activities in fostering fluency. In addition to performance-based data, learners' perceptions of role-play activities further support these findings. As illustrated in Table 2, the majority of learners in the experimental group expressed positive attitudes toward role-play and its role in improving speaking fluency.

Table 2. Learners' Perceptions of Role-Play Activities (Experimental Group)

Perception Statements	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Role-play helped me speak more fluently	45	40	10	5
Role-play reduced my fear of making mistakes	50	35	10	5
Role-play increased my confidence in speaking English	55	30	10	5
Role-play made speaking activities more interesting	60	30	5	5
Role-play encouraged interaction with classmates	58	32	7	3
Role-play helped me use new vocabulary in context	48	37	10	5

As Table 2 indicates, more than 80% of learners either agreed or strongly agreed that role-play enhanced their fluency and confidence. Moreover, a significant proportion of learners reported reduced anxiety and increased classroom interaction. These affective improvements are particularly important, as they directly support sustained oral participation and spontaneous speech.

Taken together, the combined evidence from Tables 1 and 2 demonstrates that role-play positively influences both the linguistic performance and affective readiness of intermediate EFL learners. Therefore, the results provide strong empirical support for the effectiveness of role-play as a fluency-enhancing instructional strategy.

Discussion. The findings of the present study demonstrate that role-play is an effective instructional technique for improving the speaking fluency of intermediate EFL learners. The quantitative results revealed that learners who participated in role-play activities achieved substantially greater gains in speech rate, utterance length, and overall fluency scores, while also showing a marked reduction in pausing behavior. These outcomes suggest that role-play creates favorable conditions for the development of fluent oral production.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings strongly support the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasize meaningful interaction as the foundation of language development. The role-play tasks used in this study required learners to engage in spontaneous, goal-oriented communication, thereby shifting their focus from linguistic form to message conveyance. As a result, learners were able to produce longer and more continuous stretches of speech, which is a core indicator of fluency.

Furthermore, the reduction in hesitation and pauses observed in the experimental group can be explained through cognitive processing theories of fluency. Meaning-focused tasks such as role-play impose real-time communicative pressure, encouraging rapid lexical retrieval and syntactic processing. Over time, repeated engagement in such tasks appears to facilitate the proceduralization of linguistic knowledge, allowing learners to speak with greater automaticity. In contrast, the relatively modest gains of the control group suggest that traditional accuracy-oriented activities provide limited opportunities for developing real-time processing skills. In addition to linguistic gains, learners' perceptions reported in Table 2 highlight the important role of affective factors in fluency development. A large majority of learners indicated that role-play reduced their fear of making mistakes and increased their confidence in speaking English. This finding aligns with affective theories of language learning, which emphasize that lower anxiety and higher motivation promote increased oral participation. By creating a simulated and non-threatening communicative environment, role-play appears to lower psychological barriers that often inhibit fluent speech. Moreover, learners reported that role-play encouraged interaction and facilitated the use of vocabulary in context. This suggests that role-play not only enhances fluency but also supports deeper lexical activation and discourse-level competence. Unlike controlled drills, role-play requires learners to adapt language to situational demands, thereby fostering flexible and context-sensitive language use.

Overall, the convergence of objective fluency improvements and positive learner perceptions provides strong empirical support for the effectiveness of role-play in intermediate EFL speaking instruction. These findings reinforce existing research advocating interactive, task-based approaches and further highlight the value of role-play as a tool that simultaneously addresses cognitive, linguistic, and affective dimensions of speaking fluency.

Conclusion. The present study has demonstrated that role-play is a highly effective instructional strategy for improving the speaking fluency of intermediate EFL learners. The findings show that learners exposed to role-play activities achieved greater gains in speech rate, utterance length, and overall fluency, while significantly reducing hesitation and pausing behavior when compared with learners taught through traditional speaking activities.

Moreover, the study revealed that role-play positively influences learners' affective dimensions of speaking. Increased confidence, reduced fear of making mistakes, and greater willingness to participate in classroom interaction were consistently reported by learners. These affective improvements appear to support fluent oral production by encouraging learners to engage more actively and spontaneously in communication.

Furthermore, by situating language use in meaningful and context-based scenarios, role-play enables learners to integrate vocabulary, grammar, and discourse strategies in real time. As a result, learners are able to proceduralize their linguistic knowledge and develop greater automaticity, which is essential for sustained speaking fluency.

Therefore, from both pedagogical and theoretical perspectives, role-play should be regarded as a central component of intermediate EFL speaking instruction rather than a supplementary activity. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate structured and goal-oriented role-play tasks into regular classroom practice. Finally, future research may explore the long-term effects of role-play and examine its impact on other aspects of speaking competence, such as pronunciation and pragmatic ability, using larger samples and inferential statistical analysis.

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Rezyume. Mazkur tadqiqot o'rta darajadagi EFL o'quvchilarining nutq ravonligini rivojlantirishda roli o'yinlarning samaradorligini aniqlashga qaratilgan. Tadqiqot kvazi-eksperimental dizayn asosida olib borilib, tajriba va nazorat guruhlarini qamrab oldi. Nutq ravonligi nutq tezligi, pauzalar soni, gap uzunligi va umumiy ravonlik ko'rsatkichlari orqali baholandi. Shuningdek, o'quvchilarning roli o'yinlarga bo'lgan munosabati ham o'rganildi. Tadqiqot natijalari roli o'yinlar nutq ravonligini oshirish, ishonchni kuchaytirish va muloqotga tayyorlikni rivojlantirishda samarali metod ekanligini ko'rsatdi.

Kalit so'zlar: nutq ravonligi, EFL o'quvchilari, kommunikativ ta'lim, og'zaki muloqot

Резюме. Исследование проводилось на основе квазиэкспериментального дизайна с предварительным и итоговым тестированием экспериментальной и контрольной групп. Беглость речи оценивалась по показателям скорости речи, количества пауз, длины высказываний и общего уровня беглости. Также были проанализированы мнения учащихся. Результаты показали, что использование ролевых игр способствует значительному повышению беглости речи, уверенности и коммуникативной активности учащихся. Полученные данные подтверждают эффективность ролевых игр в обучении устной речи на иностранном языке.

Ключевые слова: беглость речи, изучающие английский язык, коммуникативное обучение, устное взаимодействие

Abstract. A quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test design was employed with an experimental group receiving role-play-based instruction and a control group taught through traditional speaking activities. Speaking fluency was assessed using speech rate, pausing behavior, utterance length, and overall fluency scores. Learners' perceptions were also examined through a questionnaire. The results indicate that role-play significantly enhances speaking fluency and positively affects learners' confidence and willingness to communicate. The findings confirm the pedagogical value of role-play as an effective technique for developing fluent oral communication in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: speaking fluency, EFL learners, communicative language teaching, interaction