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**THE EFFECTS OF ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES ON THE
SPEAKING PERFORMANCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS LEARNING
ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL):
A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY IN AN GIANG PROVINCE**

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Abstract

Role-play has been widely used as a communicative technique for enhancing learners' speaking performance. However, classroom-based empirical evidence on its use with Vietnamese primary EFL learners remains limited. This quasi-experimental study examined the effects of role-play activities on Grade 4 learners' speaking performance and explored their perceptions of this technique. The participants were 98 Grade 4 learners from four intact classes at a public primary school in An Giang Province, Vietnam. Two classes were assigned as the experimental group and received speaking instruction through role-play activities, while the other two classes formed the control group and followed conventional speaking instruction. Data were collected through pre- and post-speaking tests, a post-intervention questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that both groups improved their speaking performance after the intervention; however, the experimental group demonstrated significantly greater gains in speaking performance than the control group. Findings from the questionnaire and interviews indicate that learners generally held positive perceptions of role-play activities, particularly regarding motivation, confidence, vocabulary development, pronunciation practice, and peer interaction. The findings suggest that role-play, when appropriately designed and supported, can serve as an effective instructional technique for developing speaking performance in primary school English classrooms. Implications for task design, teacher support, and classroom management are also provided.

Keywords: *An Giang Province, primary EFL learners, quasi-experimental study, role-play, speaking.*

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TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA HOẠT ĐỘNG ĐÓNG VAI ĐẾN KHẢ NĂNG NÓI CỦA HỌC SINH TIỂU HỌC HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ (EFL): NGHIÊN CỨU BÁN THỰC NGHIỆM TẠI TỈNH AN GIANG

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Tóm tắt

Hoạt động đóng vai được sử dụng rộng rãi như một kỹ thuật giao tiếp nhằm phát triển khả năng thể hiện kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của người học. Tuy nhiên, tại Việt Nam vẫn còn ít nghiên cứu thực nghiệm đánh giá hiệu quả của phương pháp này đối với học sinh tiểu học học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ. Nghiên cứu bán thực nghiệm này khảo sát tác động của hoạt động đóng vai đối với khả năng thể hiện kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của học sinh lớp 4 và tìm hiểu nhận thức của các em về hoạt động này. Đối tượng nghiên cứu gồm 98 học sinh thuộc bốn lớp 4 tại một trường tiểu học công lập ở tỉnh An Giang, Việt Nam. Hai lớp được xếp vào nhóm thực nghiệm và học nói thông qua hoạt động đóng vai, trong khi hai lớp còn lại thuộc nhóm đối chứng và học theo hình thức luyện nói thông thường. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua bài kiểm tra nói trước và sau thực nghiệm, bảng hỏi sau thực nghiệm và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Kết quả cho thấy cả hai nhóm đều tiến bộ sau thời gian can thiệp; tuy nhiên, nhóm thực nghiệm đạt mức tăng điểm khả năng thể hiện kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh cao hơn đáng kể so với nhóm đối chứng. Kết quả bảng hỏi và phỏng vấn cho thấy học sinh nhìn chung có nhận thức tích cực về hoạt động đóng vai, đặc biệt ở các khía cạnh động lực học tập, sự tự tin, sử dụng từ vựng, luyện phát âm và tương tác với bạn học. Kết quả nghiên cứu gợi ý rằng hoạt động đóng vai, khi được thiết kế và hỗ trợ phù hợp, có thể là một kỹ thuật hiệu quả trong việc phát triển khả năng thể hiện kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh ở lớp học tiếng Anh tiểu học. Nghiên cứu cũng đưa ra hàm ý đối với việc thiết kế nhiệm vụ học tập, hỗ trợ giáo viên và quản lý lớp học.

Từ khóa: *hoạt động đóng vai, học sinh tiểu học học tiếng Anh, khả năng thể hiện kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh, nghiên cứu bán thực nghiệm, tỉnh An Giang.*

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly globalized world, English serves as a key tool for international communication, educational access, and cross-cultural interaction (Crystal, 2003). Among the four language skills, speaking holds a particularly important place because it enables learners to express their ideas, respond to others, and engage in meaningful interaction (Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). In EFL contexts, speaking performance extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and effective communication (Goh & Burns, 2012; Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). For this reason, young learners should be provided with frequent opportunities to practice speaking in a supportive and purposeful learning environment. Role-play is an effective activity for this purpose, as it allows learners to participate in familiar communicative situations and use English for meaningful interactions with peers (Do & Nguyen, 2017; Ellis et al., 2020). With appropriate teacher support, role-play facilitates the development of vocabulary, pronunciation, turn-taking, and short conversational exchanges in contexts closely connected to everyday communication (Ellis et al., 2020; Tavakoli & Wright, 2020).

In Vietnam, English plays a central role in public education as the country advances its global communication and international integration (Do & Nguyen, 2017). However, speaking instruction in many EFL classrooms remains largely teacher-centered, relying on controlled practice and repetition of model sentences, which may restrict opportunities for meaningful communication and communicative competence development (Do & Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Phan, 2024; Richards, 2006). Therefore, learners often have limited opportunities to use English spontaneously in authentic interactions. Previous studies have identified problems in speaking instruction, including limited vocabulary, low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient interaction opportunities (Nguyen & Phan, 2024). These challenges are particularly important in primary education, where young learners need not only language support but also age-appropriate, engaging learning activities.

Although previous relevant studies have demonstrated the benefits of role-play for EFL learners' speaking performance and communicative engagement (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023; Xie, 2023; Zhu, 2024), most have focused on older learners, higher education contexts, or technology-supported environments. Research on primary EFL learners in regular classroom contexts remains limited, particularly in Vietnam. Moreover, few studies have examined speaking outcomes and young learners' perceptions of role-play. To address these gaps, this quasi-experimental study investigates the effects of role-play activities on Grade 4 learners' speaking performance in An Giang Province and explores their perceptions of participating in role-play activities.

The study was guided by the following questions:

- 1. To what extent do role-play activities influence the English-speaking performance of Grade 4 EFL learners?*
- 2. How do Grade 4 learners perceive their participation in role-play activities during English speaking lessons?*

2. Literature review

2.1. Role-play in communicative language teaching

Role-play is a widely used communicative language teaching technique that enables learners to engage in simulated real-life interactions, such as shopping, asking for directions, or discussing daily activities (Ellis et al., 2020; Richards, 2006). Because these situations are often familiar and meaningful, role-play is particularly suitable for young learners. In EFL

contexts such as Vietnam, where opportunities to use English outside the classroom are limited, role-play provides a valuable means of promoting communicative language use beyond the repetition of model sentences (Do & Nguyen, 2017).

The value of role-play is also consistent with task-based language teaching, as learners use English to accomplish communicative purposes rather than merely practice discrete linguistic forms (Ellis et al., 2020). Previous studies have reported positive effects of role-play on learners' speaking performance, confidence, and classroom participation (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023; Xie, 2023; Zhu, 2024). However, findings have varied across studies due to differences in participant characteristics, instructional contexts, intervention duration, and assessment methods. These variations suggest that improvements in speaking performance cannot be attributed to role-play itself, but may also depend on factors such as teacher guidance, task design, topic familiarity, preparation time, and peer support.

Research further indicates that the effectiveness of role-play depends on appropriate instructional scaffolding. Learners often benefit from pre-task support, including vocabulary input, useful expressions, and model dialogues, followed by opportunities for practice and teacher feedback on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and interaction (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018; Nguyen & Phan, 2024). Such support is particularly important for primary school learners, who may be shy and possess limited linguistic resources (Nguyen & Phan, 2024). Therefore, role-play should be viewed not as an inherently effective but as an instructional approach whose success largely depends on how well it is designed, implemented, and supported by the teacher.

2.2. Young learners and speaking performance

Young learners' speaking performance is most effectively supported through interactive, age-appropriate activities that provide meaningful opportunities for communication (Ellis et al., 2020). This view implies that task-based activities are particularly valuable because they encourage learners to use English for authentic purposes while benefiting from teacher guidance and peer interaction. Given their developing linguistic and cognitive abilities, primary school learners often require substantial instructional support, including vocabulary preparation, model dialogues, structured pair work, and gradual scaffolding toward more independent English use (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018; Nguyen & Phan, 2024).

Developing speaking proficiency is particularly challenging for young EFL learners because successful communication requires the simultaneous coordination of ideas, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and interactional skills (Skehan, 2021; Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). Their performance may be influenced by several factors, including task complexity, preparation time, and the level of classroom support available (Suzuki & Kormos, 2020; Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). In addition, emotional factors such as shyness, limited linguistic resources, and fear of making mistakes can reduce learners' willingness to participate in speaking activities (Nguyen & Phan, 2024).

Despite recognition of the benefits of interactive speaking activities for young learners, evidence regarding their effects on specific dimensions of speaking performance among primary EFL learners remains limited. Findings from studies involving older learners may not be directly transferable to children, who typically rely more heavily on teacher modeling, repetition, visual support, encouragement, and familiar communicative contexts. Further classroom-based research is therefore needed to examine how role-play influences young learners' speaking development when implemented through age-appropriate tasks and assessment criteria.

2.3. Role-play and speaking performance

Role-play has been widely used in EFL speaking lessons because it gives students a chance to use English in interaction, not only in repetition. In a role-play activity, learners are placed in a situation and asked to speak with their partners according to the roles they are given (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023; Ellis et al., 2020). This kind of practice is useful because students have to ask questions, answer their partners, choose suitable words, and try to continue the conversation. These actions are closely related to speaking performance, especially fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation, grammar, and interaction (Xie, 2023; Zhu, 2024). For young learners, role-play may also make speaking less stressful. When they speak as a customer, a seller, a friend, or another simple role, they may feel more comfortable than when they have to speak directly about themselves. This can encourage them to take part in speaking activities, particularly if they are shy or afraid of making mistakes (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023; Nguyen & Phan, 2024).

Still, role-play should not be understood as a technique that improves all aspects of speaking performance automatically. Its effects may be different across speaking components. For example, students may speak more fluently after joining role-play activities because they have more opportunities to practice with classmates. They may also become better at interaction because they need to listen and respond during the activity. However, pronunciation and grammar are different. These areas usually need correction, teacher feedback, and repeated practice. If students only perform the role-play without enough guidance, they may become more willing to speak, but their language may still be inaccurate. For this reason, speaking improvement should be examined in more detail, instead of being reported only as a general result.

Previous studies have reported that role-play can improve learners' speaking development, confidence, engagement, willingness to communicate, and participation (e.g., Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023; Lisa et al., 2025; Putri & Zaki, 2025). However, these studies do not answer all questions about the use of role-play in EFL classrooms. Many of them were conducted with secondary school students, university students, or learners with different proficiency levels. Primary school learners may respond differently because they are younger, have limited vocabulary, and often need more modelling and encouragement from the teacher. In addition, some studies mainly use students' opinions or classroom observations, while fewer studies combine these data with speaking scores from pre-tests and post-tests. Another point is that local teaching conditions are sometimes not discussed clearly. This matters because learners in some Vietnamese primary schools may not have many chances to use English outside the classroom.

Because of these gaps, more classroom-based research is needed. It is important to investigate how role-play affects primary school learners' speaking performance, which speaking components change after the intervention, and how learners feel about the activities. In An Giang Province, such research can provide more suitable evidence for teachers who want to use role-play in primary EFL classrooms.

2.4. Conceptual framework

The present study examines the relationship between role-play activities and learners' speaking performance. Role-play serves as the instructional intervention, while speaking performance is assessed through five components: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and interaction. Learners' perceptions, including their understanding of role-play, perceived speaking improvement, confidence, motivation, and willingness to participate, are examined to provide insights into their learning experiences.

The framework is grounded in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching, which emphasize meaningful communication and learner interaction (Ellis et al., 2020; Richards, 2006). From these perspectives, role-play may enhance speaking performance by providing opportunities to produce language, interact with peers, and negotiate meaning in classroom contexts (Ellis et al., 2020; Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). Repeated practice may improve fluency and vocabulary use, while teacher scaffolding through vocabulary preparation, model dialogues, guided practice, and feedback, may support pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and interactional skills (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018; Nguyen & Phan, 2024; Skehan, 2021; Suzuki & Kormos, 2020). Role-play may also reduce speaking anxiety by allowing learners to perform through assigned roles, thereby increasing confidence and participation (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023; Nguyen & Phan, 2024). In this study, learners' perceptions are included as supplementary evidence to help explain the quantitative findings rather than as mediating variables.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and participants

A quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design was employed to examine the effects of role-play activities on Grade 4 learners' English speaking performance. This design was considered appropriate because the participants were already organized into intact classes, making random assignment of individual learners impractical (Creswell, 2014; Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The participants were 98 Grade 4 learners from a public primary school in An Giang Province, Vietnam. They were selected through convenience sampling based on the researcher's access to the school. All learners shared similar linguistic backgrounds, with Vietnamese as their first language, and their English proficiency levels were generally between Pre A1 and A1/A2 according to the Cambridge Young Learner descriptors (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018). Four intact classes participated in the study. Two intact classes were assigned as the experimental group ($n = 48$) and received role-play-based speaking instruction. The remaining two intact classes formed the control group ($n = 50$) and received conventional speaking instruction following the regular Grade 4 English curriculum. No demographic variables other than grade level, class membership, and first-language background were included in the analysis.

Both groups studied the same curriculum topics and received the same number of teaching periods. The same English teacher taught both groups, and the lesson topics, target vocabulary, and main speaking objectives were kept comparable across the experimental and control classes. The key difference was the instructional procedure: the experimental group practiced through scaffolded role-play, whereas the control group followed conventional speaking practice. This arrangement was intended to reduce teacher-related and content-related differences while keeping the instructional technique as the main difference between the two groups. Because intact classes were used, the findings should be interpreted as evidence from a natural classroom context rather than as results from a fully randomized experiment.

3.2. Role-play intervention

The intervention lasted eight weeks and included 30 school periods, including testing and classroom instruction. Each period followed the regular primary-school timetable of approximately 35 minutes. Week 1 was used for the pre-test and orientation to the speaking tasks. The role-play intervention was implemented from Week 2 to Week 8, followed by the post-test and perception data collection at the end of the intervention. The speaking topics were

aligned with the Grade 4 English curriculum and included familiar situations such as self-introduction, daily routines, shopping, and asking for directions.

In the experimental group, speaking lessons followed a scaffolded role-play sequence. For each topic, the teacher introduced the communicative situation, reviewed useful vocabulary and expressions, provided short model dialogues, assigned roles, monitored pair or group preparation, supported student performance, and guided post-task reflection. Learners worked mainly in pairs or small groups before some performances were shared with the class. In the control group, learners practiced the same general topics through conventional classroom activities, including teacher presentation, repetition of model sentences, vocabulary practice, controlled question-and-answer activities, and short pair work without structured role-play performance.

The intervention was designed based on Willis's (1996) task-based learning framework and principles of CLT. It followed five stages: pre-task orientation, preparation and planning, task performance, feedback, and reflection. This sequence enabled learners to prepare for the communicative tasks, engage in meaningful role-play, receive feedback on their language use, and reflect on their performance. In line with CLT, role-play activities emphasized purposeful interaction, contextualized English language use, and learner participation (Ellis, 2003; Richards, 2006; Willis, 1996). Table 1 presents the detailed procedure.

Table 1. Procedure of the Role-play Intervention

Stage	Time	Teacher support	Student activity
1. Pre-task: Introduction and orientation	About 5 minutes	Introduced the communicative situation, clarified objectives, reviewed vocabulary, expressions, and model sentences.	Listened, answered guiding questions, and became familiar with the situation.
2. Pre-task: Preparation and planning	About 8 minutes	Assigned roles, monitored pairs/groups, and provided language support when needed.	Planned responses, practiced target vocabulary and sentence patterns, and prepared roles.
3. Task cycle: Role-play performance	About 12 minutes	Observed performances and encouraged communication.	Performed the role-play in pairs, groups, or in front of the class.
4. Post-task: Feedback and discussion	About 7 minutes	Provided constructive feedback on language use, pronunciation, fluency, and interaction.	Listened to comments, asked and answered follow-up questions, and noted useful language.
5. Post-task: Reflection	About 3 minutes	Guided learners to reflect on strengths and areas for improvement.	Identified what they did well and what they needed to practice further.

3.3. Data collection instruments

3.3.1. Pre/Post tests

The speaking pre-test and post-test were designed as brief role-play-based speaking tasks on familiar Grade 4 topics. Each test lasted approximately three to five minutes. Learners interacted with either a partner or the teacher using prompts related to familiar communicative situations. Their performances were assessed with a five-criterion rubric covering fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and interaction. The speaking assessment

rubric was adapted from the Cambridge English Qualifications framework for young learners, particularly the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers, and A2 Flyers speaking descriptors (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018). Each criterion was rated on a five-point scale, resulting in a maximum score of 25.

Two qualified English teachers independently rated the performances. The final score for each student was the average of the two raters' scores. Pearson correlation coefficients were used as an index of inter-rater consistency, and this index should be understood as consistency rather than absolute agreement. Although the pre-test and post-test used different role-play situations to reduce practice effects, the tasks were designed to be comparable in length, communicative demands, topic familiarity, and assessment criteria. The use of different test topics, the absence of blind scoring, and possible task-familiarity effects are acknowledged as methodological limitations.

Table 2. Sample Topics with Prompts for Speaking Tests

Test	Role-play situation	Roles	Prompts
Pre-test	Meeting a new friend	Student A: a new student; Student B: a classmate	Name and age; class and school; favourite subject; hobby.
Pre-test	Talking about daily routines	Student A: a student; Student B: a classmate	Time to get up; school activities; after-school activities; favourite daily activity.
Post-test	At the toy shop	Student A: a customer; Student B: a shop assistant	Ask about a toy; ask the price; say why you like it; decide whether to buy it.
Post-test	Asking for directions	Student A: a visitor; Student B: a local student	Ask where a place is; ask how to get there; ask how far it is; say thank you.

The speaking rubric assessed five areas: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, accuracy, and interaction (see Appendix A).

3.3.2. Questionnaires

A post-intervention questionnaire was administered to the experimental group to examine learners' perceptions of role-play activities. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items grouped into three clusters: learners' understanding of role-play activities, perceived effects on speaking performance, and attitudes towards participation. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Likert, 1932).

The questionnaire was first written in English and then translated into Vietnamese so that Grade 4 learners could understand the statements clearly. Two experienced English teachers reviewed the items for clarity, age appropriateness, and relevance to the research objectives. The questionnaire was piloted with 20 learners with similar characteristics to the main participants but who were not included in the main study. Ambiguous wording was revised after the pilot stage.

3.3.3. Interview

After the intervention, six learners from the experimental group voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored learners' enjoyment of role-play activities, perceived effects on speaking performance, and difficulties encountered during participation. Each interview lasted approximately ten minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese to allow learners to express their ideas comfortably. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for reporting. The

translations were checked by two experienced English teachers to preserve the meaning of learners' responses.

The interviewees were coded as Inter-1 to Inter-6 to protect their identities. The interview questions focused on whether learners enjoyed role-play, which situations they liked, whether role-play helped them improve speaking, whether they felt more confident, what difficulties they experienced, and whether they wanted role-play to continue in future speaking lessons.

3.4. Reliability of the instruments

The reliability of the speaking scores and questionnaire was examined before the main analysis. For the speaking tests, Pearson correlation coefficients showed high inter-rater consistency: $r = .992, p < .001$ for the control group pre-test; $r = .988, p < .001$ for the control group post-test; $r = .992, p < .001$ for the experimental group pre-test; and $r = .996, p < .001$ for the experimental group post-test. These values suggest that the two raters ranked learners' performances consistently. In future studies, intraclass correlation coefficients should also be reported to provide a stronger index of absolute agreement. Therefore, the speaking scores were considered sufficiently consistent for subsequent statistical analyses.

For the questionnaire, internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha. The overall 30-item questionnaire achieved good reliability, and the three clusters achieved acceptable to good reliability, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability Coefficients of the Questionnaire

Scale / Cluster	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	Interpretation
Overall questionnaire	30	.894	Good
Cluster 1: Understanding of role-play activities	8	.771	Acceptable
Cluster 2: Perceived effects on speaking performance	12	.819	Good
Cluster 3: Attitudes towards participation	10	.760	Acceptable

3.5. Data collection and analysis

Quantitative data from the speaking tests were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20. Descriptive statistics were calculated first. Independent-samples t-tests were used to examine pre-test equivalence and post-test differences between the two groups. Paired-samples t-tests were used to examine within-group changes from pre-test to post-test. To strengthen the interpretation of the intervention effect, overall gain scores were compared between the experimental and control groups using an independent-samples t-test. In addition, post-test scores for the five speaking subscales were compared between the two groups to identify which aspects of speaking performance differed after the intervention. Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's d . Negatively worded items were reverse-coded before calculating the overall and cluster mean scores. Questionnaire data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients (Cronk, 2018; Stockemer, 2019).

Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically. The process involved reading the transcripts, coding meaningful units, grouping similar codes into categories, identifying recurring themes, and reviewing the themes against the data. The first researcher conducted the initial coding, and a second experienced English teacher reviewed the codes and themes.

Differences were discussed until agreement was reached (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Flick, 2018).

3.6. Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the school administration, parents, and learners before data collection. Learners were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study without negative consequences. All personal information was kept confidential, and pseudonyms or codes were used when reporting interview data.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Speaking test results

Descriptive statistics were first calculated for the speaking pre-test and post-test scores. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Performance

Group	Test	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Control	Pre-test	50	5.0	21.0	11.09	3.53
Control	Post-test	50	7.5	21.0	12.68	2.71
Experimental	Pre-test	48	6.0	18.5	10.31	3.63
Experimental	Post-test	48	11.0	24.5	17.96	3.96

Before the intervention, the control group ($M = 11.09$, $SD = 3.53$) and the experimental group ($M = 10.31$, $SD = 3.63$) had comparable levels of speaking performance. After the intervention, both groups improved, but the experimental group achieved a much higher post-test mean score ($M = 17.96$, $SD = 3.96$) than the control group ($M = 12.68$, $SD = 2.71$).

Table 5. Between-group Comparisons before and after the Intervention

Test	Group comparison	Mean difference	t	df	p	Effect size
Pre-test	Experimental - Control	-0.78	-1.08	95.55	.285	d = -0.22
Post-test	Experimental - Control	5.28	7.73	82.68	< .001	d = 1.56

The independent-samples t-test showed no statistically significant pre-test difference between the two groups, $t(95.55) = -1.08$, $p = .285$. This indicates that the two groups were broadly comparable in speaking performance before the intervention. In contrast, the post-test difference was statistically significant, $t(82.68) = 7.73$, $p < .001$. The effect size was large, Cohen's $d = 1.56$, suggesting that role-play-based instruction was associated with a substantial improvement in learners' speaking performance. However, because the study used intact classes and non-blind scoring, this effect should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Table 6. Within-group Changes and Gain-score Comparison

Analysis	Group / Comparison	Mean gain	SD of gain	t	df	p	Effect size
Paired-samples t-test	Control: Post-test - Pre-test	1.59	2.00	5.60	49	< .001	dz = 0.79
Paired-samples t-test	Experimental: Post-test - Pre-test	7.65	2.40	21.70	47	< .001	dz = 3.19

Analysis	Group / Comparison	Mean gain	SD of gain	t	df	p	Effect size
Independent-samples t-test	Experimental gain - Control gain	6.06	-	13.55	91.53	< .001	d = 2.75

The exceptionally large effect size should be interpreted with caution. Several factors may have contributed to this result, including the intensive role-play practice, teacher guidance and feedback provided throughout the intervention, and learners' increasing familiarity with the speaking tasks. Although two independent raters assessed the speaking performances, blind scoring was not employed in the speaking assessments. Therefore, although the findings suggest a strong positive impact of role-play-based instruction, the magnitude of the effect should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 7. Between-group Comparisons of Speaking Performance Subscale Scores at Post-test

Speaking dimension	Control post-test Mean	Experimental post-test Mean	Mean difference	t	p	Effect size (d)
Fluency	2.80	3.69	0.89	4.74	< .001	0.96
Pronunciation and intonation	2.38	3.49	1.11	7.86	< .001	1.60
Vocabulary use	2.42	3.51	1.09	6.68	< .001	1.36
Grammatical accuracy	2.39	3.59	1.20	7.29	< .001	1.48
Interaction	2.69	3.68	0.99	6.72	< .001	1.36

Table 7 presents the post-test comparisons of speaking performance subscales between the experimental and control groups. The results show that the experimental group outperformed the control group across all five dimensions. The largest mean difference was observed in grammatical accuracy ($MD = 1.20$, $t = 7.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.48$), followed by pronunciation and intonation ($MD = 1.11$, $t = 7.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.60$), vocabulary use ($MD = 1.09$, $t = 6.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.36$), interaction ($MD = 0.99$, $t = 6.72$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.36$), and fluency ($MD = 0.89$, $t = 4.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.96$). These results indicate that role-play-based instruction contributed to significantly better performance in all speaking dimensions, with large effect sizes, particularly for pronunciation and intonation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, and interaction.

4.2. Questionnaire results

The questionnaire was administered to the 48 learners in the experimental group after the intervention. The overall mean score was 3.93 ($SD = .47$), indicating generally positive perceptions of role-play activities.

Table 8. Overall Perceptions of Role-play Activities

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Learners' perceptions of role-play activities in speaking lessons	48	2.93	4.77	3.93	.47	Positive

Table 9. Learners' Understanding of Role-play Activities

Items	SD & D		N		SA & A	
	F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
1. I know what to do when I take part in a role-play activity.	0	0.0	0	0.0	48	100
2. I understand the roles given by my teacher.	4	8.4	11	22.9	33	68.8
3. The role-play situations are easy for me to understand.	2	4.2	5	10.4	41	85.4
4. My teacher gives clear instructions before role-play activities.	2	4.2	8	16.7	38	79.2
5. I know what words and sentences I can use in role-play activities.	1	2.1	17	35.4	30	62.5
6. The role-play topics are familiar to me.	4	8.4	7	14.6	37	77.1
7. Sometimes I do not understand what to say in role-play activities.	3	6.3	9	18.8	36	75.0
8. I can follow the steps of role-play activities in English class.	4	8.4	11	22.9	33	68.8

Note. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded when calculating overall perception scores.

Table 9 shows that learners generally had a clear understanding of the role-play activities. Most learners agreed that they knew what to do, understood the assigned roles and situations, and could follow the teacher's instructions. The familiar topics also helped learners participate more easily. However, 75.0% of the learners reported that they sometimes did not know what to say during role-play activities, suggesting that more vocabulary support, model sentences, and preparation time are still needed.

Table 10. Learners' Perceptions of the Effects of Role-play on Speaking Performance

Items	SD & D		N		SA & A	
	F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
9. Role-play activities help me speak English more fluently.	1	2.1	11	22.9	36	75.0
10. Role-play helps me improve my pronunciation.	1	2.1	7	14.6	40	83.3
11. I can use new vocabulary better during role-play activities.	3	6.3	8	16.7	37	77.1
12. Role-play activities help me speak in complete sentences.	4	8.3	14	29.2	30	62.6
13. I feel more confident speaking English after participating in role-play.	1	2.1	15	31.3	32	66.7
14. Role-play helps me communicate better with my classmates in English.	0	0.0	14	29.2	34	70.8
15. I can respond more quickly in conversations because of role-play practice.	2	4.2	12	25.0	34	70.8
16. Role-play activities help me listen and respond in English.	1	2.1	13	27.1	34	70.8
17. I am more willing to speak English in class after role-play sessions.	3	6.3	13	27.1	32	66.7
18. I feel nervous when I speak English in role-play activities.	10	20.8	27	56.3	11	22.9
19. Role-play activities help me improve my English speaking skills.	1	2.1	6	12.5	41	85.4
20. Role-play activities help me speak English more often in class.	4	8.3	12	25.0	32	66.7

Note. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded when calculating overall perception scores.

Most learners perceived role-play activities as helpful for improving their English speaking performance. The highest level of agreement was found for overall speaking improvement (85.4%), followed by pronunciation (83.3%), vocabulary use (77.1%), and fluency (75.0%). Many learners also agreed that role-play helped them communicate better with classmates in English (70.8%), respond more quickly in conversations (70.8%), and listen and respond in English (70.8%). These results suggest that role-play created useful opportunities for learners to practice speaking in meaningful classroom situations. Nevertheless, 22.9% of the learners still reported feeling nervous when speaking in role-play activities, while 56.3% were neutral on this item. Therefore, teachers should provide more preparation time and supportive practice through pairs or small groups before asking learners to perform in front of the whole class.

Table 11. Learners' Attitudes Towards Participating in Role-play Activities

Items	SD & D		N		SA & A	
	F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
21. I enjoy participating in role-play activities in English class.	4	8.3	11	22.9	33	68.8
22. I feel excited when my teacher organizes role-play activities.	2	4.2	12	25.0	34	70.8
23. I like performing role-plays in front of my classmates.	6	12.5	22	45.8	20	41.7
24. I want my teacher to use role-play activities more often.	6	12.5	12	25.0	30	62.5
25. Role-play activities make me more interested in learning English.	3	6.3	13	27.1	32	66.7
26. I would like to continue practicing speaking through role-play in the future.	1	2.1	11	22.9	36	75.0
27. Role-play activities make me feel relaxed when speaking English.	2	4.2	8	16.7	38	79.2
28. I learn better when I practice speaking through role-play.	0	0.0	8	16.7	40	83.3
29. I prefer role-play to other speaking activities.	2	4.2	14	29.2	32	66.7
30. I do not think role-play helps me improve my speaking skills.	38	79.2	8	16.7	2	4.2

Note. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded when calculating overall perception scores.

The learners' attitudes were generally favorable. Most learners enjoyed role-play, felt excited when it was organized, wanted to continue practicing speaking through role-play, and believed they learned better through this technique. However, only 41.7% liked performing role-plays in front of classmates, while 45.8% were neutral. This indicates that public performance remained challenging for many learners and that teachers should provide gradual exposure, supportive feedback, and small-group practice before asking learners to perform in front of the whole class.

4.3. Interview findings

The interview data supported the questionnaire results and provided further insight into learners' experiences. Three themes were identified: positive attitudes towards role-play, perceived benefits for speaking development, and challenges during participation.

4.3.1. Positive attitudes towards role-play

Most interviewees reported that role-play made speaking lessons more enjoyable and lively. They appreciated the opportunity to speak with classmates rather than only repeat after

the teacher. Inter-1 stated, "I feel more confident when I speak English through role-plays because I can practice with my friends." Inter-2 also explained, "Role-plays make the classroom more interesting and lively, so I am not afraid of speaking English." These comments suggest that role-play created a more supportive atmosphere and reduced learners' fear of speaking.

4.3.2. Perceived benefits for speaking development

Learners believed that role-play helped them remember vocabulary, practice useful sentence patterns, and respond more quickly in short conversations. Inter-4 noted, "When I practice role-plays, I can speak with my friends and answer more quickly." Several learners also mentioned that pair and group work helped them learn from classmates and feel less nervous. Overall, learners perceived role-play as helpful for confidence, fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation practice, and interaction.

4.3.3. Challenges during role-play

The main challenges were limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, classroom noise, and insufficient preparation time for unfamiliar situations. Inter-3 explained, "Sometimes there are many new words in a role-play situation, so it is difficult for me to say my ideas in English." Inter-5 added, "I do not always know which words or sentences I should use when speaking with my friends." These findings indicate that young learners need clear instructions, pre-task language support, short model dialogues, and enough rehearsal time before role-play performance.

4.4. Discussion

The findings suggest that the role-play intervention contributed to improved speaking performance among Grade 4 EFL learners, particularly in comparison to conventional instruction. This improvement aligns with the study's theoretical framework, which posits that role-play shifts the focus from teacher-led interaction and the repetition of model sentences to meaningful, learner-centered communication. Unlike mechanical speaking drills, role-play required learners to use English for meaningful purposes within familiar classroom situations. Such activities likely encouraged learners to retrieve vocabulary, organize simple utterances, and negotiate meaning in a less formal but functional context. These findings support previous studies showing that role-play promotes oral participation and communicative language use (Dwiyanti & Lolita, 2023; Xie, 2023; Zhu, 2024).

The results can be interpreted through the lens of CLT and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). From a CLT perspective, role-play created opportunities for learners to practice English language as communication rather than as isolated forms. From a task-based perspective, the sequence of pre-task orientation, preparation, performance, and feedback provided learners with a balance of communicative practice and instructional support. This structured approach may explain why the intervention was particularly beneficial for vocabulary use, grammar, and interaction. As noted in the literature, young learners often struggle to manage the simultaneous demands of thinking of ideas, choosing words, and using correct grammar. The large gains observed in grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use suggest that the use of model dialogues and pre-task language preparation reduced the cognitive load, allowing learners to apply expressions in contextualized tasks.

However, the findings reinforce the literature's notice that role-play is not automatically effective. The positive outcomes were heavily dependent on specific instructional conditions and scaffolding. These forms of support, including familiar topics, model dialogues, vocabulary preparation, pair rehearsal, teacher monitoring, and post-task feedback, were important because young learners possessed limited linguistic resources and experienced

speaking anxiety. The perception and interview data confirm this interpretation, while learners reported increased confidence and interaction, while a significant portion still reported feeling nervous or struggling when they lacked specific vocabulary. This highlights the necessity of the ‘scaffolded role-play sequence’ used in this study to mitigate the emotional factors that can hinder speaking performance in primary EFL classrooms.

The present study addresses a gap in the literature by providing evidence from an ordinary Vietnamese primary classroom without the aid of technology-supported tools or high-cost materials. This suggests that structured role-play is a practical and effective technique even in resource-limited contexts. Pedagogically, the findings imply that teachers should view role-play as a supported communicative task rather than just a performance. Despite the positive results, the large effect size should be interpreted with caution due to the quasi-experimental design, the use of intact classes, and the lack of blind scoring, which may have introduced rater expectation bias. Therefore, while role-play shows potential for Vietnamese Grade 4 learners, its implementation must be carefully planned, designed, and supported by the teacher.

5. Conclusion and implications

The findings suggest that role-play is an effective communicative task that supports young learners’ speaking performance when implemented with appropriate scaffolding and teacher support. Learners who received role-play-based instruction demonstrated greater gains in speaking performance than those receiving conventional instruction and reported positive perceptions, particularly regarding motivation, confidence, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and interaction.

Several pedagogical implications emerge from these findings. Role-play can be integrated into primary EFL classrooms as a communicative technique, particularly when activities are linked to learners’ everyday experiences. To maximize its effectiveness, teachers should scaffold role-play carefully by providing vocabulary, modeling dialogues, assigning clear roles, and giving sufficient preparation time. Pair and small-group role-plays may help reduce speaking anxiety and increase opportunities for oral participation. Feedback should focus not only on grammatical accuracy but also on fluency, pronunciation, interaction, and communicative effectiveness. Teacher training programs should include practical guidance on designing, facilitating, and assessing role-play activities.

The study has limitations. The study was conducted in a single primary school using intact classes, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Although the pre-test and post-test used comparable tasks, differences in topic familiarity may have influenced performance. Furthermore, although two raters assessed the speaking performances, blind scoring was not implemented; therefore, rater expectancy bias cannot be completely ruled out. The questionnaire was administered only after the intervention, preventing an examination of changes in learners’ perceptions over time. In addition, inter-rater reliability was assessed using Pearson correlations rather than intraclass correlation coefficients, which provide stronger evidence of scoring agreement. Future studies should involve larger samples, blind scoring procedures, classroom observations, and longitudinal designs to further examine the long-term effects of role-play on speaking performance.

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Appendix A

English Speaking Performance Assessment Rubric (5-point scale)

Areas	1 point (Weak)	2 points (Average)	3 points (Good)	4 points (Very Good)	5 points (Excellent)
1. Fluency	Speaks very slowly, with many hesitations and single-word answers. Needs much help to continue.	Uses short phrases or simple sentences but often pauses and needs support.	Can produce simple sentences with some pauses. Can continue a familiar exchange with support.	Speaks in simple and connected sentences with a few pauses in familiar situations.	Speaks clearly and smoothly in familiar situations and can maintain a short exchange.
2. Pronunciation	Often difficult to understand; pronunciation errors frequently affect meaning.	Usually understandable, but several pronunciation errors require listener effort.	Mostly clear pronunciation; minor errors do not usually prevent understanding.	Clear pronunciation with appropriate word stress and intonation in familiar language.	Very clear pronunciation and natural intonation for familiar words, phrases, and short sentences.
3. Vocabulary	Uses very limited basic words and often cannot express simple ideas.	Uses some familiar words and phrases, but vocabulary is limited and repeated.	Uses appropriate vocabulary for familiar topics, with occasional misuse or repetition.	Uses a good range of topic-related vocabulary with little repetition.	Uses a wide range of familiar vocabulary accurately and appropriately for the task.
4. Accuracy	Uses single words or very simple sentence patterns; frequent errors make meaning unclear.	Uses simple sentence patterns with frequent errors, but meaning is sometimes clear.	Uses simple sentences with some grammatical errors that do not usually block meaning.	Uses familiar sentence patterns accurately most of the time, with few errors.	Uses familiar grammatical structures accurately and flexibly in short exchanges.
5. Interaction	Gives very short responses and needs much support; rarely asks or answers follow-up questions.	Can answer simple questions but responds slowly and needs prompts to continue.	Can maintain a short conversation on familiar topics with occasional support.	Interacts well, responds appropriately, and sometimes asks simple follow-up questions.	Interacts confidently in familiar situations, responds clearly, and maintains a short conversation.

Total Score Calculation Formula

Learners are assessed based on five criteria, each scored from 1 to 5. The total score is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Total Score} = (\text{Fluency} + \text{Pronunciation} + \text{Vocabulary} + \text{Accuracy} + \text{Interaction})$$