The Effect of Role-playing Tasks on the Speaking Ability of Iranian Pre-intermediate ESP Learners

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of role-playing tasks on the speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners. To this aim, the researchers examined the students' speaking ability in two groups: the experimental group and the control group. Twenty four male and female ESP learners at pre-intermediate level were selected after taking a pre-test. Then, they were randomly assigned into two groups. In the experimental group, role-playing tasks were used for teaching conversation, but the control group was exposed to the conventional method of teaching speaking. After 18 sessions of treatment, a post-test was conducted in order to measure the students' speaking ability. Regarding the data analysis, two independent and paired sample t-tests were used to analyze the data, collected using three testing instruments: Longman Placement Test (2004); the semi-structured interviews; and SPSS software version 20. Based on the inferential statistics, the participants in the experimental group showed a significantly better performance in the post-test. It was concluded that the treatment provided for the experimental group had a positive effect on the learners' speaking ability. Furthermore, the participants' attitudes towards role-playing tasks and their roles in language learning were positive. It is expected that ESP teachers and textbook writers, syllabus designers, and material producers will benefit from the findings of this research.

Keywords: Communicative Activities, Speaking Skill, Task, ESP, Role-playing

1. Introduction

Students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) usually have limited opportunities to speak English outside the classroom and have also limited exposure to English speakers in the international community. Richards and Renandya (2002) pointed out that a large percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking. Speaking is used in most daily interactions and transactions and that is why most of the researchers, language experts, curriculum designers, teachers, and language trainers claim that speaking is the main core feature of the second language learning and teaching. People who know a language are referred to as speakers of the language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak. Hence, speaking is considered as one of the central elements of communication in EFL and ESP teaching. It provides opportunities for learners to express their meaning orally.

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Speaking is one of the four macro skills necessary for effective communication in any language, particularly when speakers are not using their mother tongue. Most of the time, English learners find it difficult to improve their speaking ability and establish their relationships with others. Since English is a universal language used, as a means of communication, speaking skill should be developed along with other skills so that these integrated skills increase communication achievement of the learners in an international community. For many people, mastering speaking abilities is the ultimate goal of acquiring a foreign or second language and the other skills are overshadowed by its significance (McCarthy, 1998; Nunan, 2004). Thus, teachers are required to focus on the spoken form of FL and try to help students engage in speaking. In other words, when students are engaged in dialogues, their motivation and self-confidence will enhance and help them with their speaking abilities. To teach speaking abilities, teachers used to give some patterns to focus on some particular elements of language form. They tried to continue practicing by repetitions. The teacher provided some opportunities for the students to listen and to orally repeat certain strings of language that may pose some linguistic difficulty (Brown, 2007).

As a great success in teaching a foreign language, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has proved itself very effective in bringing about real situations of language use in language learning setting. Still, as Kumaravadivelu (2006) comments, the more the novelty of communicative language teaching is wearing thin, the more "Task-Based Language Teaching" (TBLT) is gaining importance. In other words, in the post-modern era, the word "communicative" is gradually being replaced by the word "task". Hence, task-based instruction is shedding a new insight on teaching English as a foreign language. As the title of this research shows, its underlying purpose is to investigate the effectiveness of role-playing on the speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners. So, the present study set out to seek appropriate answers to the following questions:

Question 1. Does role-playing have any significant effect on the speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners?

Question 2. What are Iranian ESP learners' attitudes towards using role-playing tasks in conversation classes?

2. Review of Literature

The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the beginnings of what we now recognize as a "communicative approach" as we better understand the functions that must be incorporated into a classroom (Brown, 2007). Meaning was important in communicative language teaching (CLT) while grammar was ignored completely. Grammar would be acquired unconsciously. During the last decades, technology has progressed so fast and learners are required to cope with them. CLT was more appropriate because it required interacting with speakers of other languages especially from the developed countries in order to receive advantages of technology and cultural interactions. Scholars strongly believed that students would learn language fast if they interacted with other language users in different contexts to negotiate meaning (Richards, 2006) Richards popularized group work, role-play, and project work as well-known activities of CLT. Zainudin (2011) and his colleagues expressed that these activities created an information gap. Richards assumed that communication must take place to narrow the gap and accomplish the task. The focus of these activities was to negotiate meaning. It happened in a real situation. So, these activities increased the learners' chances to involve in learning and acquiring the language.

The tenets of communicative language teaching put emphasis on students' ability to use language in real-life situations, which were used in foreign and second language classroom. In task-based instruction, the priority is not the *forms* of language, but rather the functional *purposes* for which language must be used. While content-based instruction focuses on subject-matter content, task-based instruction focuses on a whole set of real world tasks themselves (Brown, 2007). This model offers the opportunity to "natural" learning inside the classroom and emphasizes meaning over form, but can also cater for learning form. Furthermore, when learners are preparing their task, they are expected to consider

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language form in general rather than concentrating on a single form. It is intrinsically motivating and compatible with learner-centered educational philosophy. In addition, through different situations students have many opportunities to test their speaking skills and integrate the other skills.

2.1. Role Playing

The history of role-play goes back to ancient times of Greeks when the play was used as a medium for instruction. Probably the first role-play session was run when a master teaching a pupil, said to him: 'Act as if I am a customer and you are serving me'. The pupil played his role. The master played his role as a would-be-customer. When they discussed their roles afterwards, play was used as method of instruction (Dorathy & Mahalakshmi, 2011). The educational use of role-play in recent years has become more widespread. As Newmark points out, (Lakhdar Barker, 2006), imaginary play has always been a powerful educational device both for children and adults. By creating a dramatic situation (role-playing) in a classroom by relabeling objects and people in the room the teacher can expand the classroom indefinitely and provide imaginary natural contexts for the language being used.

Harmer (2001) advocates the use of role-play for three reasons:

a)   It is fun and motivating;

b)   Quieter students get the chance to express themselves in a more direct way;

c)   The word of the classroom is broadened to include the outside word.

Nguyen (2017) in his study compared the effect of role plays on young learners with adults with two different numbers of learners. Results showed that there is a significant difference in the scores obtained from the adult group in the post test and found that the role-plays in pairs and small groups helped the weak students and role-plays should be used in the working adult students. That is, using role plays was shown to exert a positive effect on the speaking ability improvement of the learners compared to busy and young ones. It was observed that those learners who received more attention and scaffolds showed greater improvement in their speaking. According to Tompkins (1998), role-playing or simulation is a valuable technique for foreign language learning. It gives the learners opportunities to act out various roles chosen to represent actual role that would be in the field of situation. Role-playing is a good technique to measure interaction in foreign language classroom, and in teacher and management trainings. It represents a shift of emphasis to more realistic conversation and communication.

Thus, incorporating role-playing in the classroom adds variety to the activity of the classroom. It is an opportunity for language production along with fun. Real situation can be created and students can benefit from practice; especially if it is created for a particular domain. The teaching of English for specific purposes in its early days was largely motivated by the need to communicate across language in areas such as commerce and technology. A key feature of an ESP course is that the aims and content of the course are oriented to the specific needs of learners. ESP courses then focus on the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English. Typically, ESP students are adult learners. They are also often a homogenous group in terms of learning goals, although not always in terms of language proficiency. So, due to the importance of speaking skill in the process of learning a foreign language and difficulties of Iranian ESP learners in learning this important skill, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of role-playing as a technique on enhancing speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners.

3. Methodology

This study took the advantage of a quantitative, quasi-experimental research design. The participants, who were the staff of a hotel in Chabahar, Iran, were 24 learners at the pre-intermediate level selected by taking a pre-test. Their age range was above twenty-five. They were male and female learners

but the gender was not under the focus of this research. These participants were in two groups: twelve participants in the control group and the twelve others were in the treatment or experimental group. These two groups were not selected randomly, but they were assigned to treatment and experimental groups randomly. At first, the learners participated in a placement test conducted by the language center affiliated to the English department of Chabahar Maritime University to measure how much they know English. On the basis of this examination, the language center detected the proficiency level of participants and their homogeneity. An interview was also conducted to determine their level in spoken English. The material chosen to be taught by the English department was *Be My Guest: for the Hotel Industry* (2008) publish by Cambridge University.

3.1. Data Collection Procedure

This study was held at a hotel in Chabahar, Iran in 2017.ALongman Placement Test was administered prior to the study to ensure that learners were at the same level of proficiency. Basically, to demonstrate the proficiency level of the participants, four macro-skills of language learning were tested. Then, to evaluate the level of learners' speaking ability, a speaking examination as a pre-test was administered in both control and experimental groups. In the interview, the learners were asked some questions about their personal backgrounds suitable for pre-intermediate learners, such as their age, academic major, hometown and their mother tongue. After the administration of the pre-test examination which provided data for the test of participants' homogeneity, the treatments began in research groups for eighteen sessions. It took six weeks, and was held three times a week lasting for two hours of teaching. In the experimental group, role-playing was conducted in performing conversation through in-group activities. To follow an overall lesson planning, the researcher tried to observe three steps in the experimental group.

Step 1. Preview (Pre-Task Phase)

To help the learners prepare for what they were going to act out in the speaking, the researcher asked several questions about the topic to activate their background knowledge. Then, some relevant vocabularies with preview activities were practiced.

Step 2. Listening and Speaking (Task Phase)

After a preview activity, the researcher played the listening material for a general comprehension to give the chance to the learners to get the main idea and act out the material later. At this stage, learners were expected to listen to the pronunciation of the new words and learn the structure of the phases or sentences. The following week, learners were given a text in the form of dialogues. They were asked to read them together, to get the gist, and to express their ideas about the content of the role they were going to perform. Finally, learners were asked to act out and play the role of each individual according to the tape.

Step 3. Acting out or role-playing

In the final stage, dialogues were given to the learners to practice each situation with one another. The situations were examples of real-world conversations related to the hotel staff, required to meet the needs of following personnel: receptionists, porter, waiters/waitress, room-attendants, technicians, and kitchen staff. To conduct role-playing, the teacher's role was very significant. The teacher helped the learners whenever it was needed. Each role-play was performed at least twice with learners changing their roles. In group situations the competent learners acted out the role-play to the whole class.

The teacher used to take one of the roles if needed. The teacher avoided making corrections until role-playing was finished. The teacher was also a facilitator. As learners kept on practicing the role-play, they sometimes found that they had problems with understanding new words and phrases. In the practice stage, the teacher had the chance to 'feed-in' the appropriate information. This required the teacher to act as a sort of facilitator or a spectator monitoring the class and offering assistance when it was necessary at

the end. The teacher sometimes engaged in the classroom activity as a participant; that is, when the situation required, the teacher got involved and took part in the role-playing.

But, in the control group, the conventional method of teaching speaking was used. That is, the teacher asked questions to warm up the learners and practiced relevant vocabulary items with preview activities. In the control group, the teacher used reading tasks and conversation between two learners without giving them the chance to act out role-playing. Finally, both groups' speaking ability was measured after the treatment and quantitative data was collected through post-test. Post-test was an interview recorded. The interviews were rated by two PhD. candidates in TEFL. Finally, an 8- item semi-structured interview was used to assess how the participants of the experimental group felt about using role-playing tasks and its effect on developing their speaking ability.

3.2. Data Analysis

The quantitative analyses of the collected data were conducted with the aid of SPSS (version 22) software. For the purpose of answering questions proposed by this research, at first descriptive statistics and an independent sample t-test were conducted to identify the kind of data, data distribution, and data comparison to observe the groups' homogeneity and provide data to compare with the post-test data. An independent sample t-test was used to compare post-tests to participants on role-plays. Also, two paired sample t-test were used to evaluate whether the two groups had gained any knowledge of speaking due to the treatment they received. A paired sample t-tests was used to compare the mean scores for two different groups (control and experimental). A test of Cronbach's Alpha formula and Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient were conducted to describe the internal consistency of the evaluation. Also, the data obtained from the interview were analyzed using descriptive analysis method.

4. **Results**

In order to ensure the comparability of both groups, the control and experimental group's performance were compared. All the participants were administered a pre-test of speaking to ensure they were all homogenous.

Table 1.The Descriptive Results of the Speaking Pre-test

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest for Both Groups	Control	12	11.25	1.35	.39
	Experimental	12	11.50	1.38	.39

The results given in table 1 indicate that the difference between the means obtained by the control and the experimental (role-play) group is 0.25. Based on the scores descriptors, scores 1 to 5 were considered basic, 6 to 10 elementary, 11 to 15 pre-intermediate and 16 to 20 intermediate learners. Accordingly, as observable from table 1, all of the learners are in the intermediate level. That is to say, one can conclude that in terms of their ability on the comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and lexical usage of their speaking ability which was the target of the study, the students in groups A and B were not significantly different. To put it another way, the table above shows that the mean score attained from the pretest speaking scores between the control group and the experimental group is very close and indicates their homogeneity.

Table 2. Homogeneity of Groups in Pre-test through Independent Sample t-test

Equal variances assumed	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% CI	
	F	*Sig.*	*T*	*df*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		Low	Upper
	.06	.80	-.44	22	.65	-.25	.55		-1.40	.91

The scores attained from the pre-test on the proficiency level of both groups are compared through an independent samples t-test. Significantly as P is bigger than 0.05 (P>0.005) the assumption that the means of the scores obtained on the pre-test by both groups are not statistically different is accepted. This illustrates that there was no significant difference between these two groups, an approval to the homogeneity of the groups. In order to answer the first research question of the current study, the researchers applied the following data analyses.

Table 3. Paired Sample Statistics for Experimental Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest Experimental	11.50	12	1.38	.39
	Posttest Experimental	14.75	12	2.41	.69

The statistical results obtained from the paired sample t-test run on the performance of experimental group (role-playing group) before and after the treatment are provided in table 3 above. The mean obtained from the performance on pre-test is 11.50 and the mean obtained from the post-test is 14.75. The difference between the pre-and post-test means is 5.25. That is to say, the treatment provided was highly likely to have a positive effect on the learners` speaking ability. Based on the results of the pre-and post-test, it is concluded that providing Iranian ESP learners with role-play tasks is positively effective in their speaking ability development.

Table 4. Paired Sample t-test for Experimental Group

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Paired sample Test for Experimental group	-5.25	2.34	.67	-6.73	-3.76	-7.77	11	.000

As the table 4 shows, the differences between the groups are significant (Sig=.000). Therefore, the participants in the experimental group improved in their performance in the post-test speaking. Based on the inferential statistics given in table 4, t= -7.77 with a degree of freedom which is 11, and P value less

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than 0.005 (P<0.005), it is safe to say that the treatment provided was highly likely to have a positive effect on the learners' speaking ability. Based on the results of the pre-and post-test, it is concluded that role playing had a significant effect on developing speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners. The statistical results obtained from the paired sample t-test run on the performance of control group (diagnostic group) before and after the treatment are provided in table 5 below.

Table 5. Paired Sample Statistics for Control Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest control	11.25	12	1.35	.39
	Posttest control	12.75	12	1.60	.46

The mean obtained from the performance on pre-test is 11.25 and the mean obtained from the post-test is 12.75. The difference between the pre-and post-test means is 3.50.

Table 6. Paired Sample Test for Control Group

		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Paired Sample Test for Experimental group	-3.50	2.15	.62	-4.86	-2.13	-5.63	11	.000

As the table 6 shows, the differences between the groups are significant (Sig=.000). Based on the inferential statistics given in table 6, t= -5.63 with a degree of freedom which is 11, and P value is less than 0.005 (P<0.005), therefore, the participants in the control group differed in their performance in the post-test speaking. The standard deviation of the pre-test and that of the post-test (1.81) is statistically significant. That is to say, the treatment provided was highly likely to have a positive effect on the learners' speaking ability. In this respect it can be inferred that providing Iranian ESP learners with diagnostic tasks and teacher-student repetitions is positively effective in their speaking ability development.

4.1. Inter-Rater Reliability

The pre-test and the post-test were in the form of oral interview. Since the evaluation of oral interview is conducted by two raters, their evaluation of the students' post-test could have been subjective. A test of Alpha Cronbach was run to analyze the consistency and reliability of the raters' evaluations. And Pearson Correlation Coefficient test was also performed in order to provide proof to the inexistence of discrepancies in inter-rater reliability data attained. The results are illustrated in the table below.

Table 7. Reliability Statistics through Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Alpha Cronbach

Groups	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Raters	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control Group (Pretest)	.76	2	.70	.011
Control Group (Posttest)	.83	2	.71	.009
Experimental Group (Pretest)	.87	2	.78	.002
Experimental Group (Posttest)	.78	2	.64	.023

The statistics observable in table 8 represents that there is a high significant inter-reliability of the two raters' evaluations. The alpha data evident from the table 8 are close to 1 which indicates that the evaluation has not been subjective. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient test results also indicate that the reliability in scoring the tasks between the raters was high. It is at the 0.6 and above level. This is highly significant and shows a strong agreement among the raters and suggests that the speaking test scores profile is highly reliable for evaluation purposes.

4.2. Interview Results

The researchers administered an8-item interview with twelve participants of the experimental group. The questions on the interview examined attitudes and viewpoints of the participants of the experimental group towards using role-playing tasks and their effects on their speaking ability. The majority of the ESP learners believed that these tasks had a significant effect on their speaking ability. Twelve participants (100%) in the experimental group answered that it was an enjoyable experience for them. A great number of the students found role-playing tasks were so informative and interesting. Shima said that "they were very interesting and attractive." All the participants in the experimental group stated that they intended to continue using these tasks, so that they helped them to improve their speaking ability. All of the ESP learners mentioned that they like role playing tasks because they assisted them to be so creative. Ali declared that: 'I like them, sir. I think they are so suitable for improving speaking skill.'' One of the questions was about the students' motivation to speak English by using role-playing tasks. The majority of the Iranian ESP learners agreed that role playing motivated them to speak English language. According to the interview, most of the students will use these tasks to improve their speaking skill. For example, Sine stated: ''I didn't try to improve my speaking ability up to now, but when I got familiar with these tasks, I plan to reinforce it.'' They were also interested to gather some new experience through using these tasks in the class. Actually, the interest and enthusiasm among the ESP learners regarding role plays were vividly present through the amount of positive response. Then we can conclude that the majority of the Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners had a positive attitude towards using role-playing tasks and their effects on their speaking ability.

5. Discussion

As it was stated previously, the present study made an effort to answer the research questions regarding the impact of role-playing task on improving ESP learners' speaking ability and the attitudes of Iranian ESP learners towards using role play and its impact on their speaking skill. As table 7 indicated, it was revealed that there was a prominent difference between the performance of the role play group and control group on the post-test in comparison to their pretest results achieved; yet the role play group had a better performance in comparison to the control group which confirmed the significant effect of role

playing on the speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners. Indeed, the results indicated role-playing tasks were effective and enhanced the speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate learners because they helped the ESP learners focus not only on language, but also on the learning process itself. It can be said that role-play tasks can transform the language teaching and learning process from non-inventive to an inventive and attractive form and provide ESP learners an opportunity to practice speaking skills in multiple social contexts and roles. Also, role-playing technique can expand ESP learners' creativity in the process of language learning. Providing role-play tasks in classrooms contributes to the collaborative and cooperative learning and raises the level of exposure to peer scaffolding which benefits all learners. Also, with regard to the findings of the study obtained from the post- treatment interview, the participants of the experimental group had a positive attitude regarding the effectiveness of role-playing tasks on their speaking ability. The current study's results accord with Nguyen's study (2017), which compared the impact of role-playing tasks on young and adult learners with two different numbers of learners. The Results showed that role-playing tasks had significant effect on improving speaking ability of EFL learners. Therefore, by applying role-playing tasks in the process of language teaching, we can provide good opportunities for introvert learners to express their ideas and combine the world outside with the classroom (Harmer, 2001).

Students who practiced role-playing had to use the power of their imagination, have rehearsals and act out in class in front of their peers and this process probably improved their expressive ability. They were thus more conscious of the grammatical competence when demonstrated their roles and more prepared for the actual conversations in real events. Interestingly, the participants in the current study enjoyed various models and the researcher observed less and less errors in their speaking with working out functional and situational conversations one after the other in the proceeding sessions, which highly pinpoints the conscious-raising and self-monitoring enhancement power of learners who practice role plays. Also, the current study showed that when Learners are involved in role-playing activities, they can develop fluency in language and verbal communication skills, as well as the use of the body in face-to-face communication. From the results of the study, it is concluded that incorporating role-play into classroom adds variety, a change of peace and opportunities for considerable language production.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicated that role-playing tasks had a significant impact on developing speaking ability of Iranian pre-intermediate ESP learners and they had a positive attitude regarding the usefulness of role-playing tasks for enhancing speaking ability. Role playing tasks were effective in teaching speaking and they can be one of alternative techniques in teaching speaking. In addition, it provided learners the chance not only to evaluate their own learning progress and proficiency, but also their peers' performance.

The main limitation of the study was the size of the class with limited number of students. Since the participants were staff of a hotel and busy most of the time, the researcher sometimes found it difficult to get together for further practice. Besides, the participants felt reluctant to become involved for fear of being humiliated before their colleagues. Yet, this technique has many positive impacts on the speaking ability of ESP learners so that it assists them tube exposed to a variety of experiences into the educational setting and enable them to interact with others. The researchers indicated that the foreign language teachers and instructors need to create a learning environment to compensate the authentic atmosphere in the process of language learning using pair-group work which assists in carrying out the learning process to be a successful work in promoting and adopting new techniques that will help to expand the speaking skills. Also, language teachers can benefit from the results of this study so as to manipulate the methodology throughout their classes and keep their students motivated and encouraged. Furthermore, this study will help university ESP students to develop their speaking ability along with technical English. Based on this study, further research can be done into the application of the technique on pre-intermediate

university students having courses on General English. English language institutes offering English courses on different proficiency levels can also carry it out. The study can be approached worldwide in different countries not just in teaching English but in teaching any other foreign language.

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