



The Use of Role Plays to Enhance English Speaking Skills of Grade 7 Chinese Students

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Abstract

The research objectives were: 1) to examine the use of role plays in enhancing English speaking skills of Grade 7 Chinese students and 2) to investigate the opinions towards role plays in enhancing speaking skills. The sample consisted of 51 Grade 7 Chinese students from a junior middle school in China. The research instruments consisted of three things: 1) a rubric for evaluating speaking skills in the pretest and posttest, 2) a questionnaire used for investigating the students' opinions towards role plays in enhancing English speaking skills, and 3) an interview used to obtain more information about students' opinions. The statistical data for analysis were paired sample t-test, one sample t-test, mean, and standard deviation. The findings revealed that: 1) role plays were effective in enhancing English speaking skills to the Grade 7 Chinese students and 2) the students' opinions towards role plays in enhancing speaking skills were positive. From the findings of the study, English teacher teaching speaking skills are encouraged to use role plays to teach their students and provide maximum speaking time for junior middle school students to prepare role plays. In addition, researchers are recommended to conduct similar studies but in different parts of China and at different grade levels.

Keywords: Role plays, English speaking skills, Enhance

1. Introduction

The importance of English language for socializing as well as education has increased globally. Speaking as one of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is the most important skill and it is a key to communication (Arbain & Nur, 2017; Khotimah, 2014). As a global language, English language is a powerful and influential communication tool in many countries all over the world. English is taught as the most important foreign language in China (Lam, 2002) and English education has been given more and more attention (Lin, 2002). In order to face the challenges in 21st century and keep up with the rapid requirements for English language teaching, speaking is received clear importance in the latest English curriculum syllabus issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2001 (Zhang, 2017).

However, speaking is the weakest ability for Chinese students. In China, most students lack speaking skills which would be seen from the results of the report in IELTS white paper 2019 (International English Language Testing System, 2019). According to the IELTS white paper 2019, the results in the white paper of all mainland IELTS test-takers from June 1, 2017 to May 31, 2018, speaking is the main reason for the gap between Chinese academic test-takers' performance and the global overall test-takers'. In the period of 2017-2018, speaking scores for the academic test-takers in mainland China have a minimal improvement in four language skills which only increased by 0.02 points higher than the 2012-2013 period (Zou, 2019). On the mainland China, the main group of IELTS test-takers are the students aged 19-22, accounting for 52 percent, and they have accepted 8-12 years English study in basic education. Through 17 years' English curriculum reform from 2001 in basic education for building speaking skills, the enhancement of speaking skills particularly is still an enormous challenge.

Speaking is the weakest language ability for Chinese students because of some constraint factors of the English speaking in Chinese classrooms. For example, fewer opportunities to practice speaking skills, rote learning, less motivation and confidence, and so on. Role plays technique is a very important technique because role plays can offer students more chances to practice speaking skills and motivate students to learn a foreign language without anxiety and build up students' confidence to speak English (Freeman, 2000; Kumaran, 2010). In role plays, students have more opportunities to be involved in different real contexts and social roles to practice real-life spoken language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Role plays refer to the classroom activities in which students imagine themselves in others' roles and act out what typically happen by using appropriate language in those real-life situations (Richards

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&Schmidt, 2010; Ur, 1996). Role plays are divided into two forms: scripted role plays and unscripted role plays (Byrne, 1986; Iman, 2014). In role plays, the enjoyable English learning process leads to better learning (Sato, 2001). Students' active participation in the real-life situations' role plays (Bharathy, 2013) related to their experiences and students' successful performance in front of the class and peers which enhance students' confidence and motivation to speak English language without anxiety.

Many studies have found that role plays have positive effects in enhancing speaking skills, strengthening the students' confidence, and increasing motivation in the process of English learning. Firstly, role plays can give more chances to practice speaking in different social contexts and roles, and it also can motivate students to learn a foreign language without anxiety (Freeman, 2000; Kumaran, 2010). Further, role plays not only let students enjoy the class but also build up students' confidence to speak English (Kumaran, 2010). Moreover, the students have more chances to develop fluent language skills and their motivation level is likely to increase after implementation of role plays designed in pairs or small group (Richards, 2006).

For the mentioned reasons, the researcher was interested in applying role plays to teach speaking skills and would like to know whether role plays would enhance the speaking skills of Chinese students.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this research were:

1. To examine the use of role plays in enhancing English speaking skills of Grade 7 Chinese students.
2. To investigate the opinions of Chinese students towards role plays in enhancing speaking skills.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research design

This research applied a quasi-experimental study that involved one sample group. A mixed-method approach was used in this study, in which the researcher collected and examined data, incorporated the outcomes, and made conclusions using both qualitative data and quantitative data.

3.2 Population and samples

Population in this study included 265 Grade 7 Chinese students studying in a junior middle school in Academic year of 2019-2020 in China. Division of students into sections was equally distributed based on the results of entrance examination. Therefore, all the sections consisted of students with mixed genders and abilities. Due to Grade 7 is the first level to learn English as a compulsory course in basic education and it is given more class hours than primary education. Therefore, the researcher conducted the study in Grade 7.

The sample of the study consisted of 51 Grade 7 Chinese students in a junior middle school in China. They registered in the first semester of 2019 academic year. The samples were at the age of 11-14 years with mixed genders.

3.3 Research instruments

There were three instruments for data collection in this study:

1. Rubric was used to evaluate the speaking skills in pretest and posttest, and the mean scores were used to compare the differences of students speaking skills before and after the use of role plays. The criteria of the rubric in this study consisted 25 items which were validated by three experts. The items of IOC values for rubric were 0.79.
2. Questionnaire was used to obtain the students' opinions towards using role plays in enhancing speaking skills. Questionnaire consisted 10 items with five points ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The IOC ratings for the questionnaire were rated 0.97 which indicating all statements were congruent and valid for the study. In order to make the questionnaire more reliable, one item was deleted after the reliability test. The Cronbach's alpha score was 0.942.



3. Interview was conducted after the treatment of role plays by using four questions mixed open-ended and closed-ended questions in the structured-interview. The interviewer was the researcher and seven interviewees were from the sample group. The IOC values for the interview questions were 0.67.

3.4 Materials

1. Teaching materials were two textbooks used in Grade 7 in China in this study.
2. Six lesson plans of 90 minutes each developed by the researcher were used in the sample group to enhance English speaking skills. The contents consisted of six topics: 1) seeing a doctor, 2) at the market, 3) in the restaurant, 4) in the zoo, 5) at the museum, and 6) a map of China. The students worked in pairs to act out the roles in the topics.

3.5 Validity and reliability

1. Validity

In this study, three data collection instruments included rubric, questionnaire, and interview questions were verified and validated using a content validity technique by three experts in education academic from IOC conducting.

2. Reliability

The reliability test of the questionnaire was conducted in another section of 55 Chinese students of the same school before the actual study, and there were 9 items used in this study.

3.6 Data collection

Quantitative data were collected from pretest and posttest scored by a rubric and questionnaires answered of the sample group. Qualitative data were collected by the interview of four questions developed by the researcher. The data collection was carried out from August to October in 2019.

3.7 Data analysis

The quantitative data collected from pretest, posttest, and questionnaires were used to analyze mean, standard deviation, and significance level. The qualitative data collected by interviews were analyzed by using a content analysis method in this study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Results of pretest and posttest

1. Comparison of pretest and posttest scores.

Table 1 shows the standard deviation and mean scores of the pretest and posttest.

Table 1 Comparison of the pretest and posttest scores

Tests	Full Score	\bar{X}	S.D.	<i>t</i> value	df	Sig.
Pretest	25	15.80	3.33	7.038	50	0.005
Posttest	25	17.45	2.66			

*Significance level (*p*): < 0.05 significant



As shown in Table 1, the mean score of the students' speaking skills from pretest was 15.80 and the posttest was 17.45. This indicated that the students had higher scores in speaking skills after the treatment of role plays. The result of t-test showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest.

2. Comparison of pretest and posttest scores in four subskills

Table 2 shows the standard deviation and mean scores of the pretest and posttest in four subskills.

Table 2 Comparison of pretest and posttest mean scores in four subskills

Subskills	Full Score	Pretest		Posttest		Paired Samples <i>t</i> -Test		
		\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.	<i>t</i> value	df	Sig.
Pronunciation	5	3.31	0.73	3.49	0.67	2.27	50	0.014
Grammar	5	3.50	0.78	3.92	0.52	4.61	50	0.005
Vocabulary	5	3.15	0.70	3.39	0.63	2.58	50	0.007
Fluency	5	3.10	0.98	3.57	0.78	5.50	50	0.005

*Significance level (*p*): < 0.05 significant

As shown in Table 2, the results of t-test indicated that the posttest mean scores in four subskills were significantly higher than the pretest mean scores.

4.1.2 Results of questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed to obtain the students' opinions on the use of role plays in enhancing English speaking skills.

Table 3 shows the students' opinions towards enhancing speaking skills by using role plays.

Table 3 The results of questionnaire

Items	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level
1 I enjoy speaking English in role plays activities.	4.55	0.729	Strongly agree
2 Now I feel more confident in speaking English.	4.63	0.598	Strongly agree
3 I feel I can speak English more fluently.	4.53	0.730	Strongly agree
4 I like participating in role plays activities.	4.75	0.523	Strongly agree
5 Role plays motivate me to speak English freely.	4.59	0.638	Strongly agree
6 I want more opportunities to speak English in class.	4.49	0.703	Strongly agree
7 Role plays can help me to improve my speaking skills.	4.71	0.460	Strongly agree
8 I am more engaged in role plays classroom.	4.76	0.550	Strongly agree
9 I feel more comfortable and less stress when speaking in English with my peers.	4.59	0.697	Strongly agree
Total	4.64	0.469	Strongly agree

As shown in Table 3, the students' opinions toward enhancing speaking skills by using role plays were at the high level ($\bar{X} = 4.64$, $SD = 0.469$). According to the analysis of questionnaires, the students had positive opinions on role plays.

4.1.3 Results of interviews

Based on the analysis of students' interviews in order to know more about their opinions on using role plays in enhancing speaking skills, it was found that their opinions were positive as in the following aspects.



The students thought that role plays were interesting and helpful. Role plays could improve communication skills, oratory skills, and enhance confidence and motivation. Role plays had positive impact on their speaking skills and English learning. Because role plays could provide more chances to practice speaking skills and enhance speaking skills. Role plays also could improve pronunciation, writing skills, and interpersonal skills. The students preferred role plays class with positive opinions for some reasons: 1) it is interesting, 2) it could provide more chances to practicing speaking skills and communicate with classmates in different real-life situations, and 3) students could experience foreigners' communication in real life's situations. In addition, role plays could help students to overcome the difficulties when they speak English, such as: 1) hesitation, 2) grammar mistakes, 3) lack of confidence, 4) incorrect pronunciation, and 5) nervousness. After presenting role plays, the students realized their mistakes from English teacher and other students, for example, incorrect pronunciation and grammar mistakes.

In conclusion, the students had positive opinions on role plays and preferred role plays class. Role plays had positively impact on speaking skills and English learning. The difficulties in speaking could be overcome and improved by using role plays.

4.2 Discussion

In this study the two major findings were 1) the use of role plays was effective in enhancing speaking skills of Grade 7 Chinese students, and 2) students had positive opinions towards role plays in enhancing speaking skills. This discussion was explained in the context of two potential findings of this research.

4.2.1 Role Plays Enhance Students' Speaking Skills

The finding of Akmal (2018) from grade seven students was that the use of role plays had significant effect to the students' speaking skills. The finding also was supported by Arham, Yassi and Arafah (2016). As shown in Table 1, the results indicated that role plays could significantly enhance the speaking skills of the Grade 7 Chinese students at the level of 0.01 and by the comparison between the total mean scores of the pretest and posttest showed 15.80 and 17.45 respectively. The finding was also consistent with the finding of Krebt (2017) which indicated that the role plays were successful in encouraging students to communicate by providing a kind of interesting environment. Further, the finding supported the finding of Samsibar and Naro (2018). They found that the use of role plays in the secondary school had positive effects in English speaking.

As Bharathy (2013) stated that role plays enabled students to practice speaking skills in the real-life situations and improved students' speaking skills. Therefore, the students constructed the speaking skills based on their personal previous experiences in role plays activities. Students' successful performing role plays in front of the class can offer internal reinforcement. Accordingly, the results of this study and the previous findings from mentioned researches ensured that the students' speaking skills would be enhanced by using role plays.

The statistical results showed that the significant enhancement at the level of 0.01 could be observed in all four subskills. Nuranda (2018) conducted a research in the secondary level through role plays and concluded that fluency and pronunciation were increased significantly through implementing role plays. In this study, fluency and pronunciation were also enhanced significantly in the secondary school by using role plays. In role plays activities, the students have more chances to practice speaking and rehearse the role plays with their peers, the speaking skills were enhanced by more fluent and better pronunciation. When the students tried to prepare the scripts with proper vocabulary and correct grammar, accordingly, grammar and vocabulary were improved.

4.2.2 Positive Opinions on the Use of Role Plays in Enhancing Speaking Skills

The second finding of the research was from data analysis of questionnaire and interviews to obtain the students' opinions on role plays in enhancing speaking skills. The students had positive opinions towards role plays in enhancing speaking skills after the treatment with role plays.

Since role plays were considered as the real-life activities (Bharathy, 2013; Freeman, 2000; Tompkins, 1998) which related to the students' real-life and offered familiar topics for the students, it supported the students' positive opinion towards role plays in enhancing speaking skills. As role plays were joyful learning (Sato, 2001) in which students imagined themselves in others' roles to speak with easy



language, therefore, the students gained confidence and motivation (Maxwell, 1997; Kumaran, 2010) and eliminated anxiety of speaking (Kumaran, 2010; Krebt, 2017). In the process of role plays, the students rehearsed role plays with enough time to prepare, thus they probably successfully presented in front of the class and gained confidence. The positive opinion of students was supported by the researchers Sato (2001), Richards (2006), and Blatner (2009), recommending that a positive, motivating and encouraging class environment and teamwork were essential for creating enjoyable learning to enhance speaking skills. The role plays were effective in enhancing speaking skills (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010) and helpful for secondary level students to participate in role plays activities enthusiastically (Samsibar and Naro, 2018).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

According to the findings in this research, the researcher demonstrated that role plays were effective in enhancing speaking skills of Grade 7 Chinese students. The results revealed that speaking skills were enhanced more than before using the treatment of role plays. In addition, the students' opinions towards role plays in enhancing speaking skills were positive and at a high level.

5.2 Recommendations

First, teachers of English speaking are encouraged to use role plays to teach their students and provide maximum speaking time for students to prepare role plays. It is important to create activities for students on easy language and familiar topics for role plays.

Second, researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies but with students in different parts of China and at different grade levels.

Lastly, more studies are needed to show the educational outcomes of role plays in other skills, such as writing, vocabulary, and reading.

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