

## Role-Playing as a Tool for Improving ESL Learners' Communication Skills: A Systematic Review

(Role-Playing sebagai Alat untuk Meningkatkan Kemahiran Komunikasi Pelajar ESL: Kajian Sistematis)

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### ABSTRACT

*Role-playing in the classroom allows students to simulate scenarios or take on different roles to enhance their communication skills. Communication is often considered the most challenging language skill to master, compared to reading and writing. This study conducts a systematic review of 25 relevant studies published between 2011 and 2023 from sources including Google Scholar, Research Gate, Semantic Scholar, Academia, SAGE, ProQuest, HRMAS, JELTL, and the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database. The aim is to assess the effectiveness of role-playing in improving ESL students' communication skills. The findings reveal that role-playing significantly enhances students' speaking abilities, particularly in terms of fluency, comprehension, contextual understanding, and interactive skills. Additionally, role-playing increases students' confidence in communicating in English and encourages more frequent use of English in the classroom. Future research should explore long-term effects of role-playing and its impact on different proficiency levels. Practical applications include integrating role-play activities into ESL curricula to foster a more interactive learning environment. However, limitations of existing studies include small sample sizes and a lack of longitudinal research.*

*Keywords: speaking, role-playing, systematic literature review, ESL, communication skills*

### ABSTRAK

*Role-playing di dalam bilik darjah membolehkan pelajar mensimulasikan situasi atau memainkan pelbagai watak untuk meningkatkan kemahiran komunikasi mereka. Komunikasi sering dianggap sebagai kemahiran bahasa yang paling mencabar untuk dikuasai berbanding membaca dan menulis. Kajian ini menjalankan ulasan sistematik terhadap 25 kajian yang relevan yang diterbitkan antara 2011 dan 2023 daripada sumber seperti Google Scholar, Research Gate, Semantic Scholar, Academia, SAGE, ProQuest, HRMAS, JELTL, dan pangkalan data Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC). Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menilai keberkesanan role-playing dalam meningkatkan kemahiran komunikasi pelajar ESL. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa role-playing secara signifikan meningkatkan keupayaan bertutur pelajar, terutamanya dari segi kefasihan, pemahaman, kesedaran konteks, dan kemahiran interaktif. Selain itu, role-playing meningkatkan keyakinan pelajar dan menyediakan persekitaran yang selamat serta menyeronokkan untuk berlatih bahasa Inggeris di dalam bilik darjah. Kajian masa depan seharusnya menerokai kesan jangka panjang main peranan dan impaknya pada tahap penguasaan berbeza, termasuk maklum balas rakan sebaya dan amalan reflektif, sambil menangani motivasi sebagai faktor penting untuk penglibatan pelajar. Namun, had dalam kajian sedia ada termasuk saiz sampel yang kecil dan kekurangan penyelidikan longitudinal.*

*Kata kunci: role-playing, bertutur, tinjauan literatur yang sistematik, ESL, kemahiran komunikasi*

## INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, English proficiency is crucial for success in personal, academic, and professional spheres (Sari, 2023). Effective English communication facilitates access to educational opportunities, international collaboration, and global career paths (Sari, 2021). Due to the rising need for English proficiency, teachers and scholars are exploring creative methods to enhance language learning results. Mastery of communication skills is especially important for students to function effectively in contemporary society. Perren et al. (2017) highlighted that language and communication abilities are perhaps the most crucial aspects of social life, as they allow individuals to interact with a wide variety of people. Given its prominence over other skills such as reading and writing in everyday life, proficiency in communication is indispensable. Since conversation supports learning and critical thinking, students' engagement in speaking and listening activities is vital for both linguistic and social development (Feeney, 2022; Sağlam et al., 2021).

Language plays a fundamental role in communication, and without it, ideal communication between people is impossible. Furthermore, individuals cannot achieve their ambitions, goals, and purposes without effective communication skills (Rao, 2019). Recent studies continue to emphasize the significance of communication skills for personal and professional success (Feeney, 2022). Handayani (2018) observed that students encounter speaking difficulties when they do not practice regularly in class, lack confidence, and when the teaching methods used are not appropriate for their needs. This challenge persists, as highlighted in recent research, which underscores the necessity of consistent practice and innovative pedagogical approaches to enhance speaking skills (Sağlam et al., 2021; Kastriti et al., 2022). Teachers play a pivotal role in the learning process and should employ creative strategies to facilitate students' understanding. Arifin (2021) recommended that to foster an interactive and enjoyable learning environment, teachers should use a variety of instructional strategies tailored to students' skill levels. Despite this, some educators continue using outdated methods that do not create a supportive environment for students to speak freely (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019). Recent literature stresses the importance of incorporating modern, varied instructional approaches, such as dialogic discourse, to enhance student participation and communication skills in ESL settings (Sağlam et al., 2022; Goh, 2023).

Mas (2022) indicated that role play is an ideal activity to encourage students to use English creatively. It simulates real conversational contexts, providing students with the

opportunity to practice and enhance their communication skills. The teacher serves as both a mentor and a guide, offering direction on roles, settings, characters, and events (Sarwat, Hamza, & Wazeer, 2023). Dewi, Pratisti, and Prasetyaningrum (2019) highlight the significance of the preparation phase in role-play, which includes identifying and clarifying the issue to the participants and discussing the role-play activities. During this phase, participants gain an understanding of disruptive behavior in the classroom, empathize with peers who are disturbed during class, and imagine the perspectives of both victims and perpetrators of such behavior. Before beginning the role play, participants are introduced to the importance of empathy through an explanation provided by the facilitator. After the activity, the facilitator and participants discuss the participants' understanding of disruptive behavior, empathy, and the role-playing experience. Moreover, given that communication is one of the 4Cs of 21st-century skills, its importance is highly emphasized. This focus is evident in educational policies globally, as numerous countries strive to cultivate students' communication abilities to foster proficient English speakers (Paneerselvam and Mohamad, 2019).

The journey to learning and mastering English is frequently hindered by a lack of confidence and anxiety associated with speaking a second language. This challenge is exacerbated by limited practice opportunities in daily life and students' inclination to use their native language in the classroom. These factors make developing effective communication skills more difficult. Students may encounter both verbal and non-verbal obstacles, such as internal issues with self-esteem, which can negatively affect their confidence in their language abilities (Zakaria et al., 2019). Hashim and Isa (2012) identified several elements that contribute to the discomfort and difficulties of speaking a second language, including a limited vocabulary, low self-confidence, and insufficient exposure to the language in both educational and community settings. Thus, teachers are pivotal in aiding students to find effective methods and learning techniques to enhance their communication skills. It is crucial to create a supportive learning environment that reduces fear and anxiety to improve students' proficiency in a second language. Hashim et al. (2019) suggested that with appropriate learning strategies, students can attain proficiency in both the spoken and written aspects of the language.

Hattings (1993), drawing from his observations in conversation classes, suggests that role play emerges as an optimal activity for students to creatively employ their English. Its objective is to simulate real-life conversational situations, allowing students to practice and develop their communication skills. Additionally, role play encompasses

all English skills—listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Students train themselves to create engaging conversations to capture the audience's interest. They practice speaking through simulation before performing, which indicates that students are motivated to deliver a good speaking performance.

In teaching communication skills, determining the most effective methods for helping learners master these abilities is crucial. Young learners typically prefer a fun and relaxed environment where they do not feel pressured to learn the language. This approach can reduce anxiety and boost motivation, thereby enhancing their communication skills. Teachers should avoid dominating the classroom and monopolizing conversations when teaching a second language. Torkey (2006) highlighted that teachers often monopolize classroom sessions by continuously talking and explaining, which discourages students from becoming active speakers and participating in speaking lessons. Therefore, an effective approach to language learning is to encourage students to engage in speaking activities during class. Students need opportunities to communicate and participate in student-centered activities to develop their skills.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) highlights students' 'communicative needs,' which include handling everyday tasks, sharing information and ideas, and gaining a deeper international perspective (Cambridge, 2011). Consequently, there is a greater focus on teaching listening and speaking skills. Role-playing exercises are particularly effective in developing conversational abilities, as they offer students a fun and meaningful way to practice the target language (Togimin and Jaafar, 2020). According to Vani et al. (2022), target language acquisition involves using a second language effectively and meaningfully in authentic communication settings. Through participation in role-playing activities, students have ample opportunities to communicate in the target language in the classroom, engaging in collaborative tasks and exchanging information. This greatly enhances their speaking skills.

The primary objective of this systematic review is to analyze and synthesize previous research conducted between 2011 and 2023, sourced from the Google Scholar database, with a focus on evaluating the efficacy of role-play as a pedagogical approach for improving communication skills among ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. This review aims to explore how role-play functions as a teaching strategy in enhancing the communication skills of ESL learners, examining the mechanisms through which role-play contributes to skill development, including aspects such as engagement, practice, and real-world application. Additionally, it seeks

to identify the challenges educators encounter when implementing role-play activities in the classroom, addressing obstacles such as resource constraints, student participation, and the integration of role-play with curriculum objectives. By examining these dimensions, the review intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the benefits and limitations associated with the use of role-play in ESL education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In language education, the ability to communicate is of paramount importance. Rayhan (2014) noted that speaking is as vital to a person's everyday experiences and life processes as seeing and walking. In this context, speaking is viewed as the most natural form of communication. According to Lucanus (2017), strong communication skills can greatly enhance the process of socialization, which involves expressing one's thoughts and beliefs to others through speech. Learners who can communicate effectively are able to form strong connections with one another. Communication comprises verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal elements. Verbal communication involves the words we choose and how we structure them. Nonverbal communication encompasses the information we convey through gestures and body language. Paraverbal communication includes the tone, speed, and volume of our speech (Windle & Warren, 2017). Effective communication necessitates proficiency in both verbal and nonverbal abilities. While verbal skills often receive more attention, nonverbal skills are crucial for delivering the intended message accurately, as they complement verbal communication (Samat et al., 2019). Role-playing activities offer students the chances to practice both verbal and nonverbal facets of communication. These activities involve not only spoken dialogue but also body movements, facial expressions, and gestures.

In Malaysia, primary school students often struggle with speaking English in classroom settings. Despite starting English lessons at age six, many students' proficiency remains insufficient (Azman, 2016). Since 1988, the Malaysian curriculum has incorporated the Communicative Approach in English education, aiming to develop well-rounded communication skills (Mansor, 2015). However, the outcomes, particularly in speaking and communication, have been underwhelming even after two decades of implementation. One significant barrier is the influence of students' first language, which makes them more comfortable using their mother tongue both inside and outside the classroom (Misbah, Mohamad, Yunus, &

Yaacob, 2017). This preference for their native language can hinder their progress in learning English. Hence, it is essential for teachers to establish an environment that fosters students' comfort and enthusiasm for learning English. The persistent challenges in developing oral communication skills in Malaysian schools highlight the need for more effective practices.

### ROLE PLAY

According to The Oxford Dictionary (2015), role play is described as "the act of portraying a specific person or character, often used in training or psychotherapy." Role-playing is widely recognized as an effective method for helping students adapt to unfamiliar social contexts. Abdul Rahman and Maarof (2018) elucidated that role-playing aids students in developing the ability to perform in front of an audience, a skill they will need outside the classroom. Neupane (2019) described role play as a classroom exercise where participants adopt specific personas or roles and act out scenarios. For example, students might role-play as a tourist and a police officer to practice giving directions in a second language. This offers an exceptional chance for students to learn the target language, as engaging in dialogue during classroom activities is an effective language learning strategy. Nga (2011) described role play as an approach where students enact realistic scenarios according to a role card, using creativity to imagine and temporarily assume another's identity, thereby practicing language in hypothetical, real-world situations.

Kusnierek (2015) defined role play as a versatile range of communication strategies that improve language fluency, promote classroom engagement, and enhance student motivation. Qing (2011) observed that the duration of role plays may vary, usually ranging from five to fifteen minutes, depending on the class level, objectives, and needs. Furthermore, Porter-Ladousse (1987, as cited in Kusnierek, 2015) highlighted the varying complexity of role play activities, ranging from highly structured to simpler and briefer ones, depending on the students' language proficiency.

### BENEFITS OF ROLE-PLAYING

Role play significantly contributes to students' personal development. This activity facilitates the development of skills and attributes such as creativity, leadership, collaboration, and risk-taking, all of which hold significant value across various facets of life (Angelianawati, 2019). When students engage in role play, they strive to find suitable words to express their thoughts, thereby enhancing their language proficiency while building confidence. Saad

and Mansor (2019) highlighted that role play allows students to use the target language in a supportive environment, reducing the stress associated with speaking a new language and enhancing their motivation.

Islam and Islam (2013) observed that role play is highly motivating for students because it breaks the monotony of traditional lecture-based activities. It provides students with experiences relevant to real-life and social situations, making them more adaptable. Razali and Ismail (2017) noted that role play introduces new functions, structures, and vocabulary, offering fresh experiences and supporting shy students. A study conducted by Krisdiana et al. (2018) revealed that the combination of role play with word cards led to improvements in oral proficiency, grammatical accuracy, articulation, and vocabulary. Similarly, Alabsi (2016) found that role-playing techniques were more effective than traditional vocabulary instruction in EFL lessons, consistent with previous research indicating the effectiveness of role play in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and overall English language learning (Toumpianiari et al., 2015; Sadeghi & Sharifi, 2013; Nair et al., 2014). Despite initial apprehensions about speaking in front of a group, role play assists students in practicing the target language within a less stressful environment, enabling them to freely express themselves in an engaging and meaningful classroom activity (Yousef, Jamil, and Razak, 2013).

### METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review adheres to the guidelines outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), which provides a structured framework for conducting and reporting systematic reviews. The PRISMA guidelines are designed to ensure transparency and comprehensiveness in the review process, encompassing several key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The PRISMA guidelines are designed to ensure transparency and comprehensiveness in the review process, encompassing several key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

**Identification:** The initial phase of the PRISMA process involves identifying relevant studies through comprehensive searches across multiple databases. For this review, searches were conducted using Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, Academia, SAGE, ProQuest, HRMAS, JELTL, and ERIC. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and phrases such as "role play," "communication skills," "ESL learners," "English language teaching," and "language learning."



These terms were selected to encompass a broad spectrum of research related to role play in ESL contexts.

**Screening:** Following the initial search, the next step involved screening the search results to remove duplicates and assess the relevance of the studies. Titles and abstracts of the identified studies were reviewed to determine whether they met the preliminary inclusion criteria. This step was crucial in narrowing down the large volume of studies to those most pertinent to the review's focus. In this review, 150 studies were initially identified, and after eliminating duplicates and irrelevant studies, 50 studies remained for detailed evaluation.

**Eligibility:** The full texts of the remaining studies were then assessed for eligibility based on the predefined inclusion criteria. These criteria included: (1) a focus on the use of role play to enhance communication skills among ESL learners, (2) peer-reviewed status to ensure the quality and credibility of the research, and (3) publication in English to maintain consistency in language and comprehension. This step ensures that only studies meeting the specific criteria for relevance and quality are included in the final review. From the 50 studies evaluated, 25 studies met all the inclusion criteria and were selected for in-depth analysis.

**Inclusion:** The final stage involves synthesizing the data extracted from the included studies. Data were collected regarding various aspects such as the effectiveness of role play in improving communication skills, the specific skills targeted, and any challenges or limitations reported in the implementation of role play activities in the classroom. This synthesis provides a comprehensive overview of the current evidence on the use of role play in ESL education and identifies key areas of benefit and challenge.

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases to identify relevant studies. The databases included Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, Academia, SAGE, ProQuest, HRMAS, JELTL, and ERIC. The search strategy involved the use of specific search terms such as "role play," "communication skills," "ESL learners," "English language teaching," and "language learning." These terms were selected to capture a wide range of studies related to the use of role play in ESL education.

The search was restricted to studies published from 2011 to 2023, aligning with the focus on recent research. To ensure the relevance and quality of the studies, the inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) studies that specifically focus on the use of role play to enhance communication skills among ESL learners, (2) peer-reviewed studies to ensure scholarly rigor, and (3) studies published in English to maintain linguistic consistency.

The initial search resulted in the identification of 150 studies. Following this, the process of screening involved the removal of duplicate entries and an initial review of titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the research questions. This process narrowed the selection to 50 studies. These studies were then subjected to a detailed review of their full texts to assess their alignment with the inclusion criteria.

Out of the 50 studies reviewed in full, 25 studies met the inclusion criteria and were selected for the final review. Data extraction from these studies focused on several aspects: the effectiveness of role play in improving communication skills, the specific communication skills addressed, and any reported challenges or limitations related to the implementation of role play in classroom settings. This systematic approach ensures a thorough evaluation of the literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of the role of role play in enhancing communication skills among ESL learners and the challenges faced by educators in its implementation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the established protocols for conducting the systematic review, a total of three review articles and seventeen relevant studies conducted between 2011 and 2023 were identified. Notably, seven papers were published in 2019, making it the year with the highest number of publications. In contrast, two articles each were published in 2021, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2016, and 2013. The remaining six articles spanned from 2011 to 2023, with one publication per year (2011, 2012, 2014, 2020, 2022, and 2023). Table 1 summarizes the empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of role-play exercises in enhancing students' communication skills.

Table 1. Summary of Previous Studies on the Impact of Role Play or Drama-Based Role Play on Students' Communication Skills

| Study/ Article                              | Database      | Aim  | Samples   | Findings  | Challenges   | Suggestions  |
|---|---------------|--|---|---|--|--|
| Elisabeth Renita Sari & Intan Hamzah (2023) | JELTL         | To assess whether role-playing activities can enhance students' speaking abilities   | 25 grade 5 students at SDN 1 Campang Raya   | Pre-test scores: Min = 60.00, Max = 80.00, Mean = 72.40. Post-test scores: Min = 65.00, Max = 85.00, Mean = 75.20. Significant improvement in speaking skills ( $p = 0.02$ ). Students showed increased enthusiasm and confidence.  | Limited student participation, anxiety during role play.                           | Gradual introduction of role play, creating a supportive environment.  |
| Ishak & Aziz, 2022                          | HRMAS         | Assess the influence of role-playing on improving communication abilities among ESL learners.  | Review Paper  | Role-playing enhances students' speaking skills, especially in terms of fluency, comprehension, contextual usage, and interactive capabilities. Increases their confidence and motivation to communicate in English.  | Difficulty in maintaining student interest, varying levels of proficiency.         | Incorporating diverse role play scenarios, differentiated instruction. |
| Bhatti, 2021                                | Research Gate | - To ascertain the efficacy of role-playing as a strategy for aiding students in addressing speaking difficulties.<br><br>- To assess the influence of role-playing activities on students' speaking proficiency.  | 360 secondary school students, consisting of 180 males and 180 females, from Govt. S.D. High School Bahawalpur and Workers Welfare School (Girls) Bahawalpur. | A significant difference was observed in students' achievement scores when comparing their pre-test and post-test results. Role-playing activities have shown a positive impact on the speaking skills of elementary-level students in the Bahawalpur region.   | Limited vocabulary, lack of confidence among students.                             | Vocabulary building activities, positive reinforcement.                |
| Bora, 2021                                  | SAGE          | To explore the educational utility of authentic contemporary plays in improving learners' second language (L2) oral production, with a focus on (1) complexity, which includes syntactic complexity and the mean length of AS-units (MLAS), and (2) accuracy, covering both overall accuracy and pronunciation accuracy. | 20 graduating high school seniors attending a small private school situated in a small town in northern Italy..   | In contrast to conventional methods, the blended-drama approach seems to offer an advantage in promoting higher levels of syntactic complexity. Following the implementation of the blended-drama training, the experimental group showed significant improvement in both overall and pronunciation accuracy. | Integrating drama with language learning, balancing focus on accuracy and fluency. | Blended learning approach, regular practice sessions.                  |

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| Togimim & Jaafar, 2020 | Research Gate | To discover how role-playing activities in an ESL classroom can serve as a creative method to enhance students' speaking skills. | Nine undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Computing at a public university located in the Southern region of Malaysia.         | The students showed improvement in fluency, comprehension, contextual understanding, and interactive communication. The students felt that participating in role-playing activities positively influenced their English-speaking skills.   | Students' reluctance to participate, difficulty in real-life application. | Use of relatable scenarios, continuous assessment and feedback.            |
| Alfu & Akmalun, 2019   | Research Gate | Discover the utilization of role-playing as a means to enhance speaking skills.  | First-year students at IAIN Kudus   | Role-playing effectively enhanced students' English speaking skills. Students found enjoyment in the role-playing activities, which bolstered their confidence and proficiency in speaking English.  | Limited resources, teacher preparedness.                                  | Providing training for teachers, using low-cost materials.                 |
| Rahmat et al., 2019    | Research Gate | To explore the use of role-play techniques in the ESL classroom.   | 104 participants, comprising 66 males and 38 females, enrolled in semester 1 Business and Engineering programs at a university in Malaysia. | Role-play activities provide advantages to learners of both genders. Through role-play, learners participate in English interaction, practice conversational skills within authentic scenarios, make decisions, and engage in creative thinking.                                       | Students' fear of making mistakes, cultural differences                   | Encouraging a positive learning environment, cultural sensitivity training |
| Neupane, 2019          | Research Gate | To evaluate the effectiveness of role-playing techniques in improving English speaking skills.                                   | 40 tenth-grade students from a public school in the Lamjung district  | Students in the control group, engaged in role-playing activities, demonstrated improvement in their vocabulary and accents. Students taught using role-play approaches achieved superior results in the Post Test compared to those taught through traditional grammar-based methods. | Classroom management issues, diverse student backgrounds.                 | Effective classroom management strategies, inclusive practices.            |

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| Saad & Mansor, 2019       | Research Gate | To investigate whether employing role-play improves students' speaking performance. To delve into the efficacy of role-play as a means of evaluating speaking proficiency.                                      | 125 semester one ELC 120 course students of Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah | Role-playing stands out as a valuable strategy for enhancing students' language skills, while also boosting their enthusiasm, motivation, and attitudes towards English speaking proficiency. Students show a favorable response to the effectiveness of role-play in evaluating speaking skills, valuing the spontaneous aspect of the activity that enables them to articulate ideas in English. They express contentment with their performance in the assessment. | Limited engagement, assessment challenges.                            | Interactive activities, clear assessment criteria.                  |
| Angelinawati, 2019        | ERIC          | Explores current theories and research findings regarding the integration of drama in ESL/EFL teaching and learning to offer deeper insights into leveraging drama for enhanced learning within EFL classrooms. | (Review Paper)  | Integrating drama into the classroom yields numerous advantages, such as fostering student-centered learning, encouraging students to utilize and improve their language skills, critical thinking abilities, and creativity in an enjoyable manner, and bolstering students' maturity and motivation.  | Students' initial discomfort with drama, integration with curriculum. | Step-by-step introduction to drama, aligning with curriculum goals. |
| Rojas & Villafuerte, 2019 | Research Gate | To explore the influence of incorporating Roleplay (RP) as a technique in English classes to improve the speaking proficiency of EFL learners in Ecuador.   | (Review Paper)  | Participating in role-play activities in the classroom promotes the development of students' speaking skills and vocabulary. It encourages creativity through teamwork and provides chances for students to learn English naturally and with significance, concentrating on topics that engage and motivate them.   | Students' performance anxiety, varied language proficiency.           | Role play in small groups, scaffolding techniques.                  |

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| Wulandari et al., 2019      | Research Gate    | Improving speaking skills through the utilization of the Role Play technique.  | 30 accounting students from SMKN 3 Karawang, comprising 20 females and 10 males.           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role-playing is often regarded as an effective technique for enhancing students' speaking skills.</li> <li>• Role-playing strategies aid in the development of students' English speaking abilities, bolster their confidence in using English, promote active participation, and ignite enthusiasm for learning the language.</li> </ul>                                | Difficulty in organizing role play sessions, time constraints.       | Structured lesson plans, time management strategies.               |
| Krisdiana et al., 2018      | Semantic Scholar | To evaluate the effectiveness of combining role-play activities with word cards to enhance the speaking skills.  | 23 second-semester students at the University of Malang.                                   | The integration of role-play with word cards demonstrated effectiveness in improving fluency, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and vocabulary skills in speaking for communication purposes.  | Students' hesitation to participate, balancing accuracy and fluency. | Encouraging participation, balanced focus on accuracy and fluency. |
| Abdul Rahman & Maarof, 2018 | Academia         | To investigate the influence of employing role-play and simulation techniques on oral communication skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) among engineering students at Malaysian Polytechnics. | 100 first-year engineering students at Selangor Polytechnic.                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students expressed passion for engaging in role-play and simulation activities due to the engaging nature of the tasks, which kept them interested and allowed for repeated speaking practice.</li> <li>• Remarkable improvements were observed in students' communication abilities, as evidenced by their increased confidence and proficiency in speaking.</li> </ul> | Limited teacher experience, student resistance.                      | Professional development for teachers, motivating students.        |
| Dhea Mizhir Krebt, 2017     | Research Gate    | To discover the impact of incorporating role-playing as a classroom technique on the speaking abilities of Iraqi EFL college students.   | 40 college language students at the University of Baghdad, College of Education Ibn-Rushd. | The experimental group exhibited notable enhancement in their speaking abilities compared to the control group. The role-play technique was shown to be more efficacious than traditional methods in improving speaking proficiency.  | Overcoming students' fear, varying skill levels.                     | Creating a supportive atmosphere, differentiated instruction.      |

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| Mohd Razali & Ismail, 2017 | Semantic Scholar | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To investigate the relationship between the use of simulation and role-play techniques and the improvement of students' speaking skills.</li> <li>• To explore students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of simulation and role-play in the classroom for enhancing their speaking abilities.</li> </ul> | 40 students of Form 2A from Sekolah Agama Menengah (SAM) Muhammadiyah, Sabak Bernam. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Findings suggest that engaging in simulation and role-play activities can enhance students' speaking skills.</li> <li>• Furthermore, students express enjoyment in learning English through the use of simulation and role-play techniques.</li> </ul>   | Limited student engagement, assessment issues.              | Interactive and engaging activities, clear assessment guidelines.        |
| Ampatuan & Jose, 2016      | Semantic Scholar | To examine the effectiveness of employing role-play as an approach to cultivate the communicative competence of freshmen.   | 14 second semester Bachelor in Elementary Education students.                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role-play proves to be a valuable approach in fostering students' communicative competence, as long as it's not overly prolonged.</li> <li>• Role-play fosters student expression and boosts self-confidence through the application of social rules and language learned, facilitating the enhancement of communication abilities.</li> </ul> | Classroom management issues, varying student engagement.    | Effective classroom management strategies, engaging role play scenarios. |
| Eckersley, 2016            | Semantic Scholar | To investigate the various methods by which drama can be utilized to actively engage both English first language (L1) speakers and ESL learners in the development of effective communication skills.   | (Review Paper)   | Skills such as improvisation and role-play, inherent in drama, aid ESL students in thinking, acting, and communicating, while fostering empathy and critical thinking. Drama can also serve as a tool to introduce new concepts, support challenging learning tasks, and facilitate the development of complex language and ideas.  | Adapting drama to language learning, student participation. | Integrating drama techniques, fostering active participation.            |

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| Altun, 2015          | ProQuest      | To explore the benefits of integrating role-play activities to improve speaking skills.   | 45 ELT third year students   | Participating in role-playing activities motivates learners to enhance their foreign language skills, boosts their self-confidence, presents language materials in a natural context, provides opportunities for learning everyday language, and facilitates the expansion of vocabulary and language proficiency.   | Students' initial resistance, balancing focus on different skills. | Gradual integration of role play, balanced skill development. |
| Emre Erturk ,2015    | Research Gate | To investigate both the implementation and effectiveness of integrating role-play techniques within a systems analysis and design course. | Students in a New Zealand tertiary institution (2013-2015).  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role-playing is indeed effective in capturing students' interest and enhancing their communication skills.</li> <li>• The activities involved the utilization of Data Flow Diagrams (DFDs) and Activity Diagrams.</li> <li>• The approach facilitated learner-centered and active learning.</li> <li>• Feedback from both peers and instructors played a crucial role.</li> <li>• Suggestions included gradually increasing the length of role-play sessions and enhancing questioning skills.</li> </ul> | Teacher preparedness, varying student proficiency.                 | Training for teachers, adaptive role play scenarios.          |
| Yuliana et al., 2014 | Research Gate | To assess the influence of role-playing activities on students' speaking proficiency.   | 62 students from Natural Science (IPA) High School 1 Batang Anai, Padang Pariaman Regency, West Sumatera, Indonesia. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The average score of students in the experimental group, who were taught through role-play, exceeded that of students in the control group, who were taught through information gap activities.</li> <li>• Role-play demonstrated a notable impact on students' speaking skills.</li> </ul>   | Limited resources, student motivation.                             | Resourceful planning, motivational strategies.                |

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| Javid, 2013  | Semantic Scholar | To assess the effectiveness of employing simulation techniques in teaching English to enhance the oral proficiency of pharmacy students at Taif University.  | 88 freshman students enrolled in the College of Pharmacy                       | Both the experimental and control groups showed reasonable progress in their oral communication proficiency, but the experimental groups demonstrated greater improvement in their speaking and listening skills compared to the control groups.  | Student anxiety, maintaining interest.       | Anxiety-reducing techniques, engaging and varied activities. |
| Islam, 2013  | Semantic Scholar | To evaluate the efficacy of employing role-play to enhance the speaking skills of students in a large class, and to analyze the benefits and drawbacks of incorporating role-play at the tertiary level.   | 120 students from the Department of English at Stamford University Bangladesh. | After engaging in a series of role-plays, students' speaking abilities saw a significant improvement, with noticeable gains in fluency. Moreover, students developed the confidence and ability to express themselves freely. Role-play emerged as a valuable strategy, particularly in larger classrooms, allowing for the observation of numerous students' performances within a short timeframe.          | Large classroom size, diverse student needs. | Effective classroom management, inclusive practices.         |
| Oradee, 2012 | Academia         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To analyze and compare English speaking skills through three communicative activities: Discussion, Problem Solving, and Role-playing.</li> <li>To investigate students' attitudes toward learning English speaking skills through the use of these three communicative activities.</li> </ul> | 49 Grade 11 students of Satri Rachinuthit School, Udon Thani, Thailand         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The students' English-speaking proficiency showed significant improvement following the implementation of the three communicative exercises compared to their proficiency prior to their use.</li> <li>Furthermore, the students demonstrated a positive attitude towards the instruction of English speaking skills through these communicative exercises.</li> </ul> | Time constraints, varied student engagement. | Efficient time management, interactive activities.           |

continue ...

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|------------|---------------|--|----------------|---|---|---|
| Qing, 2011 | Research Gate | To explore the significance of communicative competence in college English education and investigate an enjoyable method to enhance students' intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge through collaborative role-playing activities developed by groups. | (Review Paper) | Engaging in role-playing activities has the potential to elevate students' intercultural awareness while fostering the development of their overall communicative competence. | Students' initial discomfort, balancing communicative competence. | Creating a comfortable environment, comprehensive approach. |
|------------|---------------|--|----------------|---|---|---|

This systematic review aims to explore and synthesize findings from studies conducted between 2011 and 2023 to address two critical research questions. Firstly, it investigates how role-play functions as a teaching strategy in improving ESL learners' communication skills. This includes examining the impact of role-play on various aspects of communication, such as fluency, vocabulary, and confidence. Secondly, the review seeks to identify and understand the challenges educators encounter when implementing role-play activities in the classroom. By addressing these questions, the review provides a comprehensive analysis of role-play's efficacy and the practical difficulties faced by educators, offering valuable insights for optimizing its use in ESL instruction.

**(a) How does role-play function as a teaching strategy in enhancing ESL learners' communication skills?**

The review of the studies reveals that role-play is widely recognized as an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing communication skills among ESL learners. Across the reviewed literature, role-play has consistently been found to improve various aspects of communication, including speaking fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and interactive abilities. For instance, Sari and Hamzah (2023) demonstrated significant improvements in speaking skills, with pre-test and post-test scores indicating a notable enhancement in students' abilities. Similarly, Bhatti (2021) observed a positive impact on speaking proficiency, particularly in terms of fluency and vocabulary, among secondary school students in Bahawalpur.

Role-play activities are noted for their ability to engage students in authentic communication scenarios, thereby fostering greater confidence and motivation to use English. For example, Togimim and Jaafar (2020) reported

improved fluency and contextual understanding among undergraduate students who participated in role-play activities. The blended-drama approach, as explored by Bora (2021), showed advantages in promoting syntactic complexity and pronunciation accuracy, highlighting the role of role-play in enhancing both the complexity and accuracy of language use.

Furthermore, role-play is effective in creating a supportive and interactive learning environment where students feel more comfortable practicing their English. Neupane (2019) found that students engaged in role-play demonstrated superior vocabulary and accent improvement compared to those taught using traditional methods. This indicates that role-play not only enhances language skills but also makes learning more engaging and relevant to real-life situations.

**(b) What challenges do educators encounter when implementing role-play activities in the classroom?**

Despite its benefits, the implementation of role-play activities in the ESL classroom is not without challenges. Several studies identified common difficulties faced by educators, which include limited student participation, classroom management issues, and varying levels of student proficiency.

One significant challenge is ensuring adequate student participation. Studies by Sari and Hamzah (2023) and Togimim and Jaafar (2020) noted that some students exhibit reluctance or anxiety during role-play activities, which can hinder their engagement and the overall effectiveness of the approach. To address this, gradual introduction of role-play activities and creating a supportive environment are recommended.



Classroom management also poses challenges, particularly in larger classes or with diverse student groups. For example, Islam (2013) highlighted difficulties in managing large class sizes, which can affect the ability to monitor and support individual student performance effectively. Similarly, classroom management issues were noted by Ampatuan and Jose (2016) and Mohd Razali and Ismail (2017), with recommendations for effective management strategies and engaging role-play scenarios to overcome these obstacles.

Another challenge is the need for adequate resources and teacher preparedness. Alfu and Akmalun (2019) and Abdul Rahman and Maarof (2018) observed that limited resources and varying levels of teacher experience can impact the successful implementation of role-play. Providing teacher training and using low-cost materials are suggested solutions to mitigate these issues.

Finally, balancing the focus between accuracy and fluency in role-play activities is another challenge. Studies such as those by Krisdiana et al. (2018) and Wulandari et al. (2019) noted that while role-play can enhance fluency, ensuring that accuracy is also addressed requires careful planning and continuous assessment.

In summary, while role-play is a highly effective strategy for improving ESL learners' communication skills, educators must navigate challenges related to student participation, classroom management, resource limitations, and balancing language skills. Addressing these challenges through thoughtful implementation and support strategies can enhance the effectiveness of role-play as a teaching tool.

#### ROLE-PLAY AS A TEACHING STRATEGY IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A review of four review papers and seventeen research studies underscores the favorable influence of role-play activities in classrooms on students' communication skills. Role-play exercises afford students an opportunity to express themselves openly, thereby mitigating the apprehension typically linked with speaking in a second language. By engaging in collaborative and relaxed role-play activities, students become more comfortable and confident in expressing themselves without fear of judgment.

Engaging classroom activities, like role play, foster an environment where students can practice English more naturally, enhancing their communication abilities. Studies by Aziz & Kashinathan (2021) and Togimin & Jaafar (2020) demonstrate that role plays help students speak more fluidly and confidently, as they simulate real-life situations or take on different characters. Role-playing is

recognized as an effective method for ESL students to practice and prepare for real-life interactions (Kusnierek, 2015). The collaborative nature of role play allows students to learn through social constructivism, improving their social skills and peer interactions. McLeod (2007) supports this, indicating that learning occurs through interaction, leading to the replication of positive behaviors in a non-teaching atmosphere.

Role-play activities encourage students to take on individual and group responsibilities, promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing. This enhances their interpersonal skills and English communication abilities. Neupane (2019) notes that role-playing techniques create a community of learners who support each other towards common goals. Furthermore, role play is a student-centered activity that increases accountability and motivation, as students lead the activities and choose their characters. This involvement boosts their confidence and willingness to speak the target language. Yuliana et al. (2014) and Islam & Islam (2012) found that students became more spontaneous and confident after role-playing sessions, improving their verbal fluency and expressive abilities.

Role play allows shy students to adopt different identities, facilitating freer expression. It helps improve fluency, accuracy, accent, and pronunciation through continuous practice and repetition. Studies by Bhatti (2021), Saad & Mansor (2019), and others highlight the significant improvements in speaking skills achieved through role-play activities. Students become more aware of their accent and pronunciation, leading to better overall communication skills. In summary, role-play activities in classrooms significantly enhance students' communication skills by providing practice in a supportive, engaging, and collaborative environment. This method prepares students to use the target language effectively in various real-life situations, improving their proficiency and confidence.

#### CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING ROLE PLAY

One of the primary challenges with incorporating role-playing activities or simulations is the inherent unpredictability and instability they bring to the classroom. Teachers may find it difficult to maintain control as students can sometimes become unruly, requiring quick action to restore order. This unpredictability leads some teachers to avoid role play in favor of more teacher-centered activities, as they prefer to maintain strict control over the classroom environment.

Saad and Mansor (2019) noted that although large classroom environments can become chaotic during role-play activities, and students may forget their lines and feel embarrassed, these issues can be mitigated with supportive

feedback and guidance from teachers. Teaching should go beyond rigid lesson plans and focus on making lessons engaging and entertaining through various approaches. For successful role-play activities, teachers should identify curriculum areas that can be effectively taught through role-playing and choose suitable dramatic exercises according to the maturity level and readiness of the students.

Additionally, some learners might be hesitant about role-playing exercises. Older children, particularly those with lower proficiency levels, may lack enthusiasm for group work or speaking activities. This reluctance can hinder the effectiveness of the activity and discourage teachers from using role play in the future. Assigning critical roles to hesitant or weaker students can result in a lackluster performance, especially during their first attempt in front of the class. To foster a more comfortable and productive environment, teachers need to actively address these challenges.

One approach is to shorten the role-play activities initially, allowing students to experiment and gradually become more comfortable with the process. This method has proven successful, as students often begin to enjoy role-playing after a brief trial period. According to Ampatuan and Jose (2016), role play can serve as an effective approach for improving students' communicative competence, as long as the activities are not excessively prolonged. Prolonged activities can lead to a loss of interest and motivation among students.

## CONCLUSION

Malaysian ESL students frequently demonstrate limited proficiency in communication skills, which can be attributed to factors like fear of ridicule, nervousness, inadequate practice, and non-interactive classroom activities. Mansor (2015) highlighted that despite the implementation of the Communicative Approach in Malaysian education since 1988, aiming to develop well-rounded communication skills, students' proficiency in speech and communication remains questionable. Classroom instruction tends to prioritize reading and writing over listening and speaking, which are crucial for effective communication. This imbalance may contribute to students' difficulties in communicating proficiently in English. Moreover, the lack of student-centered classroom activities limits students' opportunities to practice and become familiar with the target language. To prevent students from shying away from speaking English, teachers should create lively, student-centered lessons that maximize opportunities for speaking practice (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

Implementing role-play activities in the classroom provides a refreshing change from traditional practices, capturing students' interest and boosting their motivation to engage actively in the learning process. As educators are encouraged to incorporate 21st-century learning elements, collaborative and student-centered activities like role play are particularly beneficial. These activities create an engaging and meaningful learning environment that helps improve students' communication skills, as supported by the research findings in this systematic review. Role play emerges as a facilitator in fostering effective communication competence and conversational skills applicable in real-life situations. Additionally, collaborative role-playing sessions enhance peer interaction, allowing students to practice negotiation and idea exchange. Role plays additionally promote the development of various skills beyond language and communication. As Rahmat et al. (2019) observed, when students acquire new knowledge through interactions in role-playing activities, these experiences effectively reinforce their collaborative learning.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The systematic review indicates a widespread consensus among researchers regarding the efficacy of role-play activities in improving students' communication skills. However, nearly half of these studies involve a small number of participants, making it challenging to generalize their findings to a broader population. Additionally, half of the studies focus on secondary school students, while the other half concentrate on tertiary-level students, with only one study including primary school students. This limits the discussion regarding the use of role play in primary education. Future research should address this gap by including more studies on primary school students.

The restricted number of reviewed studies also constrains the viewpoints on the efficacy of role-play activities in enhancing communication skills. A more expansive inquiry is imperative to thoroughly explore the multifaceted aspects of communication skills. Encompassing a broader spectrum of publications in systematic reviews could unveil a more diverse range of insights, perspectives, and potentially varying theoretical frameworks.

For future research, it is advisable to incorporate a more varied selection of publications and a wider array of participants. This approach will offer a more holistic comprehension of the effectiveness of role-play activities in augmenting students' communication skills.

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