Improving english speaking skills in elementary students through role-playing activities

Mejoramiento del habla en inglés en alumnos de nivel elemental mediante juego de roles

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Resumen

Este estudio se enfoca en el uso de juegos de rol como estrategia pedagógica para mejorar la habilidad del habla en inglés. Se llevó a cabo un enfoque de investigación mixta que combinó métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos. La observación de las clases de inglés evaluó cualitativamente el desempeño de los estudiantes, mientras que los datos cuantitativos se obtuvieron analizando las calificaciones antes y después de las pruebas. Se implementó un diseño cuasiexperimental con un grupo experimental que recibió intervenciones basadas en juegos de rol y un grupo de control que no recibió ese tratamiento. Los participantes fueron estudiantes de nivel elemental de inglés de la Escuela de Formación de Soldados IWIAS "Crnl. Gonzalo Barragán", con 18 en el grupo experimental y 17 en el grupo de control. El estudio combinó revisión bibliográfica y recopilación de datos de campo. La evaluación del impacto de las intervenciones con juegos de rol se centró en el componente oral del Key English Test, administrado antes y después del tratamiento. Se utilizó una prueba t para validar la hipótesis. Los resultados indicaron una mejora significativa en la habilidad del habla en inglés en el grupo experimental, abarcando gramática, vocabulario, pronunciación y habilidades de comunicación interactiva. Este estudio aporta una perspectiva innovadora al demostrar la eficacia de los juegos de rol en la mejora de la habilidad del habla en inglés. Destaca la relevancia de integrar actividades de juegos de rol en la enseñanza de idiomas y ofrece valiosas perspectivas para educadores e investigadores.

Palabras clave: Juegos de rol, Estrategia pedagógica, Habilidad del habla, Investigación mixta

Abstract

This study focuses on the use of role-playing activities as a pedagogical strategy to improve English speaking skills. The research used a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Observation of English classes qualitatively assessed students' performance, while quantitative data were obtained by analyzing pre- and post-test scores. The investigation employed a quasi-experimental design with an experimental group receiving role-playing interventions and a control group receiving traditional teaching. The participants were elementary level English students from the Soldiers Training School IWIAS "Crnl. Gonzalo Barragan", with 18 in the experimental group and 17 in the control group. The study combined literature review and field data collection. The evaluation of the impact of role-playing interventions focused on the oral component of the Key English Test, administered before and after treatment. The research used a t-test to validate the hypothesis. The results indicated a significant improvement in English speaking ability in the experimental group, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and interactive communication. This study provides an innovative perspective by demonstrating the efficacy of role-playing activities in improving the English speaking skill. It highlights the relevance of integrating role-playing activities in language teaching and offers valuable insights for educators and researchers alike.

Keywords: Role-playing, Pedagogical strategy, English speaking skills, Mixed-method approach

INTRODUCTION

The importance of this study is rooted in its dedication to comprehending the manner in which role-playing activities can enrich English speaking skills, a pivotal facet of daily communication. The cultivation of active engagement and self-assurance in English speaking is of paramount significance, not only for nurturing competency but also for fostering motivation in an increasingly globalized world. It is imperative to recognize that English serves as a lingua franca, with approximately 1.5 billion English speakers worldwide (Crystal, 2003). This research seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of how role-playing can facilitate language acquisition and enhance communication skills.

The justification for this research endeavor lies in its innovative approach of employing role-playing activities to enhance the speaking skills of indigenous language speakers at Escuela de Formación de Soldados IWIAS, situated in the Ecuadorian Amazon Region. This novel approach, primarily recruiting Kichwa and Shuar-speaking students, marks a departure from conventional teaching methods at the institution. Furthermore, there exists a notable dearth of prior research in this specific context.

To provide a theoretical foundation for the variables under investigation, on the one hand, Ladousse (1987) underscores the dual nature of role-play, which involves assuming the role of another person and creating a dynamic, engaging learning environment. Role-playing facilitates the expression of experiences, the portrayal of social relations, and the enactment of real-life situations. Additionally, role-playing activities exhibit a "Low input high output" nature, promoting language learning through extensive exposure to spoken production.

Bailey (2003) offers a comprehensive definition of role play as a conversational activity where students take on different character roles, interact while embodying those characters' qualities, and engage in the teaching of speech acts, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. This makes role-playing a practical and valuable tool for language learning. Moreover, role-playing activities, as suggested by Harmer (2001), enable students to employ the target language in real-life contexts. They simulate various scenarios, encouraging students to act as if they were in different situations, thereby promoting interaction through pair and group work and enhancing their speaking skills.

Ur (1996) highlights the potential for increased spoken interaction as students assume various roles and engage in outdoor activities, fostering active cooperation and providing a dynamic, real-world language usage experience. In the context of Communicative Language Teaching, role-playing activities enable students to effectively use English to achieve communicative goals, helping learners at various proficiency levels (Bailey, 2003).

Mugglestone (1977) positions role-playing activities as a vital component of English as a foreign language teaching, facilitating practice in real-life situations, promoting free and creative spoken practice, and enhancing communicative competence. Moreover, Larsen (2000) reinforces the significance of role-play as a fundamental tool in Communicative Language Teaching, offering students opportunities to practice communication in various social contexts and roles.

Role-playing activities are suitable for large classes, often based on themes and activities found in course books (Mani, Vijayakanthi, Vasanthi, Bertheu, & Parimalam, 2008). These activities stimulate students' speaking practice and encourage interactions involving different social roles and everyday situations.

Furthermore, role-playing activities allow participants to immerse themselves in hypothetical events and act as characters different from their real lives. In role plays, students receive role cards outlining specific circumstances and interact to create scenes lasting at least four minutes (Nation and Newton, 2009). Specialized vocabulary and grammar content are often provided to facilitate these activities.

On the other hand, the art of effective communication through speaking is an indispensable skill in daily life. People communicate daily, often producing tens of thousands of words, making speaking the most fundamental and immediate form of language expression (Thornbury, 2005). In language learning, the importance of speaking is particularly pronounced, where it often encompasses all aspects of language acquisition. As a result, foreign language courses, if not all, prioritize the development of speaking skills (Bailey, 2003).

The significance of speaking as a skill is apparent in its extensive usage across various social and instrumental contexts. It is the primary means for interpersonal communication, utilized for seeking information, asking directions, or making purchases (Saville, 2006). Ecuador, a country frequently visited by global tourists, relies on English as a medium of communication, making it imperative for students to achieve proficiency in this oral skill.

Additionally, in a world characterized by international communication, the ability to exchange information effectively, both orally and in writing, is of utmost

importance (Modesti, 2015). Given the role of speaking as the immediate mode of communication, students should attain a high level of competence in this skill to convey information accurately.

It is essential for teachers to create an environment that encourages students to engage in creative communicative activities and step out of their comfort zones (Nunan, 2015). Such tasks should cater to the students' needs, ensuring a significant improvement in their speaking abilities, transforming them into active participants in a student-centered setting.

Mastery of the speaking skill is a fundamental goal for language learners, as it is a key criterion for assessing their language proficiency (Richards, 2008). Achieving a good level of oral proficiency is the ultimate aim of any foreign language course. Evaluating whether students have reached the expected proficiency level in speaking is one way to gauge their language competence. Speaking, as a real-time action, presents unique challenges. It involves immediate responses from interlocutors, limiting the chances for planning and editing spoken output. This stands in contrast to most written communication, where writers have opportunities for careful planning, editing, and revising (Bailey, 2003).

In addition to new learners, advanced students may also face challenges in speaking, particularly when conversing with native speakers on diverse topics (Kathleen, Bailey & Lance, 1994). Understanding others' words can be challenging due to issues such as limited vocabulary and differing pronunciations. Hence, speaking encompasses not only the pronunciation of words but also the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Anxiety can be a significant barrier to speaking confidently in a foreign language classroom (Paradowski, 2015). Creating a positive learning environment where students feel at ease is crucial for productive speaking practice, as confidence is a key factor in skill improvement.

Activities such as repeating the teacher's words, discussing weekend plans, listening to recordings, having conversations in pairs or groups, and repeating difficult sounds can help students build confidence (Scrivener, 2011). These activities promote peer interaction and foster a comfortable and willing environment for speaking.

The implementation of role-playing activities in the classroom offers a multitude of advantages for students, including heightened motivation, opportunities for shy students to participate, and an expanded classroom vocabulary. Additionally, role-playing activities can be seamlessly integrated with technology, further enhancing students' creativity and communication skills. These activities can be applied in large classes and cater to various proficiency levels, making them a valuable tool in language education

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research paper utilized a Quasi-experimental design, involving a population of 35 students who were divided into two groups: a control group consisting of 17 students and an experimental group comprising 18 students. The study was conducted in the academic term May – Sep 2018 at Escuela de Formación de Soldados IWIAS "CNRL. Gonzálo Barragán" located in the Ecuadorian Amazon region, where the primary indigenous languages spoken among the students apart from Spanish are Kichwa and Shuar.

Moreover, throughout the course of this study, extensive bibliographical research has been diligently conducted, enabling a thorough analysis and exploration of concepts and insights from various authors. The information gathered originates from international publications. This comprehensive review of the bibliographic sources has facilitated the presentation of pertinent insights regarding the relationship between the two variables under investigation. Notably, the incorporation and examination of diverse author perspectives have greatly enriched the quality and depth of this study.

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. In this investigation, a pre-test and a post-test were concurrently administered to two distinct groups. Specifically, the experimental group participated in a treatment involving role-playing activities. Subsequently, the data collected from these assessments were meticulously organized, analyzed, and interpreted in a quantitative manner. A comparative analysis was then conducted to discern any disparities in the scores achieved by students from both the control and experimental groups.

This research can be classified as descriptive since its primary objective is to substantiate the validity of the formulated hypothesis. As a result, a statistical analysis of both pre-test and post-test results becomes imperative. Additionally, a t-test has been conducted to assess the viability of the alternative hypothesis. Moreover, this study adopts an applied research approach, chosen for its emphasis on reporting the outcomes derived from data analysis and its pursuit of solutions to issues arising from the implementation of role-playing activities with students.

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The instrument was the speaking part of a mock KET test. The test has three parameters (grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and interactive communication) and each one is awarded 5 points, giving a total of 15 points.

Finally, the research adopted a correlational methodology to examine the relationship between role-playing and the development of English speaking skills. This relationship was assessed following the implementation of role-playing activities as a treatment. Consequently, we were able to investigate the association between the independent and the dependent variable. This study aimed to observe both the effects and the influence of role-playing within the context of English classes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TEST/GROUP	Grammar and Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Interactive Communication
Pre-test control group	2,530	2,000	2,470
Post-test control group	3,650	3,530	3,530
Pre-test experimental group	2,220	2,000	2,560
Post-test experimental group	4,280	3,940	4,060

Table 1. *Comparison of averages out of 5 points obtained in the parameters of grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation and interactive communication in the pre-test and the post-test.*

Analysis and interpretation

Table 1 shows that both groups have almost similar averages in the pre-test. Nevertheless, some differences are shown in the post-test scores. It can be seen that the control group obtained better results in relation to the pre-test. However, the experimental group obtained much higher scores in the three categories in the post-test than the control group comparing with the pre-test grades. These results start to give an idea that the treatment applied to the experimental group has had good results.

Parameters	Scores Control group		Experimental group	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	7,00	10,71	6,78	12,28
Variance	0,63	0,60	0,18	0,57
Standard deviation	0,79	0,77	0,43	0,75

Table 2. *Mean, variance and standard deviation from the control and experimental group's scores in the pre-test and post-test: grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation and interactive communication.*

Analysis and interpretation

According to the data presented in Table 2, the average of the results from the control and experimental group in the

pre and post-test can be observed and compared. The following data corresponds to the control group's post-test' results: mean 10.71, the variance was 0.60 and the standard deviation was 0.77. It shows a small difference with the pre-test results.

Apart from that, it can be seen that the experimental group achieved a significant increment in the post-test scores with a mean of 12.28, the variance was 0.57 and the standard deviation was 0.75. These results clearly show that the difference between the results obtained in the post-test by the experimental group may be seen as a significant improvement made by this group.

Likert scale	Control group		Experimental group	
	Pre-test FQ%	Post-test FQ%	Pre-test FQ%	Post-test FQ%
Excellent (A)	0 0	0 0	0 0	1 6
Good (B)	0 0	9 53	0 0	17 94
Satisfactory (C)	0 0	8 47	0 0	0 0
Needs Improvement (D)	12 71	0 0	14 78	0 0
Unsatisfactory (E)	5 29	0 0	4 22	0 0
	17 100	17 100	18 100	18 100

Table 3. *Frequencies from the total scores obtained in the pre-test and post-test by the control and experimental group.*

A: Excellent 15-14 points,
B: Good 13-11 points
C: Satisfactory 10-9 points
D: Need improvement 8-7 points
E: Unsatisfactory 6-0 points.
FQ: Frequency.
%: Percentage of frequency.

Analysis and interpretation

In table 3, it can be observed the frequency of the total grades obtained by the students from both groups. First of all, in the pre-test, one part of the control group obtained grades from 7-8, this represents 71% of results and is marked as need improvement. Another portion of them obtained grades form 0-6; this represents 29% and is marked with the scale unsatisfactory. Whilst in the post-test, this group was categorized with 47% (grades 9-10) of the results as satisfactory and 53% (grades 11-13) as good. The comparison of these results shows an increment in the grades.

Second, in the pre-test, one part of the students from the experimental group obtained grades from 7-8, this represents 78% and is in the scale of need improvement. Another portion of this group obtained grades form 0-6; this represents 22% and is in the scale of unsatisfactory. On the other hand, in the post-test, 94% of this group was in the scale of good, with grades 11-13 and 6% was in the scale of excellent (grades 14-15). The comparison of these

results clearly shows a difference in the scores and an increment in the grades in both groups. However, the experimental group obtained better grades and reached the scale of excellent. It could suggest that the treatment with role-playing activities affected positively on the students' scores.

The hypothesis verification had to be developed. For that to be done; it was necessary to compare the means from both the control and experimental group; thus, a t-test for two small samples was employed for the post-test's results of the control and experimental group. Besides, a t-test for paired samples was employed for the pre and post-test's results of the experimental group. Moreover, the means of both groups needed to be compared to see if they are different in the post- test. It was necessary to verify if the treatment with role-playing activities affected positively the students' speaking skills, because it is vital to have a statistically evidence to verify whether the null hypothesis is rejected or not.

T-test
The post-test from the control and experimental group's scores were used to develop a t-test for small samples as well as the pre-test and post-test's results from the experimental group for the *t-test* for paired samples. The results are shown in the following graphs.

Parameters	Control group Post-test	Experimental group Post-test
Mean	10,70588235	12,27777778
Variance	0,595588235	0,565359477
Standard deviation	0,771743633	0,751903901
Observations	17	18
Grouped variance	0,580015845	
Degrees of freedom	33	
Statistics t	-6,10281791	
P(T<=t) one tailed	3,5655E-07	
T critical value (one tailed)	1,692360309	
P(T<=t) two tailed	7,131E-07	
T critical value (two tailed)	2,034515297	

Table 4. *T-test for small samples (control y experimental group)*

Analysis and interpretation
The results of the *t-test* are shown in table 4. The control and experimental group's results are used in order to compare if there is any difference between the means of the two groups. In the post-test, the control group's score was 10,71; whilst the experimental group's result was 12, 28, it is clearly higher than the latter group. It was observed that the statistics *t* was -6, 10, it means there is a 95% of reliability for two tails which was 2, 03. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted due to the difference among the means. In the same way, the value of *p=7,13E-07* is lower than α=0,05. This helps to reinforce that no mistake was made when accepting the alternative hypothesis.

Parameters	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	6,777777778	12,27777778
Variance	0,183006536	0,565359477
Standard deviation	0,427792631	0,751903901
Observations	18	18
Grouped variance	0,20319496	
Hypothetical difference of means	0	
Degrees of freedom	17	
Statistics t	-29,69126856	
P(T<=t) one tail	2,17085E-16	
T critical value (one tail)	1,739606726	
P(T<=t) two tail	4,34169E-16	
T critical value (two tails)	2,109815578	

Table 5. *T-test for paired samples (pre-test y post-test) in the experimental group.*

Analysis and interpretation
The *t-test* for paired samples determined an increment in the post-test's grades in comparison to the pre-test's scores. In the pre-test the means were: 6.777 in the pre-test and 12.277 in the post-test. When contrasted with the statistics *t* calculated -29.69 and the critical value two tailed 2.109, it was observed that the calculated *t* is in the rejected zone to a 95% of reliability. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted because there is a visible difference in the pre and post-test's scores.

Furthermore, the correlation's coefficient of Pearson showed a result of 0,203 which indicates that there is a weak relation between the two variables (pre and post-test) and when contrasted with the *p* value for two tailed with a significance level of 5% (p= p=4, 34E-16 < than α=0, 05). This suggests that the treatment with role-playing activities contributed in the speaking skills improvement. Similarly, when contrasting the *p* value, there is not any probability to accept the null hypothesis. Thus, there is not any risk of accepting the alternative hypothesis.

Discussion

The results presented in Table 1 provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of a teaching intervention aimed at improving language skills. The pre-test scores for both the control and experimental groups indicate that the participants had similar levels of proficiency in grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and interactive communication before the intervention. However, the post-test scores reveal significant differences in the outcomes between the two groups.

The control group exhibited noticeable improvements in their language skills, as evidenced by the post-test scores. The mean scores increased from 7.00 in the pre-test to 10.71 in the post-test. While this demonstrates some progress, it is essential to note that the variance and standard deviation remained relatively stable, indicating that the control group's improvement was modest and relatively consistent across participants.

In contrast, the experimental group experienced a substantial increase in their language skills. The mean scores soared from 6.78 in the pre-test to an impressive 12.28 in the post-test. This dramatic improvement is further emphasized by the decrease in the variance and standard deviation, suggesting that the experimental group exhibited a more consistent and substantial enhancement in their language skills.

To further explore the significance of these findings, it is crucial to consider the Likert scale results presented in Table 3. In the pre-test, the majority of the control group fell into the "Needs Improvement" category, with a smaller portion in the "Unsatisfactory" category. However, in the post-test, the distribution shifted significantly, with most participants now in the "Satisfactory" and "Good" categories, indicating an overall improvement in language skills.

In contrast, the experimental group showed an even more pronounced shift in categories. In the pre-test, the majority of participants were categorized as "Needs Improvement" and "Unsatisfactory," while in the post-test, an overwhelming majority fell into the "Good" category, and some even reached the "Excellent" category.

The statistical analyses, as presented in Tables 4 and 5, confirm the significance of these results. The t-test for small samples (Table 4) demonstrates a clear difference in post-test scores between the control and experimental groups, with the experimental group outperforming the control group. The t-test for paired samples (Table 5) further underscores the impact of the intervention on the experimental group. The mean scores increased significantly from the pre-test to the post-test, and the null hypothesis was confidently rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

The Pearson correlation coefficient indicated a weak relationship between pre-test and post-test scores, further supporting the idea that the treatment with role-playing activities contributed significantly to the improvement in speaking skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Prior to the intervention, students underwent a Key English Test (KET) assessment, specifically focusing on their speaking abilities. This served as a diagnostic tool to assess their proficiency in spoken English. The pre-test results, for both the control and experimental groups, revealed that the average scores in the three key test parameters - grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and interactive communication - were notably low, resulting in ratings falling within the "Need Improvement" and "Unsatisfactory" categories.

Following the completion of the role-playing treatment, students participated in a post-treatment KET test. The results of this post-test clearly demonstrated the positive impact of role-playing activities on the development of students' speaking skills. Notably, a significant improvement was observed, with the majority of students in the experimental group achieving "Good" and "Excellent" ratings. This underscores the effectiveness of the role-playing treatment in enhancing students' speaking abilities.

A comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores indicated a notable increase in the latter. Statistical analysis employing the t-test revealed the rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis, confirming a substantial relationship between role-playing and the development of speaking skills. In essence, the practice of role-playing had a positive impact on students' speaking proficiency.

The advantages of incorporating role-playing in the classroom context became evident. Notably, students engage in experiential learning, allowing for comprehensive spoken practice. Role-playing scenarios can also be tailored to address real-world situations, incorporating authentic vocabulary. Moreover, this teaching approach is highly adaptable, suitable for various teaching materials and course levels, from beginner to advanced. Consequently, it stands as an effective tool to not only enhance students' communication skills but also to nurture personal competencies and social skills.

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