



Improving Students Speaking Skills Through Role Play at Junior High School

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Abstract

This classroom action research aimed to improve the English-speaking skills of ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan within the framework of Kurikulum Merdeka. The study addressed two key objectives: (1) examining how role-play enhances speaking proficiency, and (2) exploring students' perceptions of the method. Using Kemmis and McTaggart's action research model which was conducted over two cycles involving 23 students serving as the respondents of this study. Data were collected through observations and questionnaire distribution. To back up the gathered data, pre-test and 2 post-tests were conducted. The gathered data were analyzed with the utilization of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The findings demonstrate that the implementation of role-play significantly improved students' speaking performance, as evidenced by the progressive increase in test scores across pre-test, post-test cycle 1, and post-test cycle 2. Questionnaire responses indicated overwhelmingly positive perceptions, with students reporting reduced anxiety and increased confidence. Observational data further revealed enhanced communicative competence, greater spontaneity, and stronger peer collaboration. The results strongly suggest that structured role-play activities can effectively foster both linguistic and affective development in an EFL classroom setting. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by demonstrating the efficacy of sustained role-play implementation in an Indonesian EFL context, aligning with Kurikulum Merdeka's communicative objectives. It also highlights the importance of iterative practice and peer collaboration in reducing speaking anxiety, a finding that extends previous research.

1. Introduction

English has four skills to be mastered; reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Out of those skills, speaking is seen as one of the most complicated to master (Abrar et al., 2018). Due to that, extra efforts were supposed to be done to cope with the difficulty. Despite it, multiple problems existed instead. Students tend to keep silent due to lack of motivation to express their idea, feel afraid and embarrassed because they were not confident enough, heavily being influenced by their mother tongue, and insufficient speaking practice activities (Fadillah, 2020; Hibatullah, 2019; Riadil, 2019).

Furthermore, teaching speaking consumes more teacher's energy. It has been indicated that teachers were not allocating enough time to teach speaking in English classes because they prefer teaching grammar to productive skills such as speaking and writing (Riadil, 2020). and struggling to assess speaking skill since they were accustomed to pencil and paper test method to assess the students' achievement (Zaim et al., 2020). In addition, teachers often select topics that were inappropriate and/or not familiar to the student, as the result, lack of student participation is inevitable. (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

These were challenges for English teachers in junior high schools considering that the very first Learning Outcomes required based on Kulikulum Merdeka in phase D is Listening-Speaking (Capaian Pembelajaran Kurikulum Merdeka, 2024). The curriculum expects learners use English to interact and exchange ideas, experiences, interests, opinions, and views with teachers, peers, and others in a variety of formal and informal familiar contexts. Learners engage in discussion, give opinions, make comparisons, and/or express preferences. Learners explain and clarify their answers using simple sentence structures and verbs in English. Undoubtably, the initial element in the English learning outcomes of junior high school phase D students is speaking English.

When considering the English learning outcomes that focus on student interaction and exchanging ideas both formally and non-formally, the learning model that is suitable to be integrated with the curriculum is through games. Games reduced anxiety or fear of making mistake compared to conventional English learning practices (Pituxcoosuvann et al., 2024). In the Merdeka Curriculum, the game model is included in Discovery Learning. The game model in Discovery Learning discovered by Bruner in 1961 is role-playing (Yunizha, 2023).

Previous research shows the positive effects of role-playing on improving students' speaking skills. First, the role-playing approach improves students' communication skills and active participation in the teaching and learning process. As opportunities for sharing and discourse increase, the engagement dynamics between educators and learners, as well as among learners themselves, become more active and intellectually stimulating. Secondly, role-playing effectively improves students' communication skills. This is based on their vocal performances that effectively meet the success criteria and minimum grades, as

well as students' active participation that reaches the minimum standard (Arifin, 2021; Henisah, Margana, et al., 2023; Togimin & Jaafar, 2020).

Given the inherent challenges in developing speaking skills among junior high school students, compounded by the specific demands of the Kurikulum Merdeka's emphasis on interactive and communicative language use, it is imperative to implement pedagogical strategies that directly address these issues. Role-play, as a game-based approach within the Discovery Learning framework, offers a promising avenue for creating a dynamic, engaging, and less anxiety-inducing learning environment.

By simulating real-life scenarios and encouraging active participation, role-play not only aligns with the curriculum's focus on interaction and idea exchange, but also provides students with the necessary practice to build confidence and fluency. Therefore, to bridge the gap between the curriculum's expectations and the students' current speaking abilities at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan, and to directly address the identified challenges of anxiety, lack of motivation, and insufficient practice, this study investigated the effectiveness of role-play as a means to improve the speaking skills of ninth-grade students through classroom action research.

The diagnostic findings highlighted significant obstacles in the students' ability to develop their English-speaking skills, particularly in terms of confidence, fluency, and willingness to participate. Many ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan were reluctant to speak because they felt anxious, feared making mistakes, and often required translation before responding. These issues were intensified by limited exposure to English communication, low motivation, and insufficient interactive practice during lessons.

Considering these challenges, an instructional approach that reduces anxiety, increases engagement, and provides authentic opportunities for communication becomes essential. Role-play offers such advantages because it immerses students in meaningful, real-life situations that encourage spontaneous interaction and gradual improvement in fluency. By simulating everyday conversations, role-play aligns with communicative teaching principles and provides students the practice they need to develop confidence in speaking English.

To address the gap between the students' current proficiency and the expected learning outcomes outlined in the curriculum, this classroom action research implemented role-play as the primary strategy for enhancing speaking skills. The approach required students to work collaboratively, perform assigned scenarios, and reflect on their experiences, creating a learning environment that was both communicative and supportive.

Through continuous cycles of practice, feedback, and evaluation, students were encouraged to overcome their fear of speaking and actively participate in English dialogues. This method not only aimed to improve their fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary but also to strengthen their motivation and reduce

speaking anxiety. Ultimately, the study investigated how role-play could effectively support ninth-grade students in developing stronger communicative competence and greater confidence in using English in classroom interactions.

Considering the gap identified between the desired speaking proficiency outlined by the Kurikulum Merdeka and the actual classroom situation at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan, this study sought to investigate potential improvements. Therefore, the research problems guiding this investigation could be formulated as follow: 1) How can the implementation of the role-play method improve the English-speaking skills of ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan? 2) What are the ninth-grade students' perceptions of using the role-play method for learning English speaking skills at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan?

This classroom action research aimed to examine the implementation of the role-play method to improve the English-speaking skills of ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan and to explore their perceptions of using this method in learning. The study was expected to benefit multiple stakeholders: students would gain a more engaging and less anxiety-inducing opportunity to practice speaking, enhancing proficiency, confidence, and motivation; English teachers could gain practical, evidence-based insights for designing interactive speaking activities aligned with the Kurikulum Merdeka; the school could obtain valuable data to inform teaching strategies, curriculum development, and teacher professional development; and other researchers could build on this study as a reference for future investigations into role-play or interactive, game-based methods in Indonesian EFL contexts.

2. Method

This study employed Kemmis & McTaggart's action research model with two cycles, chosen for its participatory, iterative, and reflective nature, allowing continuous improvement through planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The research took place at SMP Negeri 2 Dusun Selatan, Buntok, from July 1st to August 31st, 2025, with learning sessions twice a week, each lasting 80 minutes. The study involved 24 ninth-grade students (14 males, 10 females), aged 14–16, with beginner-level English proficiency. Observations indicated varied learning styles, moderate participation, limited vocabulary retention, and low speaking confidence, making role-play an appropriate method for engaging learners in active participation.

The research followed four phases per cycle: planning, action, observation, and reflection. During planning, lesson modules aligned with Kurikulum Merdeka were prepared, including role-play scenarios relevant to daily life, along with pre-tests to assess baseline speaking skills. In the action phase, students were divided into small groups to perform scripted role-plays over five sessions per cycle, with vocabulary support provided before and during activities. Observation was systematically conducted using cameras and observation sheets to record fluency,

confidence, and participation, while reflection involved post-tests, questionnaires, peer feedback, and student suggestions to identify areas for improvement.

In the second cycle, refinements were made based on first-cycle findings, such as simplifying scenarios, incorporating visual aids, extending preparation time, and rotating roles more frequently. Post-tests and observations continued to track improvements, with success defined as students achieving the school’s passing grade (KKTP) and displaying increased confidence, fluency, and participation. Data collection included both qualitative data (observations, recordings, notes) and quantitative data (pre-tests, post-tests, and a 10-item Guttman scale questionnaire), providing a comprehensive view of students’ progress and perceptions of role-play.

Data analysis combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data were analyzed using Reflective Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), emphasizing the researcher’s engagement with the data to construct meaningful themes. Quantitative data, including questionnaire responses and speaking assessment scores, were analyzed using percentage calculations and converted into qualitative descriptions to interpret students’ engagement and outcomes. Together, these analyses offered a thorough evaluation of role-play’s effectiveness in enhancing speaking skills at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan.

3. Results

1. Questionnaire Outcome

In the post-intervention phase in cycle 2, student perceptions of the role-play activities were captured using a 10-item Guttman-scale questionnaire. All 23 participants completed the instrument, yielding a 100% response rate. The binary YES/NO data were converted into percentages according to Arikunto’s (2010) formula and interpreted through Azis et al.’s (2024) descriptive categories. The questionnaire results (n = 23) were shown below. Percentages were rounded to one decimal place.

Statement	Yes	No	Yes Percentage	No Percentage
S1.	23	0	100%	0%
S2.	21	2	91.3%	8.7%
S3.	23	0	100%	0%
S4.	23	0	100%	0%
S5.	22	1	95.7%	4.3%
S6.	23	0	100%	0%
S7.	23	0	100%	0%
S8.	21	2	91.3%	8.7%
S9.	23	0	100%	0%
S10.	23	0	100%	0%

Seven of the ten questionnaire items were marked “YES” by all 23 respondents, yielding a 100.0% agreement rate for each. According to the response-interpretation criteria, a 100% “YES” rate falls under the “all” category; all agreed to statement 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10. For S5 (“I feel less afraid of making mistakes during role-play than in regular speaking practice”), 22 students answered “YES” and 1 answered “NO,” resulting in a 95.7% “YES” rate and 4.3% “NO” rate. A “YES” percentage between 75% and 100% (but below 100%) is classified as “almost all.” Based on this category, almost all agreed to the statement 5.

Both S2 (“I clearly understand the instructions for the role-play activities”) and S8 (“Role-play makes me more confident speaking English in front of others”) received 21 “YES” responses and 2 “NO” responses, corresponding to a 91.3% “YES” rate and an 8.7% “NO” rate for each. These 91.3% “YES” values also fall into the “almost all” category. Hence, it is concluded that almost all agreed to statement 2 and 8. These overwhelmingly positive perceptions indicate that students not only valued the relevance and interactivity of role-play but also recognized its impact on their language development. The slight dips in S2 and S8 suggest areas for instructional refinement—namely, clearer procedural guidance and additional confidence-building scaffolds.

2. *Observation and Reflection*

This analysis examines the progression of student learning across ten role-play sessions, structured in two cycles of five meetings each. The observations reveal significant development in students' communicative competence, confidence, and collaborative skills, demonstrating how repeated practice and scaffolded challenges facilitated gradual improvement. Initially, students exhibited heavy reliance on scripts and teacher guidance, particularly during the first three meetings. Low-proficiency learners, such as Aja Kasuma Diwa and Muhamad Saputra, hesitated frequently, often pausing to check notes or seek peer assistance.

However, by the second cycle, a shift toward spontaneous communication became evident. Students who once struggled to deviate from memorized dialogues began improvising responses, incorporating newly learned phrases naturally. For example, in later sessions, even initially hesitant participants like Putra Aditya started volunteering to perform first—a marked contrast to their earlier reluctance.

Figure 7 Group role-play performance by the volunteering students



Confidence emerged as a critical factor influencing participation. Early observations noted visible anxiety among less proficient students, with some avoiding eye contact or whispering responses. Over time, however, learners developed strategies to manage hesitation, such as using stall phrases ("Let me think...") or self-correcting without embarrassment. By the final sessions, mistakes—which once elicited nervous laughter—were treated as normal parts of the learning process. This shift was particularly evident in moments like Elizabeth's

quick recovery after mispronouncing a word, demonstrating increased linguistic resilience.

Peer collaboration also evolved significantly. Initially, high-achieving students like Aisyah and Klara dominated discussions, while others remained passive. Yet, as the sessions progressed, natural mentoring relationships formed. Yizreel, for instance, was observed guiding Rizki through gestures without teacher prompting, illustrating how role-play fostered a supportive learning community. This dynamic not only improved individual performance but also encouraged collective problem-solving, as seen when students negotiated cultural misunderstandings independently in later meetings.



The teacher's role transitioned from directive to facilitative across the two cycles. Early sessions required extensive modeling and error correction, but by the second half, the focus shifted toward guiding reflection and encouraging self-assessment. Introducing surprise challenges in Meeting 5 proved pivotal, pushing students beyond rehearsed dialogues and into adaptive communication. Subsequent sessions saw learners employing more sophisticated language, including expressions of empathy and nuanced negotiation—skills that extended beyond linguistic accuracy into pragmatic competence.

Key turning points, such as the first unprompted use of empathetic language (Aziza in Meeting 7) or the collaborative resolution of cultural dilemmas (Meeting 9), illustrated the intervention's success in fostering real-world communicative skills. These moments underscored that progress was not merely about grammatical accuracy but about developing the flexibility to navigate authentic interactions.



Moving forward, the findings suggest three key adjustments: First, gradually reducing scripted support while maintaining accessible aids like word banks. Second, incorporating structured reflection to consolidate learning, and the third, tailoring challenges to individual proficiency levels to sustain engagement. The most meaningful outcome, however, was the transformation in students' attitudes—from fear of mistakes to a willingness to experiment, reflecting a classroom culture where language became a tool for connection rather than perfection.



3. Student's Speaking Assessment

Speaking performance was measured at three points: pre-test, post-test Cycle 1, and post-test Cycle 2 (n = 23). Below is the complete data set of the participant identity and their gained score.

No.	Name	Pre-test score	Post-test cycle 1	Post-test cycle 2
1	Aisyah	67	82	90
2	Aja Kasuma Diwa	53	75	83
3	Alex Berry	53	83	80
4	Arumi Kusumawati	57	83	87
5	Aziza Azahra	65	83	88
6	Elizabeth Tiraini	67	80	88
7	Febrian	55	82	87
8	Filipi Haratinu	58	80	87
9	Jovita Celestyna	63	82	90
10	Keysa Aditrianto	55	77	87
11	Klara	72	83	90
12	Laura Graziani	57	77	82
13	Muhamad Aini	52	75	82
14	Muhamad Angga S.	53	75	83
15	Muhamad Khairul Aby	53	75	83
16	Muhamad Saputra A.	52	75	80
17	Nur Era Aprita	73	83	92
18	Nurul Aspia	57	77	82
19	Putra Aditya	53	75	82
20	Riordan Marsello	58	75	83
21	Rizki Aditya	53	77	80
22	Rizky Ramadhan	58	78	85
23	Yizreel A.Rachman	73	83	93

An analysis of the scores from all 23 participants revealed a clear and consistent upward trend in speaking ability over the course of the study. In the pre-test, student scores were clustered in the 50s and 60s, with the lowest score being 52 and the highest 73 and average 53. The implementation of the first intervention cycle resulted in a marked improvement in the post-test Cycle 1 scores. Most students achieved scores in the 70s and 80s with average score of 79, demonstrating a significant jump from their initial abilities.

Following the second intervention cycle, the post-test Cycle 2 scores showed further improvement, with the majority of students scoring in the 80s and several achieving scores in the 90s with average score reaching 85. The lowest score in the final post-test was an 80, which was higher than the pre-test scores of many

students. Notable individual progress was observed, for instance, in students like Yizreel A. Rachman, whose score increased from 73 in the pre-test to 93 in the final post-test. Similarly, students who began with scores in the low 50s, such as Muhamad Aini and Aja Kąsunga Diwa, showed substantial growth, ending with scores of 82 and 83 respectively.

Overall, the data indicated that the interventions applied in both cycles were associated with a progressive and positive impact on the students' speaking performance, with each assessment point recording a higher distribution of scores than the last.

4. Discussion

The findings from the questionnaire, observations, and speaking assessments collectively demonstrate that the implementation of role-play activities was highly effective in enhancing students' speaking skills and fostering a more positive and proactive learning environment. The triangulation of these data sources provides a robust picture of not only the quantitative improvement in scores but also the qualitative shifts in classroom dynamics and student psychology that underpinned this progress. The steady and significant rise in speaking test scores from the pre-test to the post-tests in Cycles 1 and 2 provides clear quantitative evidence of the intervention's success.

This numerical improvement, however, is fully explained and given context by the observational data. The initial clustering of pre-test scores in the 50s and 60s corresponded directly with the early observations of student anxiety, heavy reliance on scripts, and hesitation. The jump into the 70s and low 80s in Post-test Cycle 1 aligned with the observed "shift toward spontaneous communication" and the developing strategies to manage hesitation.

The final progression to scores predominantly in the 80s and 90s in Post-test Cycle 2 mirrors the observed transformation in students' attitudes and abilities. As noted in the reflections, mistakes became a normalized part of learning, and students began experimenting with more sophisticated language, such as empathy and negotiation. The remarkable individual progress of students like Yizreel A. Rachman (from 73 to 93) and Aja Kasuma Diwa (from 53 to 83) is a testament to how the role-play activities successfully supported learners across the proficiency spectrum, enabling both high-achievers and initially hesitant students to excel. The discussion must highlight that the success of this intervention was not solely linguistic but also profoundly affective.

The questionnaire results were critical here, revealing that the role-play technique was perceived by students as a key factor in reducing speaking anxiety and building confidence. Statements S5 ("I feel less afraid of making mistakes during role-play") and S8 ("Role-play makes me more confident speaking English in front of others"), both affirmed by "almost all" students, directly address the primary psychological barriers to speaking fluency.

This quantitative perception is vividly supported by the observational notes. The evolution from students "avoiding eye contact or whispering responses" to "volunteering to perform first" and recovering seamlessly from errors illustrates a fundamental shift. The classroom culture evolved from one focused on "perfection" to one embracing "connection" and experimentation, which is the ideal environment for language acquisition to flourish. A key finding from the observations was the natural development of peer collaboration and a reduction in teacher-centered instruction.

The emergence of natural mentoring relationships, where students like Yizreel guided peers without prompting, indicates that the role-play activities fostered a supportive learning community. This collaborative spirit likely contributed to the overall score improvement by providing low-proficiency students with more opportunities for practice and support in a low-stakes setting.

Concurrently, the teacher's role successfully transitioned from "directive to facilitative." This shift was crucial for fostering learner autonomy. By Cycle 2, the focus on guiding reflection and introducing "surprise challenges" pushed students beyond memorized dialogues, forcing them to employ adaptive communication strategies. This directly explains the progression to higher-order speaking skills observed in the final sessions and reflected in the superior Post-test Cycle 2 scores. The observational reflections already propose three key adjustments that were strongly supported by the overall results: reducing scripted support gradually, incorporating structured reflection, and tailoring challenges to individual levels. These strategies would further optimize the balance between challenge and support, ensuring continuous engagement and growth for all students.

5. Conclusion

This study successfully achieved its three research objectives by implementing role-play in teaching speaking skills to ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Dusun Selatan. First, role-play significantly improved students' English-speaking skills, as evidenced by the average speaking score increasing from 59 in the pre-test to 85 in the post-test. This progress resulted from repeated, scaffolded practice in authentic scenarios that helped students transition from scripted dialogues to spontaneous speech, normalized mistakes to reduce anxiety, built confidence through peer collaboration, and encouraged the use of higher-order communicative strategies such as negotiation and empathy. Second, students' perceptions were overwhelmingly positive: all participants (100%) enjoyed collaborative role-play and wanted more such activities, while 91.3% reported improved confidence, confirming the method's effectiveness in reducing speaking anxiety.

The study concludes that role-play is an effective and engaging strategy for enhancing both linguistic competence (fluency, accuracy) and psychosocial factors (confidence, motivation) in EFL contexts, aligning well with the communicative

approach of Kurikulum Merdeka. Although generalizability may be limited, the consistent positive outcomes across all measures strongly support the continued use and further investigation of role-play in similar educational settings.

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