

# OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN TEACHING SPEAKING TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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## Abstract

Developing speaking skills among young learners remains a major challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms due to linguistic limitations, anxiety, lack of confidence, and insufficient opportunities for meaningful interaction. This action research study investigated the effectiveness of role-play activities in improving speaking performance among intermediate-level young learners. The study employed a mixed-methods approach involving classroom observations, student questionnaires, teacher interviews, and pre-test/post-test speaking assessments. Fifteen students and two English teachers participated in the research. Two communicative lesson interventions based on role-play activities were implemented over a short instructional period. The findings demonstrated noticeable improvement in students' fluency, confidence, participation, and willingness to communicate in English. Students also reported reduced anxiety and increased motivation during speaking tasks. Furthermore, teachers emphasized that role-play created a more interactive and student-centered classroom environment. Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges remained, including vocabulary limitations, classroom management issues, and varying levels of learner confidence. The study concludes that role-play is an effective pedagogical strategy for overcoming speaking difficulties among young learners and recommends its integration into communicative language teaching practices.

**Keywords:** Role-play, speaking skills, young learners, communicative language teaching, action research, EFL.

## **Introduction**

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential yet difficult skills to develop in English language learning. Unlike receptive skills such as reading and listening, speaking requires learners to produce language spontaneously, organize ideas quickly, and interact confidently with others. For young learners, these demands are particularly challenging because they often possess limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical knowledge, and low self-confidence when communicating in English.

In many EFL classrooms, speaking instruction remains dominated by traditional teacher-centered methods that prioritize grammar exercises, memorization, and controlled practice rather than authentic communication. As a result, students frequently become passive learners who lack opportunities to use English meaningfully in real-life contexts. This situation often leads to hesitation, fear of making mistakes, and reduced participation in classroom discussions.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes interaction, learner participation, and meaningful communication as central components of language acquisition. Within this framework, role-play has emerged as an effective instructional strategy for developing speaking skills. Role-play activities simulate authentic social situations in which learners assume different identities and communicate for meaningful purposes. Such activities encourage students to practice vocabulary, improve fluency, negotiate meaning, and interact collaboratively with peers.

Previous studies have demonstrated the pedagogical value of role-play in language learning. Inawati (2014) argues that role-play promotes communicative competence by allowing learners to use language contextually rather than through memorization alone. Similarly, Tran, Thach, and Nguyen (2025) found that authentic role-play activities significantly improved pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary among young EFL learners. Other researchers emphasize that role-play also contributes to affective development by reducing anxiety and increasing learners' confidence and motivation.

Despite these advantages, implementing role-play activities can present practical challenges for teachers. Large class sizes, limited lesson time, classroom management concerns, and differences in learners' proficiency levels may affect the effectiveness of speaking activities. Therefore, classroom-based action

research is necessary to investigate how role-play can be implemented successfully to address speaking challenges among young learners.

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of role-play activities in improving speaking skills among young learners and to identify the main challenges associated with teaching speaking in EFL classrooms.

The study specifically focuses on identifying the major speaking difficulties experienced by young learners, examining the effectiveness of role-play activities in improving classroom participation and confidence, and evaluating the extent to which communicative speaking tasks contribute to students' speaking development. In addition, the study explores the practical challenges teachers encounter while implementing role-play activities in EFL classrooms.

To address these issues, the present study investigates the role of communicative speaking activities, particularly role-play, in supporting speaking development among young learners.

### **Literature Review**

Role-play has been extensively discussed in communicative language teaching literature as an effective strategy for developing oral communication skills. According to Inawati (2014), role-play enables learners to engage in contextualized language use and supports communicative competence through interaction. By participating in simulated real-life situations, learners are encouraged to move beyond memorization toward spontaneous language production.

Research also highlights the psychological benefits of role-play. Alwahibee (2004) and Vernon (2009) argue that role-play reduces learners' fear of making mistakes by allowing them to communicate through fictional identities rather than direct personal interaction. This creates a less threatening learning environment where students feel more comfortable experimenting with language.

Empirical studies further confirm the effectiveness of role-play in improving speaking performance. Tran, Thach, and Nguyen (2025) compared collaborative and individual role-play formats and concluded that group-based role-play significantly enhanced students' pronunciation, vocabulary use, fluency, and motivation. Similarly, Xaydarova (2025) found that role-play games increased learner creativity, interaction, and communicative confidence.

However, scholars also acknowledge several limitations associated with role-play activities. Teachers may encounter classroom management difficulties, unequal participation among learners, and time constraints when organizing communicative tasks. Furthermore, learners with low proficiency levels may require additional scaffolding and language support to participate effectively.

Overall, the literature strongly supports the integration of role-play into speaking instruction due to its ability to combine linguistic practice with communicative interaction, learner engagement, and confidence building.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a classroom-based action research design to investigate the effectiveness of role-play activities in improving speaking skills among young EFL learners. Action research was selected as the most appropriate methodological framework because it allows researchers to identify practical classroom problems, implement pedagogical interventions, and critically evaluate instructional outcomes within authentic educational contexts. The cyclical nature of action research—planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—also aligned closely with the purpose of the study, which aimed not only to examine learners' speaking difficulties but also to improve classroom practice through communicative intervention.

The research was conducted with fifteen intermediate-level lyceum students studying English as a foreign language. The participants represented learners who demonstrated moderate speaking proficiency but experienced noticeable difficulties related to fluency, vocabulary use, confidence, and active participation during oral tasks. In addition to student participants, two English language teachers with experience teaching young learners contributed to the study through semi-structured interviews designed to explore professional perspectives regarding speaking instruction and communicative activities.

To ensure methodological triangulation and increase the credibility of findings, the study employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection procedures. Classroom observations were conducted during speaking lessons to examine instructional strategies, patterns of interaction, student engagement, and classroom atmosphere during role-play implementation. Observational data provided insight into learners' behavioral responses, levels of participation, and communicative interaction throughout the intervention process.

In addition, a student questionnaire was administered following the intervention in order to explore learners' perceptions of role-play activities. The questionnaire focused on students' confidence levels, speaking challenges, classroom participation, and attitudes toward communicative speaking tasks. The questionnaire data provided valuable insight into the psychological and affective dimensions of speaking development.

Semi-structured teacher interviews were also conducted to obtain professional reflections regarding the implementation of role-play activities in speaking instruction. The interviews explored issues such as learner anxiety, classroom management, participation patterns, and the pedagogical effectiveness of communicative activities. The interview format allowed participants to elaborate on classroom experiences and provide detailed professional observations.

To measure students' speaking development more systematically, pre-test and post-test speaking assessments were administered before and after the intervention period. The speaking assessments evaluated learners according to several criteria, including fluency, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and confidence. Students responded to discussion-based speaking prompts related to familiar social and academic topics. The comparison of pre-test and post-test performance enabled the researcher to identify measurable changes in learners' speaking ability following the intervention.

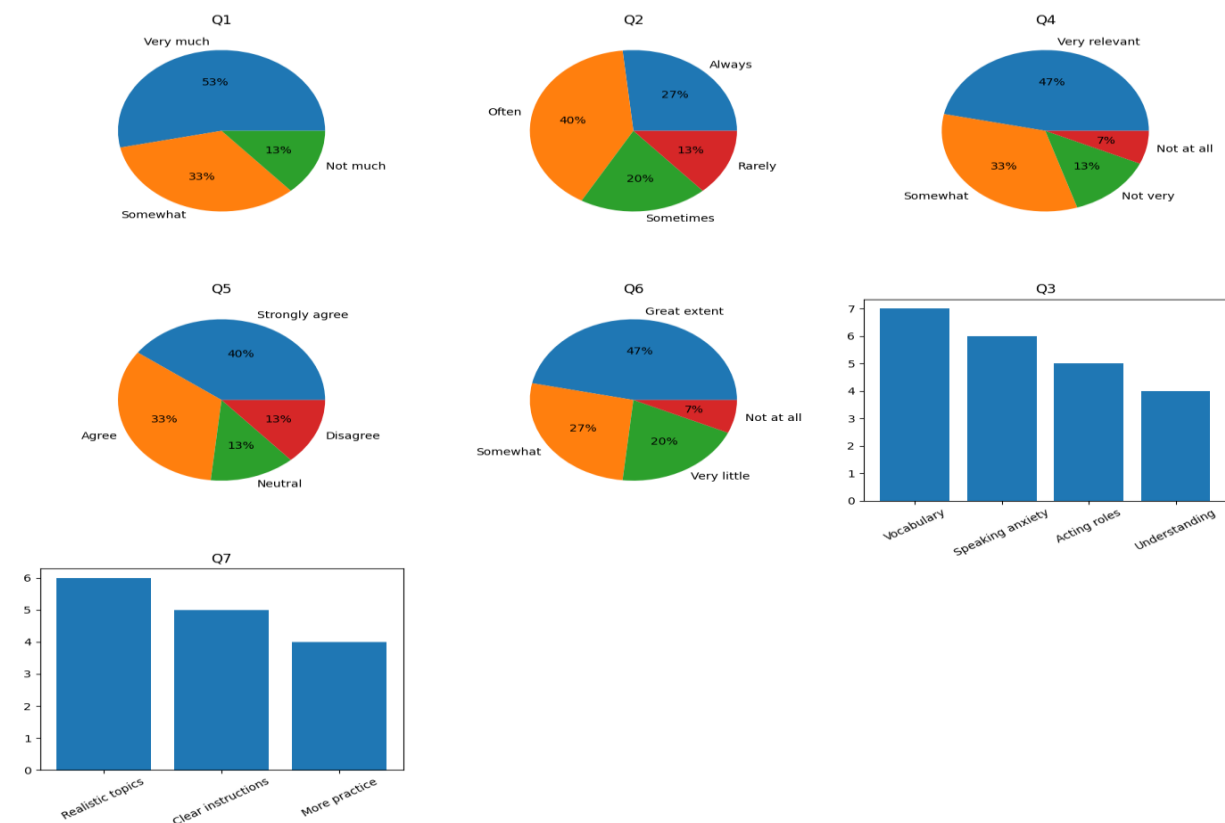
The instructional intervention was designed around communicative role-play activities intended to increase learners' opportunities for meaningful spoken interaction. Throughout the intervention period, students participated in collaborative speaking tasks based on realistic social situations requiring discussion, negotiation of meaning, and opinion exchange. The selected speaking contexts reflected familiar contemporary issues in order to encourage authentic communication and learner engagement.

During the intervention, students were encouraged to assume different social perspectives and interact with peers through structured communicative scenarios. The activities emphasized spontaneous language production rather than memorization, allowing learners to practice speaking within contextualized and interactive environments. In order to support participation, the teacher provided vocabulary scaffolding, modeled target expressions, and guided learners during interaction when necessary. Pair work and small-group discussion were incorporated throughout the intervention to promote collaboration and reduce

speaking anxiety among participants. The collected data were analyzed through a combination of descriptive and thematic analysis. Quantitative findings obtained from questionnaires and speaking assessments were interpreted through percentage comparison and score analysis, while qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to speaking anxiety, communicative confidence, participation, and classroom interaction.

Overall, the methodological framework of the study was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how role-play activities influence young learners' speaking development within authentic EFL classroom settings.

## Results (Questionnaire Findings)



The questionnaire findings demonstrate that role-play activities had a noticeably positive influence on students' speaking development, classroom participation, and overall engagement during communicative tasks. The majority of participants reported that role-play activities contributed significantly to the improvement of their speaking abilities, while only a small proportion of learners perceived limited progress. These findings suggest that communicative speaking tasks created opportunities for learners to practice English more actively and

meaningfully within classroom interaction. The positive responses further indicate that students viewed role-play as an effective strategy for developing oral communication skills and increasing participation during speaking activities.

The questionnaire data also revealed important changes in students' confidence levels during speaking activities. A considerable number of learners reported feeling more comfortable participating in oral interaction when communicative tasks involved role-play scenarios. Many students explained that assuming fictional identities or social roles reduced the pressure commonly associated with speaking English in front of peers. As a result, learners appeared more willing to express opinions, interact spontaneously, and participate actively in classroom discussions. These findings indicate that role-play activities may contribute not only to linguistic development but also to the reduction of speaking anxiety and psychological barriers that frequently limit classroom participation among young learners.

Despite the generally positive perceptions of role-play activities, the questionnaire findings also revealed several persistent challenges affecting learners' speaking performance. The most frequently identified difficulties included limited vocabulary knowledge, nervousness when speaking in front of classmates, hesitation during spontaneous interaction, and difficulty understanding or responding to certain communicative scenarios. These findings suggest that although role-play activities created supportive opportunities for communication, linguistic limitations and affective factors continued to influence learners' oral performance. In particular, vocabulary insufficiency appeared to reduce learners' ability to express ideas confidently and maintain fluent interaction during speaking tasks.

### **Interview Findings**

The interview data further supported the questionnaire and observation findings by revealing several recurring concerns related to speaking instruction among young learners. Both teachers emphasized that students frequently experience anxiety and hesitation during oral activities, particularly when they lack sufficient vocabulary or fear making mistakes in front of peers. The participants also noted that many learners tend to rely on their native language during classroom interaction because they feel more confident expressing ideas in familiar linguistic contexts.

At the same time, the teachers described role-play activities as highly beneficial for increasing learner engagement and communicative confidence. According to the interview responses, students appeared more willing to participate in speaking tasks when activities involved realistic social situations and collaborative interaction. The teachers observed that learners who were usually passive or reluctant became more active during communicative role-play tasks, particularly when they worked in pairs or small groups.

However, the interviews also highlighted several practical difficulties associated with implementing communicative speaking activities in classroom settings. Both teachers referred to classroom management and time constraints as major challenges during role-play sessions. Organizing learners, preparing materials, and maintaining balanced participation required considerable teacher guidance and instructional time.

In addition, the participants stressed the importance of scaffolding during speaking activities. Vocabulary preparation, clear demonstrations, and supportive feedback were identified as essential elements contributing to successful learner participation. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of role-play activities depends not only on the activities themselves but also on the quality of instructional support provided throughout the communicative process.

To establish learners' initial speaking proficiency and identify the specific difficulties affecting classroom participation, a diagnostic pre-test speaking assessment was administered before the instructional intervention. The assessment aimed to evaluate students' existing oral communication skills and determine the extent to which learners experienced challenges related to fluency, vocabulary use, grammatical control, pronunciation, and confidence during spoken interaction.

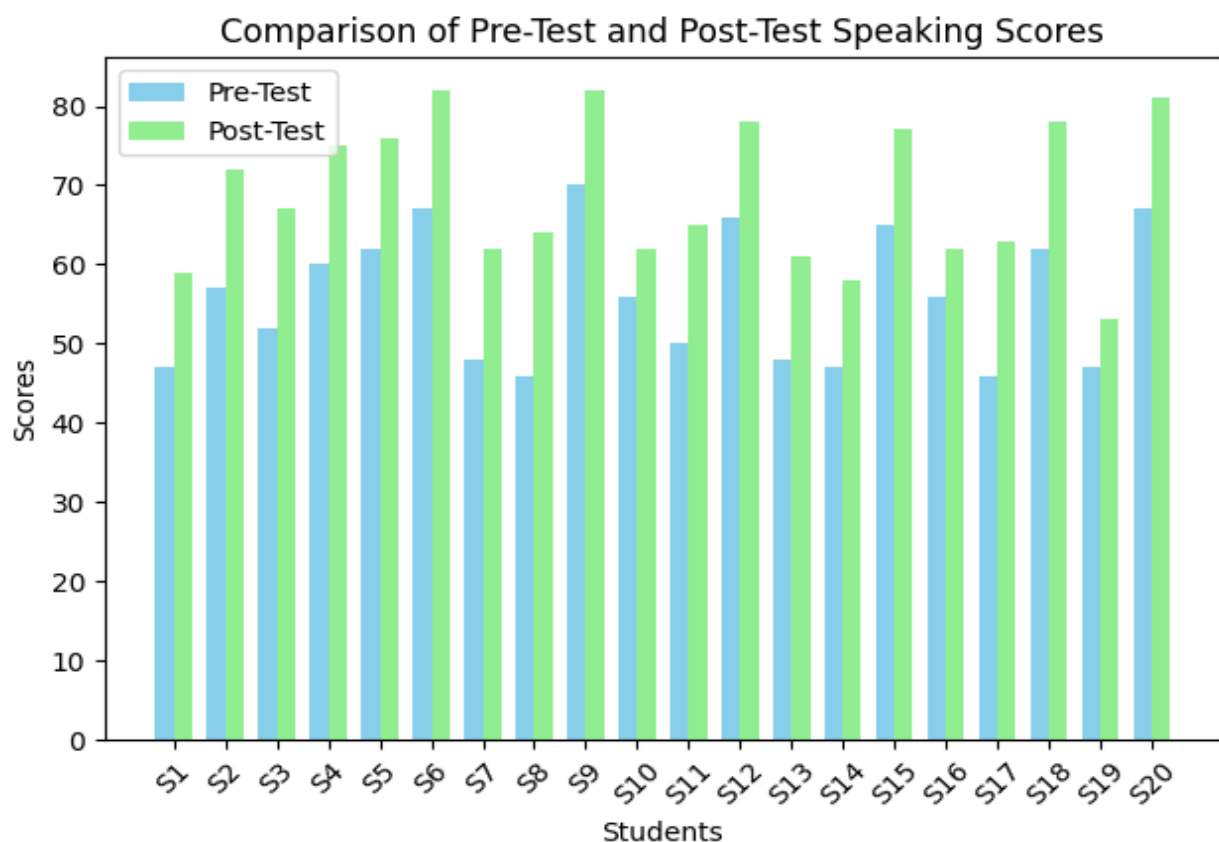
	Criteria Excellent (5)	Good (4)	Satisfactory (3)	Limited (2)
<b>Fluency</b>	Speaks smoothly with no hesitation	Minor pauses but mostly fluent	Some hesitation while speaking	Frequent pauses
<b>Vocabulary</b>	Uses a wide range of vocabulary	Adequate vocabulary	Limited vocabulary	Very basic vocabulary
<b>Grammar</b>	Use grammar accurately	Some minor grammatical errors	Several grammatical errors	Frequent errors in grammar prevent communication
<b>Pronunciation</b>	Use grammar accurately	Some minor grammatical errors	Several grammatical errors	Frequent errors in grammar prevent communication
<b>Confidence</b>	Speaks confidently and clearly	Mostly confident	Some hesitation	Low confidence

The pre-test consisted of short discussion-based speaking tasks in which students responded to open-ended questions connected to familiar educational and social topics. The tasks were selected to encourage spontaneous language production rather than memorized responses. Each student participated individually and was asked to express opinions, explain ideas, and respond to follow-up questions within a limited speaking period.

Students' oral performance was assessed using an analytic speaking rubric adapted from commonly used communicative speaking assessment criteria in EFL instruction. The rubric evaluated five dimensions of speaking performance: fluency, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and communicative confidence. Fluency referred to learners' ability to maintain speech smoothly with minimal hesitation, while vocabulary use focused on the range and appropriateness of lexical items employed during communication. Grammatical accuracy assessed the correctness and complexity of sentence structures, whereas pronunciation evaluated clarity, intelligibility, stress, and overall comprehensibility of speech. Communicative confidence measured students' willingness to participate, maintain interaction, and express ideas independently during speaking tasks. These criteria were selected because they represent essential components of communicative speaking ability and allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' oral proficiency.

Following the intervention period, a post-test assessment using similar communicative speaking tasks was conducted in order to measure potential changes in learners' speaking performance. The comparison between pre-test and post-test results enabled the researcher to examine the effectiveness of role-play activities in improving students' oral communication skills and classroom confidence.

### Pre-Test and Post-Test Findings



The comparison between pre-test and post-test assessments demonstrated noticeable improvement in students' speaking abilities following the intervention. Before the intervention, students displayed moderate speaking performance characterized by hesitation, limited fluency, and difficulty organizing ideas coherently. Many learners lacked confidence when expressing opinions in English.

Following the role-play intervention, students demonstrated improved fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and willingness to communicate. The post-test

scores revealed greater consistency among participants, indicating that weaker students also benefited from the intervention.

The findings suggest that role-play activities created a more supportive and communicative classroom environment that encouraged active language use.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study should be interpreted within the broader framework of communicative language teaching and interaction-based learning theories. The noticeable improvement in learners' speaking performance indicates that communicative activities such as role-play provide learners with meaningful opportunities to practice language in authentic contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, the results support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). During role-play activities, students interacted collaboratively, received scaffolding from teachers and peers, and gradually developed confidence in producing spoken English. The activities allowed learners to perform beyond their initial independent speaking ability through guided interaction.

The findings also align with Communicative Language Teaching principles, which emphasize learner-centered instruction, authentic communication, and fluency development. Unlike traditional grammar-focused instruction, role-play encouraged spontaneous language production and negotiation of meaning. Students became active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Another important aspect revealed by the findings is the relationship between emotional factors and speaking performance. The reduction of anxiety among students confirms that affective variables significantly influence language acquisition. Learners who initially hesitated to speak gradually became more comfortable participating in discussions after repeated exposure to supportive communicative tasks.

However, the study also demonstrates that role-play alone cannot fully solve all speaking difficulties. Some students continued to experience problems related to vocabulary limitations, pronunciation, and performance anxiety. Therefore, communicative activities should be combined with explicit language instruction, vocabulary pre-teaching, pronunciation support, and structured scaffolding.

The findings also carry important pedagogical implications for speaking instruction in EFL classrooms. The results suggest that communicative speaking

activities are most effective when learners are provided with sufficient emotional and linguistic support throughout the interaction process. Students demonstrated greater participation and confidence when classroom environments were supportive, collaborative, and focused on communication rather than accuracy alone.

The study further indicates that the success of role-play activities depends heavily on appropriate scaffolding. Learners benefited from vocabulary preparation, modeled expressions, pair interaction, and guided participation before engaging in communicative speaking tasks independently. Consequently, speaking instruction should balance communicative freedom with structured support to reduce learner anxiety and encourage more active participation.

Another important implication concerns the selection of speaking contexts. Activities based on familiar and realistic situations appeared to increase learner engagement and willingness to communicate. This suggests that contextual relevance plays a significant role in motivating young learners to participate in oral interaction.

Finally, the findings reinforce the importance of learner-centered instruction in speaking classrooms. Rather than emphasizing memorization or isolated grammar practice, communicative speaking tasks should prioritize interaction, negotiation of meaning, and authentic language use in order to support both linguistic and affective development.

Despite the positive findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study involved 20 participants within one educational context, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The intervention period was relatively short, making it difficult to measure long-term speaking development. In addition, some findings relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may contain subjective bias.

Future research could involve larger participant groups, longer intervention periods, and comparative studies examining the effectiveness of different communicative teaching strategies.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study confirm that role-play activities are effective in improving speaking skills among young EFL learners. Consistent with previous

studies, the results indicate that communicative and interactive tasks significantly enhance learners' fluency, confidence, and participation.

One of the most important findings is the improvement in learners' confidence levels. Before the intervention, many students experienced anxiety and hesitation during speaking activities. However, participation in role-play activities allowed students to communicate more freely because they were speaking through fictional roles rather than as themselves. This finding supports communicative language teaching principles emphasizing meaningful interaction and reduced learner anxiety.

The study also demonstrates that role-play contributes not only to linguistic development but also to affective development. Students became more motivated, engaged, and willing to participate in classroom communication. These findings align with the arguments presented by Alwahibee (2004) and Vernon (2009), who emphasize the motivational and psychological benefits of role-play.

Another significant finding concerns the importance of scaffolding and teacher support. Students reported that vocabulary preparation, demonstrations, and clear instructions helped them participate more confidently in communicative tasks. This suggests that role-play activities are most effective when combined with appropriate guidance and preparation.

Nevertheless, several challenges remained evident throughout the study. Some students continued to experience difficulties related to vocabulary limitations and speaking anxiety. Additionally, teachers identified classroom management and preparation time as major obstacles. These findings indicate that while role-play is beneficial, its successful implementation requires careful planning and effective classroom organization.

Overall, the findings strongly support the integration of role-play into EFL speaking instruction. By creating opportunities for authentic interaction, role-play helps learners develop communicative competence while simultaneously reducing psychological barriers associated with speaking.

### **Academic Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the growing body of research emphasizing the importance of communicative and student-centered approaches in EFL instruction. The research provides practical classroom-based evidence

demonstrating that role-play can effectively address both linguistic and psychological barriers associated with speaking.

Furthermore, the study is particularly relevant within the context of young learner education because it highlights the importance of interaction, collaboration, and emotional support in language acquisition. The findings may be useful for English teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum designers, and researchers interested in improving speaking instruction in EFL classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

This action research study investigated the effectiveness of role-play activities in overcoming challenges associated with teaching speaking to young learners. The findings demonstrate that role-play is a highly effective instructional strategy for improving speaking performance, increasing confidence, and encouraging active classroom participation.

The study identified several barriers affecting speaking development, including limited vocabulary, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence. However, the intervention showed that communicative role-play activities could successfully address many of these difficulties by creating meaningful and supportive opportunities for interaction.

The comparison between pre-test and post-test assessments revealed measurable improvement in students' fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and communicative confidence. Furthermore, both teachers and students expressed positive attitudes toward the use of role-play activities in speaking instruction.

Despite these positive outcomes, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a relatively small sample size and was conducted within a single educational context, limiting the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the intervention period was relatively short.

Future research could involve larger participant groups, longer intervention periods, and comparative analysis of different communicative teaching strategies. Nevertheless, the present study provides practical evidence supporting the integration of role-play into modern EFL classrooms.

In conclusion, role-play should be considered an essential component of communicative language teaching for young learners because it promotes authentic interaction, increases learner confidence, and enhances speaking proficiency.

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