

## Role Play to Improve ESL Learners' Communication Skills: A Systematic Review

Suaibatul Aslamiah Ishak<sup>1,2</sup>, Azlina Abdul Aziz<sup>1</sup>

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia<sup>1</sup>, Sekolah Kebangsaan Hulu Kelang, Malaysia<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

The used of role play in classroom allows students to act out a situation or adopt the role of someone else in order for them to practice their communication skills. When compared to other language abilities such as reading, and writing, communication skill is said to be the most challenging skill to learn. This study includes a systematic assessment of 20 relevant published studies from Google Scholar, Research Gate, Semantic Scholar, Academia, SAGE, ProQuest and Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database on the use of role play in the classroom to improve ESL students' communication abilities from the year 2011 to 2021. The goal of this study is to see how successful role-playing is at helping ESL learners improve their communication abilities. The results show that role-playing influenced and improved students' speaking abilities, particularly fluency, understanding, context, and interactive ability. Other than this, role play can also assist students gain confidence in their ability to communicate in English and increase their drive to speak English in the classroom. Future research and practise objectives, as well as the limits in regards to prior pertinent studies were more thoroughly evaluated.

**Keywords:** Role Play, ESL Learners, Communication Skills, Confidence, Motivation, Interactive, Speaking English

### Introduction

Since the world is rapidly moving toward the new era of digitalisation and world without boundaries, English language is becoming increasingly important for many individuals around the world in order for them to interact and communicate with each other. As a result, future generations should be well-versed in the English language in order to meet the difficulties of the twenty-first century world. Consequently, communication skills become a fundamental ability that students must master in order to become competent members of society in this modern period. Perren et al (2017) stated that as people need to engage with a large number of people in society, language and communication abilities are maybe the most crucial aspect of social life. Communication is the act of exchanging ideas, facts, feelings, and attitudes between two or more people. As a result, communication is the most fundamental and

important aspect of forming and maintaining human relationships (Kim et al., 2020). As communication dominates other skills like reading and writing when it comes to its usage in our daily life, it proves that becoming proficient in communicating with others is very important aspect in life. Because conversation underlies learning and thinking, students' capacity to speak and listen is critical to their linguistic and social development. Furthermore, as communication is one of the 4C's of 21st century skills; thus, it has emphasised the significant of the skill. Due of this, the primary motivation for the administration of many countries to guarantee the development of students' communication skills is represented in the educational policies in order to produce proficient English language speakers (Paneerselvam and Mohamad, 2019).

The process of learning and mastering English is hampered by a lack of confidence and anxiousness while speaking in a second language. Inadequate practise in speaking the second language in everyday life, along with the fact that most students prefer to talk in their native tongue in class, makes the process of becoming proficient in communication skills difficult. According to Hashim and Isa (2012), factors that may lead to the uneasiness and difficulties of speaking a second language rather than one's native tongue include a limited vocabulary, a lack of self-confidence, and an absence of exposure to the language in a learning environment and community. The issues that students experience may be verbal or non-linguistic in nature, such as elements that arise from within the inner self. Low self-esteem can lead to a lack of confidence in one's ability to communicate (Zakaria et al., 2019). As a result, teachers play a crucial role in assisting students in identifying appropriate methods and learning techniques in order for them to improve their communication skills. Sequentially, when assisting students to develop communication skills, a suitable language learning environment that provides a conducive and pleasant setting for them to battle their fear and anxiety when using the second language is also required. Hashim et al (2019) in their studies stated that students will be able to master the language verbally and in writing if they use the right learning methodologies.

Yet, in terms of teaching communication skills, the key question remains: Which methods are most effective in assisting those folks in learning the abilities that they are necessary to master? For young learners, fun and relax environment where they can loosen up and not forced to learn the language will be more preferable when learning a new language. This will help them to feel less anxious and improve their motivation when trying to acquire the new language and consequently improving their communication skills. When teaching a second language, teachers should not dominate the classroom and should not do all of the talking. It will be more difficult for students to build their communication skills if they are not provided opportunities to communicate in the classroom and are not involved in student-centred activities. Torky (2006) points this out in his study where most of the time, teachers monopolise the session by talking and explaining things incessantly, demotivating students to become active speakers and dominant in speaking lessons. Thus, we can conclude that one of effective approaches to have students learn the target language is to have them talk during classroom activities.

In Malaysia, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was introduced and it emphasised greatly on the ability of students to communicate using the English language. Thus, more emphasise is given on the teaching of listening and speaking

skills. Students' 'communicative needs,' which include dealing with day-to-day activities, expressing information and ideas, and obtaining a larger and deeper international understanding, are highlighted in the CEFR text (Cambridge, 2011). Target language acquisition, according to Vani et al., (2022), is the ability of a speaker to use a second language productively and meaningfully in a truthful communication setting. Role-playing exercises, for example, can be more helpful than other activities in developing pupils' conversational abilities. Other than that, it also provides opportunity for students to use and practice their second language in a fun and meaningful way. As a result of this practice, students will have countless chance to discuss using the target language in the classroom through collaborative tasks and shared information. Role play, for example, can significantly improve students' speaking abilities since it allows them to practise real-life speech in an ESL classroom (Togimin and Jaafar, 2020).

### **Research Objectives and Research Questions**

The main objective of this systematic review is to analyse and synthesise past research studies between the year 2010 to 2022 taken from the Google Scholar database on the efficacy of role play as a teaching strategy for improving ESL learners' communication skills. Aside from this, this study is also conducted in order to answer these two research questions;

(a) How effective is role play as teaching strategy in improving ESL learners' communication skills? (b) What are the challenges faced by educators when managing role play activity in classroom?

### **Literature Review**

#### *Communication Skills*

In the study of languages, communication skill is highly significant. "Speaking is as important to an individual's living processes and experiences as the ability to see and walk," says Rayhan (2014). Speaking in this context is seen as the most natural method of communication. Lucanus (2017) stated that good communication skills can help to foster the socialising process. It entails using the channel of speech to communicate one's thoughts and beliefs to another person. Students that are able to communicate successfully can form strong bonds with one another. Communication is made up of verbal, nonverbal, and paraverbal components. The verbal component includes the words we use and the way we arrange them in our speech. The nonverbal component refers to the information we convey through our mannerisms and gestures. The tone, speed, and volume of our voices when we speak are all examples of the paraverbal component (Windle & Warren, 2017). Communication requires both verbal and nonverbal abilities. However, compared to non-verbal skills, verbal skills receive greater attention. Yet, in order to deliver the proper message, each part of nonverbal competence is interconnected with verbal talent (Samat et al., 2019). Thus, through activities like role-playing, students can practice both verbal and non-verbal components of their communication skills by conveying message through the dialogues and also, the movement of body, facial expression and gestures.

Speaking ability is a problem among most Malaysian primary school students when it comes to classroom communication. Although pupils start studying English at 6 years of age, as evidenced by the Malaysian scenario, their English competence is not encouraging sufficiently (Azman, 2016). The Communicative Approach has been introduced into the

Malaysian school curriculum through the English subject since 1988, with all four skills being incorporated to accomplish the purpose of developing employees who are compatible with communication abilities (Mansor, 2015). Despite this, Malaysians' performance in speech and communication is at best doubtful after more than two decades of implementation. The influence of the first language is one of the many reasons why students are unable to speak the language (Misbah, Mohamad, Yunus, & Yaacob, 2017). As students are more comfortable communicating in their mother tongue whether inside the classroom or outside of it, it may hamper the continuous effort to help them improve in the acquisition of English language. Thus, it is very important for teachers to create an environment where students will be comfortable and interested to learn the second language. Due to the fact that Malaysians' English ability is still very lacking, particularly in the communicative sector, we can say that oral skill development exercises in Malaysian schools are still insufficient.

### *Role Play*

Role play, according to the Oxford Dictionary (2015), is “performing in the role of a certain person or character, such as in training or psychotherapy”. Role-playing is a well-known approach for assisting pupils in acclimating to new social situations. Role-playing teaches students how to perform in front of a crowd, which is something they will have to do outside of the classroom (Abdul Rahman and Maarof, 2018). Neupane (2019) stated that a drama-like classroom exercise wherein participants put on certain persona or roles of several individuals in a scene and act out what may happen in that setting can be referred as role play. For example, when students are practising giving instructions in second language, they might need to role play as tourist and a policeman. This provides great opportunity for students to practice the language as one of the effective approaches for having students learn the target language is to have them talk during classroom activities. In his studies, Nga (2011) stated role-playing is an approach in which students act out a part that is so close to actual life that it must be carried out in compliance with the role card. It involves using one's creativeness to imagine and temporarily assume the identity of another person or one's own in a given circumstance, inventing dialogue, and setting up hypothetical situations that takes place in the real world.

As interaction between students are formed through this activity, it is understandable why Kusnierek (2015) defined role play as a “comprehensive set of communication techniques that improves language fluency and encourages student participation in the classroom, while also raising students' motivation and encouraging them to study while also sharing duties between instructor and students”. Qing (2011) stated that role plays can last anywhere from five to fifteen minutes, depending on the class's level, specific goals, and prerequisites. Porter-Ladousse (1987, as cited in Kusnierek, 2015) also points out that role-playing can vary in complexity, with some utterances being quite structured and others being very short and simple. As a result, the difficulty of the exercise is determined by the language level of the students.

### **Advantages of Role-playing**

Our students' personal growth benefits greatly from role play. Students' role-playing skills and qualities that has been developed through the implementation of this activity will progress into attributes such as collaboration, creativity, leadership, and risk-taking which are valuable assets in many subjects and sectors of life. Role play engages students'

imaginations while providing a secure and supportive setting for them to explore challenges and experiences (Angelianawati, 2019). When students were given a setting to role play in, they worked hard to come up with acceptable words to express their opinions and thoughts in order to communicate. As they prepared for the play, they were able to regain their confidence while simultaneously improving their proficiency in the target language. Learners can use the target language in a non-threatening environment when they participate in role-plays, either because it is a rehearsal of real-life events or because they are not portraying themselves (Saad and Mansor, 2019). Thus, it improves their motivation when using the second language. Observation made by Islam and Islam (2013) while researching the effects of role play on students, they discovered that role-playing was highly motivating because it was different from the monotonous lecture-based activities they were used to. Students were shown to get a distinct experience relating to their lives and other social situations as a result of this activity, which encouraged them to become less inflexible in their behaviour.

According to Razali and Ismail (2017), the benefits of role-playing include the ability to introduce functions, structures, and vocabulary, which can lead to new experiences for students, as well as the ability to strengthen phatic forms of language and provide assistance to many shy students. In a study by Krisdiana et al (2018), as they combined role play activity with word cards, the researchers discovered that it was beneficial in enhancing oral proficiency, grammatical accuracy, articulation, and vocabulary. Meanwhile, Alabsi (2016) in her studies found out that by utilising a role-playing technique in EFL lessons, it is beneficial and more effective than standard vocabulary instruction. The outcome of her studies is in line with prior research indicating that role-playing is an excellent method for improving student vocabulary achievement in particular and learning English language in general (Toumpaniari et al., 2015, Sadeghi & Sharifi, 2013; Nair et al., 2014). Due to the fact that students had no prior expertise with the language, students were apprehensive about speaking out loud in front of a large group. According to research done by Yousef, Jamil, and Razak (2013), most Malaysian students lack the confidence to speak due to their own nervousness. Thus, through the implementation of role play, students can practice using the target language in a less-stressful environment and they can express themselves freely in a fun and meaningful classroom activity.

### **Methodology**

Utilizing the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), this systematic review was carried out. For this evaluation, the PRISMA 2020 statement, which replaces the 2009 statement and has updated reporting guidelines that take into account recent improvements in approaches for finding, choosing, evaluating, and synthesising research, was utilised (Page et al., 2021). In order to conduct this review, the PRISMA 2020, 27-item checklist, which is an enlarged checklist that specifies reporting guidelines for each item, the PRISMA 2020 abstract checklist, and the revised flow diagrams for original and updated reviews was used as a guide throughout the process of completing the systematic review.

The first step, which involved planning the review, was completed in order to determine the necessity for a systematic review regarding this topic and to design a review procedure. Then I moved on to the next step, which was to execute an analysis to find relevant studies that looked into the issue of role play's effectiveness in developing students' communication skills so that relevant studies could be chosen to extract and synthesise the data. After that, the third stage was conducted, which was to report the review by conveying the findings through this systematic review. All of the researches relevant to the chosen topic were primarily sourced via Google Scholar. Then, to find peer-reviewed research studies or articles written in English published between 2011 and 2021, the following international online bibliographic databases were among the databases suggested by Google Scholar and used: Research Gate, Semantic Scholar, Academia, SAGE, ProQuest and Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC). This review focused solely on studies completed during the previous 10 years.

Effectiveness of role play OR simulation OR drama, effects of role play on communication skills OR speaking skills, benefits of role play OR drama OR simulation in the classroom, and effects on ESL and EFL learners were among the terms and phrases used to search for past related studies in the keywords fields of the above databases. To extend the viewpoint on related researches, relevant keywords such as simulation, drama, and speaking abilities were added in the search. The "sort by relevance" box from the Google Scholar was selected in order to filter and refine the most related researches. 15,900 results were generated from this primary sourcing process. Then, to sort out the best researches that fit into this topic, these criteria were taken into consideration

- i. The study's participants or responders might be in elementary, secondary, or postsecondary education.
- ii. The research should be undertaken in the context of teaching English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL).
- iii. The research should concentrate on the impact of role-playing activities on communication skills.
- iv. As more methodologically rigorous investigations are needed, the studies might use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method study designs.
- v. The role-playing activity must include the use of English language.
- vi. The intervention must be conducted in education context.

The introduction and conclusion sections of the entire paper were reviewed in order to select a bigger range of researches. This process is needed mostly due to the fact that it was difficult to rule out journals or articles just on the basis of the studies' titles and abstracts. As a matter of fact, various researches related to medical context were included during the primary sourcing process. After identifying and refining the researches that fit within the topic and filtering out non-related papers, 20 publications were selected.

## **Results and Discussion**

After executing the above-mentioned steps for conducting the systematic review, three review articles and seventeen preceding relevant studies on the impact of role play activity on student communication skills from 2011 to 2021 were shortlisted. Six papers were published in 2019 out of the 20 selected articles, making it the year with the most publications while two articles were published in year 2021, 2018, 2016 and 2013

respectively. The remaining 6 chosen articles were published between 2011 to 2020 where one paper was published for each year (2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017 and 2020). Table 1 summarises the empirical data supporting the effectiveness of role play exercise in enhancing students' communication abilities.

**Table 1**

*Summary of past related studies on effectiveness of role play or drama-based role play on students' communication skills*

Study/Article	Database	Aim	Samples	Findings
Bhatti, 2021	Research Gate	- To discover whether role play is an effective way to overcome students' speaking difficulties. - To assess the impact of role play activities on students to perform better orally.	360 secondary- students (180 males and 180 females) of Govt. S.D. High School Bahawalpur and Workers Welfare School (Girls) Bahawalpur.	- Significant difference was found in students' achievement scores of pre-test post-test results. - Role play activities have a positive impact in enhancing the speaking skills of the elementary level students of Bahawalpur region.
Bora, 2021	SAGE	To examines the pedagogical use of authentic contemporary plays for developing learners' L2 oral production in terms of (1) complexity – syntactic and mean length of AS-units (MLAS) and (2) accuracy – global and pronunciation accuracy.	20 final year high school students in a small private school in a small town in the northern part of Italy.	- When compared to a conventional technique, the blended-drama method appears to have a benefit in terms of encouraging a higher level of syntactic complexity. - After the drama-blended training was put into place, the experimental group significantly improved in terms of both global and pronunciation accuracy.
Togimim & Jaafar, 2020	Research Gate	- To investigate how role play activities in an ESL classroom can be an innovative approach in improving students' speaking skill.	nine undergraduate students from the Faculty of Computing in a public university in the Southern region of Malaysia.	- The students improved in areas like fluency, understanding, and interactive communication. - The students felt that role play activities had brought positive effects on their English-speaking skills.

Rahmat et al., 2019	Research Gate	To explore the use of role play in the ESL classroom.	104 respondents (66- male and 38 female) semester 1 Business and Engineering students in a university in Malaysia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role play activities can be beneficial to both male and female learners.</li> <li>- Role play allows learners to interact in English, practise conversational skills in authentic situations, decide things, and think beyond the box.</li> </ul>
Neupane, 2019	Research Gate	To find out the effectiveness of role play technique in improving speaking skill in English.	40 tenth grade students of a public school from Lamjung district.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students in the control group who are involved with role play activity improved their accents and vocabulary.</li> <li>- Students who were taught through role play got better result in Post Test than the students who were taught through traditional grammar-based method.</li> </ul>
Saad & Mansor, 2019	Research Gate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To investigate whether utilizing role play enhances speaking performance among students.</li> <li>- To investigate whether role-play is an effective way to assess speaking ability.</li> </ul>	125 semester one ELC 120 course students of Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role-playing can be an excellent strategy for improving students' language abilities as well as their motivation, enthusiasm, and attitudes regarding English speaking ability.</li> <li>- Students have positive response on the suitability of role play to test speaking skill as the unscripted situation can help to express ideas in</li> </ul>
				English language and the students are satisfied with their speaking performance in the assessment.
Angelinawati, ERIC 2019		Reviews current theories and research findings on the use of drama in ESL/EFL teaching and learning to provide a better understanding of the use of drama to facilitate learning in EFL classrooms	(Review Paper)	Drama in the classroom has several benefits, including promoting student-centred learning, allowing students to use and improve their language abilities, thinking skills, and creativity in a fun way, and enhancing



				students' maturity and motivation.
Rojas Villafuerte, 2019	& Research Gate	To explore the influence of implementing Role-play (RP) as a technique in English classto boost EFL learners' speaking skills in Ecuador	(Review Paper)	Role play activity in the classroom assist the development of students' speaking skills and vocabulary, develops students' creativity through collaborative work, and provide opportunity to learn English naturally and meaningfully by focusing on topics that are interesting and motivating to students.
Wulandari et al.,2019	Research Gate	To improve Speaking skill using Role Play technique	30 students (20 females and 10 males) Accounting students of t SMKN 3 Karawang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role playing can be considered as the right technique to improve students' speaking skills.</li> <li>- Role-playing strategies help students develop their English speaking abilities, improve their confidence in speaking English, stimulate active engagement, and</li> </ul>
				increase their enthusiasm for learning English.
Krisdiana et al., 2018	Semantic Scholar	To investigate the effectiveness of role play integrated with word cards on students' speaking skill for communication	23 second semester students of University of Malang	- Role play integrated with word cards was effective in improving fluency, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and vocabulary skill in speaking for communication.

Abdul Rahman & Maarof, 2018	Academia	To investigate the effect of role-play and simulation approach on Malaysian Polytechnic engineering students' ESL oral communication skills.	100 first year engineering students in a Selangor Polytechnic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students were enthusiastic about role-play and simulation activities because they never got bored and could practice speaking so many times</li> <li>- Students showed outstanding enhancement in their communication ability and they were able to speak confidently.</li> </ul>
Mohd Razali & Ismail, 2017	Semantic Scholar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To investigate about the relation of the use of simulation and role-play in enhancing the student's speaking skills.</li> <li>- What are the student's perception towards the use of simulation and role-play in the classroom for helping them increasing their speaking skills?</li> </ul>	40 students of Form 2A from Sekolah Agama Menengah (SAM) Muhammadiyah, Sabak Bernam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simulation and role-play as activities can enhance student's speaking skills.</li> <li>- Students enjoy learning English through the use of simulation and role-play.</li> </ul>
Ampatuan & Jose, 2016	Semantic Scholar	To examine the outcome of role play as an approach in	14 second semester Bachelor in Elementary Education students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role play is beneficial approach in developing students' communicative competence provided that it is not too long.</li> <li>- Role play encourages students to express themselves and builds self-confidence by allowing them to practise social rules and language they have learnt and allows students to express themselves and</li> </ul>

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enhance their communication abilities.

Eckersley, 2016	Semantic Scholar	To explore the ways that drama can be used to effectively engage English L1 and ESL Learners to develop effective communication skills	(Review Paper)	Drama skills like improvisation and role play assist ESL students to think, act, and communicate while utilising empathy and critical thinking. Drama may also be utilised to teach new concepts, scaffold difficult learning, and promote the development of complex concepts and language.
Altun, 2015	ProQuest	To explore the 45 ELT third year benefits of role-play activities in developing speaking skills.		The role-playing activity encourages learners to improve their foreign language skills, builds their self-confidence, presents language materials in a natural way to learners, provides a good opportunity for learners to learn everyday language, and allows them to expand their vocabulary and language skills.
Yuliana et al., 2014	Research Gate	To investigate the effect of role play towards students' speaking skill.	62 students of Natural Science (IPA) High School1 Batang Anai, Padang Pariaman Regency, West Sumatera, Indonesia,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The students' mean score of experiment class who were taught by role play was higher than students' mean score who were taught by information gap.</li> <li>- Role play gave significant effect on students'</li> </ul>

speaking skill

Javid, 2013	Semantic Scholar	Investigating the effectiveness of using simulation in teaching English in developing oral skills of pharmacy students at Taif University	88 freshman students enrolled in the College of Pharmacy	-	Both experimental and controlled groups have shown reasonable progress in their oral communication proficiency but experimental group show more improvement in term of their speaking and listening skills compared to controlled group.
Islam & Islam, 2013	Semantic Scholar	To see the effectiveness of using role play in enhancing speaking skills of the students in a large class and also the advantage and disadvantage of role-play in the tertiary level.	120 students of Department of English of Stamford University Bangladesh	Students' speaking abilities improved dramatically after a series of role plays, and they were found to be fairly fluent. Students gained the confidence and ability to express themselves freely. Role play was a useful strategy to utilise in a big classroom to observe the performance of a number of pupils in a short amount of time.	
Oradee, 2012	Academia	- To study and compare English speaking skills using three communicative activities:	49 Grade 11 students of Satri Rachinuthit School Udon Thani, Thailand	The students' English-speaking abilities improved considerably after utilising the three communicative exercises	

		Discussion, Problem solving, and Role-playing. - To study the students' attitude towards teaching English speaking skills using the three communicative activities.	compared to before they were used. The students had a positive attitude toward the teaching of English-speaking skills through the three communicative exercises.
Qing, 2011	Research Gate	To discuss the significance of communicative competence relative to the field of college English education and explore an enjoyable way to increase students' intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge through collaborative, group-generated role plays	(Review Paper) Role plays could increase students' intercultural awareness and help them develop overall communicative competence.

#### *Effectiveness Of Role Play Activity in Improving Students' Communication Skills*

Based on the three review papers and seventeen research papers shortlisted, it can be seen that various positive effects of the implementation of role play activity in classroom towards students' communication skills has been highlighted. Role plays as classroom exercises give platform to students to express themselves freely and communicate whatever in their minds as much as possible. Students tend to be shy when they are asked to speak in the second language alone. However, through the implementation of role play activity in classroom where most of the time are done collaboratively and in a more relaxed environment, students will be more comfortable in expressing themselves without being judge by others. It is expected that more engaging classroom activities will help children speak in English with one another as the participation of students in English-speaking activities necessitates a certain level of excitement on their behalf (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). As they are able to practice using the language more freely, the students will gradually improve in regard to their communication skills. They will be able to communicate ideas as they are put in a situation where they are simulating certain real-life situation or role-playing characters in real life. As mentioned in the findings of study by Togimin and Jaafar (2020), role plays as activities in the classroom trained the students to express themselves and as a result, they managed to speak their sentences smoothly without any interruption from fillers or pausing. Role-playing, according to Kusnierek (2015), is an expressive activity that can offer ample experience and practice to ESL students of probable circumstances or events that they may meet in life.

As the nature of role play activity requires collaboration between the students, learners can learn through social constructivism by participating in role play exercises. Learners can improve their social skills through peer contact. According to McLeod (2007), the idea of social constructivism demonstrates that learning takes place through learners' interaction activities. As a result, learners are more likely to replicate positive behaviour due to the fact that learning occurs in a non-teaching atmosphere where students learn by experimenting and interacting with their peers. Peer engagement not only allows students to communicate in a less intimidating atmosphere, but it also exposes them to critical social skills. When students become involved and use role-playing techniques like group work and peer work, it's clear that they're part of a community that needs to collaborate and support one another thus, they will be able to collaborate on the same goals (Neupane, 2019). Through role play activity, individual and group duties will be assigned to members of the group, encouraging collaboration and information exchange. This form of group exercise does, in fact, have a significant social advantage in terms of allowing students to improve their interpersonal skills while utilising English. As a result, their capacity to communicate with and comprehend one another will improve significantly, which is the finest foundation for good communicating skills that will eventually facilitate learning.

Role play allows students to test their capacity to participate more actively in the teaching and learning process. Because role play is a student-centred activity, students become more accountable for their own learning because they must participate in the activity in order to get something from it. Students are given the opportunity to lead the activity through role play because they are the ones who must perform. As students have the ability and choice to pick and plan their own characters during the role-playing session, there will be a high degree of interest, which will consequently stimulate motivation. Because the teacher's participation during a role-playing exercise is limited to assisting or observing the students, pupils will feel that they are the centre of attention during the learning process. Due to this, many of the researches shortlisted highlighted that the role-play activity improves the confidence and motivation of the students in learning and also in speaking the target language. Yuliana et al (2014) in their studies stated that role play can help pupils improve their speaking skills as it may aid students in speaking more eloquently. It also inspires students to speak up. Some slow pupils who were afraid to speak out usually in class were even able to speak in their roles meanwhile in the study of Islam and Islam (2012), after four sessions of role-playing practices, the students became more spontaneous and confident in their ability to communicate as a result of the good engagement and communication. They also increased their verbal fluency, vocabulary utilisation, mood adaptation, body language, and voice expressiveness in various situations. Role plays, according to Qing (2011), help students gain confidence when speaking English. They also provide shy kids the option to take on a different identity. Students that are shy have a hard time participating in talks about themselves or expressing their own thoughts. Adopting a persona from a different culture might be a freeing experience.

Based on the literature, role play provides platform for students to keep practicing their conversational skills where gradually they will improve naturally in regards to their fluency, accuracy, accent and pronunciation of the target language. Speaking is a skill that requires the users to keep using the language in order for them to improve the components of the

speaking skill. As seen by the research papers analysed, Bhatti (2021); Togimin and Jaafar (2020); Saad and Mansor (2019); Wulandari et al (2019) improvement in regards to speaking skill has been seen as one of the major effectiveness when implementing role play activity in classroom. Fluency, accuracy, accent and pronunciation cannot be learnt through other skills like reading and writing but it can only be acquired if the learners use the language enough to realise and rectify the mistakes that they have done before. The execution of the role play game enhanced the pupils' accents. It might be because the role playing approach requires pupils to practise speaking and listening more than reading and writing, and they will also need to practise repeating the same phrases or expressions several times in order to understand their dialogue. Apart from remembering each sentence, they were also required to concentrate intentionally on their accent and pronunciation. As a result, pupils may have been more conscious of their accent or pronunciation when speaking (Neupane, 2019). Students feel more comfortable and confident speaking in the target language when they communicate with their group members because they work in smaller groups during role- playing sessions. This extensive engagement was successful in improving their English ability in terms of speaking abilities. This is supported by Oradee (2012) and she also claimed that as pupils have been taught how to use the language functions effectively, they will be able to improve their English proficiency successfully. Students will also get the chance to learn basic interaction skills in English, such as exchanging pleasantries, expressing gratitude and apologies, making requests, obtaining information and services, and much more through role-playing session (Zaidi et al., 2017). To put it another way, as a result of the role-playing activity, the students are getting prepared to be able to communicate vocally in the target language.

### **Challenges And Suggestions in Implementing Role Play**

The major issue with any role-playing activities or simulation is that teachers must accept that there will be some degree of unpredictability and instability when conducting role play activity in classrooms. Students can get out of hand, and they will have to act quickly to restore order in the classroom. This is one of the many reasons why some teachers decided to forego role-playing activity as they do not want to lose their "control" of the classroom thus resorting to more teacher-centred activities. Saad and Mansor (2019) stated in their studies that although the environment in a big classroom during the implementation of role play activity might get chaotic at times, and the students may forget their lines, causing them to feel embarrassed, this problem can ultimately be rectified with the aid of supportive feedback and guidance from the teachers. Teachers need to realise that teaching is not just dependent on the lesson plan and what students can achieve in a day. It should not be limited to strict teaching methods, but it requires the instructors who present the lesson and employ numerous approaches to make it more engaging and entertaining. Thus, if teachers want to successfully try role play activity in classroom, they must first determine which aspects of the curriculum may be learned more effectively through role- playing session. The teachers should also choose the ideal form of dramatic exercise for the students based on their maturity and readiness.

Aside from this, some students may even seem to be wary of the role-playing exercise. Older children may show lack of excitement and enthusiasm for activities that require them to work in groups or speak up, especially if they have a poor level of proficiency. This will hamper the smoothness of the activity conducted by the teachers thus may discourage them

to conduct this kind of activity in the future. Sometime, when the most critical elements during the role-playing session are assigned to hesitant or weak students, they frequently fail. As a result, the role-playing session appear dull and uninteresting, particularly when they perform in front of the entire class for the first time. Therefore, to create more comfortable and productive environment in the classroom, teachers must play a significant role in overcoming these unfortunate scenarios. Alternatively, teachers can consider how they may shorten the role play activity so that students can test it out and see how it works. This second method is frequently successful, and students may try role-playing activity for a period of time before beginning to enjoy themselves. This coincides with the findings of study by Ampatuan and Jose (2016), where they stated that role play can be a beneficial approach in developing students' communicative competence provided that it is not conducted for too long. When the activity gets dragged, students will start to lose interest and motivation to continue the activity.

### Conclusion

Fear of being ridiculed, nervousness, lack of practice, and non-interactive classroom activities may all contribute towards Malaysian ESL students' low competency in their communication skills. As highlighted by Mansor (2015), even though the Communicative Approach has been implemented into the Malaysian education system through the English subject since 1988 where all four skills were being incorporated to fulfil the objective of producing personnel who are compatible with communication knowledge and proficiency, despite this, Malaysians' proficiency in speech and communication is still at best questionable even after more than twenty years of implementation. Reading and writing abilities are frequently emphasised in the classroom, whereas the other two important communication skills like listening and speaking are frequently overlooked. Considering speaking ability is most probably the most essential compared to other skills in terms of enhancing communication among target language learners, it may be one of the reasons why students struggle to communicate proficiently and effectively in English language. Aside from this, less emphasis on providing students with student-centred classroom activity may also hamper the process of acquiring the target language. As students do not receive enough practice and platform to use the target language, naturally they will shy away from using the target language due to its unfamiliarity. To avoid pupils withdrawing and avoiding speaking English, an English teacher's responsibility is to make their lessons lively and student-centred, as well as to provide every student with the chance to practise speaking in English as much as possible (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

Due to this, the implementation of role play activity in classroom give students a breath of fresh air from the normal classroom practices that they have been used to everyday. As it can be considered as a novel experience for them, it will attract their interest and boost the students' motivation to get involved actively with the learning process. As teachers are required to introduce more twenty first century learning elements in classroom, implementation of collaborative and student-centred activity like role play will be more beneficial to the students. Not only will it be able to engage them in a fun and meaningful learning environment, plus it also contributes to various factors that will be able to help improve students' communication skills as highlighted through the findings of all researches shortlisted in this systematic review. Role play facilitate students' learning in developing effective communicating competency in English and practising conversational skills that may



be applied in real-life circumstances. Aside from that, via collaborative role-playing sessions, learners' peer interaction will also be strengthened thus allowing them to practise negotiating skills and exchanging ideas with their peers. Role plays can also be used to develop a variety of skills in addition to language and communication. As highlighted by Rahmat et al (2019) when learners are given the chance to acquire new knowledge through exchanges that occurred within the role-playing activity, these elements will effectively scaffold them towards social constructivism.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

Through all the researches shortlisted in this systematic review, almost all researches believe that role play activity is effective in improving students' communication skills. However, almost half of the researches are conducted with small number of participants. Taking this into consideration, it will be difficult to generalise the experience and insights of the participants in regards to the effectiveness of role play activity in improving their communication skills to the general public. Half of the researches shortlisted were focusing on the experience of the secondary school students while another half is based on the insights of the tertiary level of students. Among 20 papers chosen from this systematic review, only one paper has primary school students as the participants of the study. This has caused limited discussion pertaining perspectives of the use of role play in primary school context. In the future, further study should be conducted to learn more about this matter. Apart from this, due to the limited number of publications shortlisted for this systematic review, less views from various perspectives could be offered when talking about how effective is role play implementation towards the goal of improving students' communication skills. Deeper investigation is needed to elaborate the complex elements of communication skills so future research can be conducted to tackle and enrich each component of the communication skills. If more publications are involved in this systematic review, more revelations, views or even different schools of thought can be discovered and explored further. Therefore, it is suggested for future studies to get insight from more publications and sources with variety of target participants in order to get more comprehensive reviews regarding the effectiveness of role play activity in improving students' communication skills.

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