

The Use of Role-Play Strategy in Enhancing EFL Learners' Confidence in Speaking at Junior High Schools: A Classroom Action Research

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Abstract

This classroom action research investigated the effectiveness of role-play strategies in enhancing junior high school EFL learners' speaking confidence and communicative performance. Conducted with thirty-three students aged 14–16, the study employed qualitative methods, including classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, across iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The findings revealed that the implementation of scaffolded role-play activities significantly increased learners' willingness to speak, reduced speaking anxiety, and promoted more spontaneous and extended oral interactions. Students demonstrated noticeable improvements in both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, such as clearer voice projection, more consistent eye contact, and greater use of gestures. Interviews confirmed that performing through fictional roles helped reduce fear of negative evaluation, allowing learners to experiment with language more freely and confidently. The study also identified several challenges, including learners' initial shyness, fear of peer judgment, tendency to switch to their first language, and uneven proficiency levels that sometimes limited participation. However, these difficulties were mitigated by supportive classroom climates, linguistic scaffolding, pair rehearsals, and task adjustments across action research cycles. The findings align with previous studies highlighting the interplay between affective factors, willingness to communicate, and speaking performance. The study contributes to current knowledge by demonstrating how role-play, when deliberately structured and refined, can effectively foster speaking confidence among young adolescent EFL learners. Practical implications emphasize integrating role-play systematically into speaking instruction, providing adequate scaffolding, and cultivating emotionally safe learning environments. The study offers a contextualized model of role-play implementation for junior high school EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Role-play strategy; Speaking confidence; Classroom action research; Junior high EFL learners; Communicative language teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Communicative language teaching has shifted the focus of English language education from grammatical accuracy to meaningful interaction, positioning speaking as a central indicator of communicative competence (Adem & Berkessa, 2022; Lestari & Margana, 2024). Within this paradigm, role-play has attracted considerable interest because it allows learners to rehearse real-life communicative situations in a relatively

safe classroom environment. Yet, its implementation in EFL settings is often fraught with tensions between policy expectations, curriculum demands, and classroom realities. Teachers must balance exam-oriented syllabi with communicative tasks, manage large classes, and work within limited instructional time, which can marginalize more innovative but time-consuming methods such as role-play (Samaranayake, 2021). As a result, role-play is frequently implemented superficially—treated as an “extra” activity for entertainment rather than as a structured strategy for building communicative competence. This gap between theoretical promise and classroom practice creates a need to re-examine how role-play is designed and enacted in EFL speaking classes, particularly at the junior high school level where foundational habits of language use are being formed.

A core implementation problem concerns the design of role-play tasks that genuinely promote spontaneous, linguistically rich interaction. Time pressure, large class sizes, and diverse proficiency levels can lead teachers to rely on scripted dialogues that are easy to manage but do little to cultivate critical thinking, negotiation of meaning, or adaptive language use (Adrian et al., 2015; Suchada & Asama, 2018). Learners often revert to their first language during planning or even performance, thereby reducing exposure to the target language and diluting the communicative value of the activity (Adrian et al., 2015). Assessment further complicates matters: many teachers lack clear, operational rubrics for evaluating fluency, accuracy, interactional strategies, and non-verbal communication, which results in impressionistic feedback that offers limited guidance for improvement (Ayala et al., 2024; Saptari et al., 2022). Although some studies have shown that carefully designed oral proficiency rubrics—covering content, fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation—can support more systematic evaluation (Kubota et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2018; Wettergreen et al., 2022), such tools are not yet widely integrated into everyday classroom practice. Cultural norms regarding appropriate emotional expression and hierarchical relationships may also make learners reluctant to perform in front of peers, especially when role-play requires them to challenge authority or display overt emotion (Nascimento, 2020; Xie, 2019). These pedagogical, assessment, and cultural factors together suggest that the effectiveness of role-play depends less on the method itself than on how it is adapted to specific classroom and sociocultural contexts.

Alongside these pedagogical issues, affective variables—especially speaking confidence—play a decisive role in determining whether role-play and other communicative activities actually lead to improved oral proficiency. Learners with higher confidence are more willing to initiate conversation, tolerate ambiguity, and persist in communication despite making mistakes, which in turn increases their opportunities for practice and feedback (Jin, 2023). Research on motivation and self-efficacy shows that students who believe in their ability to speak English are more likely to participate actively in oral tasks, and that these beliefs are significant predictors of speaking achievement (Bandura, 1997; Burhanuddin et al., 2023). Conversely, low-confidence learners often experience debilitating anxiety and fear of negative evaluation; they either remain silent or limit themselves to short, memorized utterances, which slows their progress and further erodes their confidence over time (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zamir & Jabeen, 2023).

Confidence manifests not only in verbal output but also in pronunciation, intonation, eye contact, and gesture. Students with stronger linguistic self-confidence tend to communicate more clearly and willingly, thereby enhancing their overall comprehensibility (SAKA & Merç, 2021). Studies on drama and performance-based activities indicate that structured oral tasks can improve accuracy, fluency, and non-verbal expressiveness, contributing to a more robust sense of communicative competence (Galante, 2018; Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022; Lee & Lee, 2019; Rosmayanti et al., 2023; MacIntyre et al., 1998). These findings underscore that any attempt to use role-play as a pedagogical tool must explicitly consider how it influences, and is influenced by, learners' speaking confidence.

For young EFL learners in junior high schools, the interplay between role-play and speaking confidence is particularly complex. Early adolescence is marked by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation and a strong concern with self-image, which can make students simultaneously attracted to and fearful of performance-based tasks. On the positive side, role-play can create a playful, low-stakes space where learners "hide" behind characters, experiment with new identities, and practice functional language—such as greetings, invitations, apologies, and requests—in realistic contexts (Marliana et al., 2025; Togimin & Jaafar, 2020). Research has shown that role-play and drama activities can enhance fluency, promote interaction, and support cognitive development through social participation (Galante, 2018; Rajeswaran, 2019).

Numerous classroom-based interventions have used role-play to address problems such as limited speaking practice, textbook-bound instruction, and low learner engagement, often reporting gains in students' oral performance and willingness to communicate. However, these gains are not automatic. Adolescents may perceive some roles as "childish" or incongruent with their emerging identities, leading to resistance, embarrassment, or superficial participation (Wong & Yunus, 2021). Without adequate scaffolding—such as task modeling, pair rehearsals, language support, and constructive feedback—role-play can inadvertently increase anxiety, especially among lower-proficiency learners (Wu, 2023; Zheng & Zhou, 2022). Problems of unequal participation may also arise when high-proficiency students dominate interactions, leaving others marginalized (Larasaty et al., 2024; Zou et al., 2025). Thus, while prior studies have attempted to use role-play to improve speaking skills, there is still a need for more nuanced investigations that connect task design, assessment practices, and affective factors specifically in junior high EFL classrooms.

Despite this growing body of work, several gaps remain. Much of the existing research on role-play focuses either on university students or on short-term interventions that measure linguistic outcomes without examining changes in speaking confidence or classroom dynamics in depth. Studies that do address affective factors often treat confidence, anxiety, or willingness to communicate as isolated constructs rather than as interrelated variables shaped by how role-play is designed, assessed, and culturally framed (Jin, 2023; MacIntyre et al., 1998; SAKA & Merç, 2021). Moreover, relatively few investigations have explored how teachers of junior high EFL learners integrate role-play into their regular curriculum, how they evaluate student performance, and how learners themselves perceive the benefits and challenges of these activities. Past attempts to solve the problem of low speaking

participation—such as the introduction of generic drama tasks, isolated pronunciation drills, or unstructured conversation practice—have often neglected systematic assessment and ignored the socio-emotional needs of adolescents (Adrian et al., 2015; Galante, 2018; Wong & Yunus, 2021). Consequently, there is a clear need for research that examines role-play not only as a technique but as part of a broader pedagogical ecology that includes task design, classroom climate, assessment, and learner affect.

The objective of this research is twofold: (a) to investigate the extent to which thoughtfully designed role-play activities contribute to improvements in students' speaking confidence and communicative performance, and (b) to identify pedagogical, assessment-related, and socio-emotional conditions that enable role-play to function effectively in junior high EFL settings. The novelty of the study lies in its integrative perspective: it simultaneously considers task design, assessment practices, cultural and developmental characteristics of adolescent learners, and the affective construct of speaking confidence within a single coherent framework. By doing so, the research aims to generate practical insights for teachers and contribute conceptually to the literature on performance-based pedagogy and affect in EFL speaking classrooms.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the use of role-play to enhance junior high school EFL learners' confidence in speaking English. It seeks to move beyond viewing role-play merely as a fun activity by examining how it can be deliberately structured to support communicative development and positive affective outcomes. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: *How does the implementation of role-play strategies influence junior high EFL learners' confidence in speaking English?*

RQ2: *What challenges and facilitating factors do teachers and students perceive when using role-play to develop speaking confidence in junior high EFL classrooms?*

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to investigate how the integration of role-play activities can enhance junior high school learners' speaking confidence and communicative performance. CAR was chosen because it allows researchers and teachers to collaboratively examine problems arising in classroom practice, implement targeted interventions, and reflect on the effects of those interventions on students' learning behaviors. This design aligns closely with the objectives of the study, which seek to understand both the process and outcomes of role-play implementation, as well as learners' affective responses to the intervention. Unlike experimental designs that prioritize controlled conditions, CAR captures the dynamic, social, and context-bound nature of classroom interaction, making it particularly suitable for exploring changes in speaking confidence and communicative engagement in natural learning environments.

The qualitative orientation of the study enables the exploration of learners' perceptions, behaviors, and interactional patterns through rich descriptive data. Because speaking confidence involves complex emotional and psychological dimensions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurements alone, qualitative CAR provides the necessary depth to understand learners' experiences and transformations across cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The

iterative cycles within CAR further allow adjustments to instructional strategies, ensuring that classroom interventions remain responsive to students' needs and evolving conditions.

Despite its strengths, the CAR design is not without limitations. One potential bias arises from the researcher's dual role as teacher and investigator, which may influence the interpretation of classroom events or the responses obtained during interviews. This was mitigated by maintaining reflective field notes, triangulating data sources (interviews, observations, and students' speaking outputs), and inviting a peer observer to provide independent observations during instructional sessions. Another limitation concerns the localized nature of CAR findings, which may reduce generalizability. To address this, the study provides thick, detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and instructional procedures, enabling other educators or researchers to determine the transferability of the findings to their own contexts. By acknowledging these limitations and employing appropriate mitigation strategies, the research design ensures a credible and trustworthy investigation into the role of role-play in enhancing speaking confidence among young EFL learners.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of thirty-three EFL learners enrolled in a junior high school in Indonesia. Their ages ranged from fourteen to sixteen years, representing the developmental stage of early adolescence, where heightened self-consciousness and sensitivity to peer evaluation often influence participation in oral communication activities. The participants were selected based on their enrollment in the class where the role-play intervention was implemented, making this a naturally occurring sample rather than a deliberately stratified or randomized one. This selection approach is appropriate for a Classroom Action Research design, which focuses on improving instructional practices within a specific learning community.

Demographically, the learners came from diverse linguistic backgrounds, although all shared Indonesian as their primary language of instruction. Their English proficiency ranged from beginner to lower-intermediate levels, reflecting the common profile of junior high EFL learners in Indonesian public schools. Prior to the study, the participants demonstrated low levels of speaking confidence, as indicated by their reluctance to participate in oral classroom activities and their strong dependence on memorized phrases. These characteristics made them suitable participants for exploring the potential of role-play to improve speaking confidence and communicative skills. Parental consent and school approval were obtained to ensure ethical participation throughout the study.

Instruments and Data Collection Technique

To generate comprehensive and trustworthy qualitative data, the study utilized two primary instruments: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. These instruments were chosen to capture both behavioral and perceptual evidence of learners' speaking confidence and their responses to role-play activities. Observation was used to document learners' interactions, participation levels, verbal output, and non-verbal communicative behaviors during role-play activities. An observation checklist and field-note template were developed based on existing frameworks for communicative language teaching and speaking-confidence

indicators. These tools were adapted from validated observation guides used in previous EFL classroom research, ensuring that key aspects such as fluency, willingness to communicate, eye contact, turn-taking, and affective engagement were systematically captured. To enhance validity, peer observation was incorporated, allowing a second observer to record independent impressions that could be compared with the researcher's observations.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore learners' subjective experiences, including their perceptions of role-play, sources of anxiety, and the extent to which the intervention influenced their confidence and comfort in speaking English. The interview protocol was adapted from prior studies investigating language anxiety and speaking confidence. Questions were piloted with a small group of students not included in the study to refine wording and ensure that learners could understand and respond meaningfully. This process contributed to enhancing the face validity and clarity of the instrument. Reliability of the instruments was strengthened by triangulating data from observations and interviews, which allowed the researcher to verify patterns across multiple sources. Additionally, member-checking was conducted by summarizing interview responses and confirming them with participants to ensure accurate representation of their perspectives.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data obtained from observations, interviews, and learners' speaking performances. Data analysis began with familiarization, where the researcher repeatedly read field notes and interview transcripts to identify preliminary insights related to speaking confidence, communicative behavior, and learners' responses to the role-play intervention. This was followed by open coding, during which segments of data were labeled based on recurring ideas, patterns, or behavioral indicators. Codes included categories such as willingness to communicate, anxiety manifestations, spontaneous speaking attempts, peer support, and non-verbal expressions of confidence.

Axial coding was conducted to establish relationships among the initial codes, allowing broader themes to emerge. Themes were then refined to ensure their internal coherence and distinctiveness from one another. Examples of final themes included increased willingness to participate, reduction of performance-related anxiety, enhanced interactional fluency, and positive peer influence. Observation data were analyzed alongside interview responses to strengthen the credibility of themes and ensure that interpretations reflected both observed behaviors and learners' self-reported experiences.

Learners' speaking achievements were analyzed descriptively by examining qualitative improvements in fluency, clarity of pronunciation, interactional strategies, and the ability to sustain communication without heavy reliance on memorized scripts. These elements were evaluated using the observation rubric and supported by specific excerpts from classroom interactions. The interpretation of findings adhered to principles of trustworthiness through triangulation, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytical decisions throughout the process. Through this systematic approach, the data analysis produced nuanced and credible insights into how role-play contributed to changes in learners' speaking confidence and communicative performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

How does the implementation of role-play strategies influence junior high EFL learners' confidence in speaking English?

The implementation of role-play strategies in the classroom led to a noticeable increase in learners' willingness to speak and participate in English. Across the action research cycles, observation data showed that students who initially avoided eye contact, spoke very softly, or relied on single-word answers began to volunteer more frequently and sustain short dialogues with their peers. In the early sessions, many learners depended heavily on written scripts; however, as the cycles progressed and they grew more familiar with the role-play format, they began to improvise expressions, ask follow-up questions, and adapt their language to keep the interaction going. This shift from reluctant participation to more active engagement indicated that role-play created a relatively safe and supportive space in which learners could "try out" English without feeling excessively judged.

Interview data reinforced this pattern. Students reported feeling "less afraid of making mistakes" because they were speaking "as the character, not as themselves," which helped distance their personal identity from possible errors. They described role-play activities as "more fun" and "less boring" than traditional drilling or reading aloud, which made them more eager to participate. Several learners mentioned that repeated role-plays on everyday situations (such as buying something, apologizing, or asking for help) gave them a sense of familiarity and control, thus reducing anxiety. Over time, this familiarity appeared to translate into greater self-belief in their ability to communicate in English, even when they encountered new vocabulary or unexpected responses from peers.

Non-verbal indicators of confidence also changed. Initially, a number of students performed with their heads down, avoided looking at peers, and used minimal gestures. After repeated exposure to role-play activities, many of them began to use more natural eye contact, clearer voice projection, and simple gestures to support their speech. These behaviors were repeatedly noted in observation checklists and field notes. Although not all learners achieved the same level of confidence, the general pattern suggested that role-play encouraged students to experiment with both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, which are core components of speaking confidence. In short, the qualitative data indicate that the implementation of role-play strategies did not merely increase the amount of student talk, but also fostered a more positive emotional climate in which learners perceived themselves as more capable English speakers.

What challenges and facilitating factors do teachers and students perceive when using role-play to develop speaking confidence in junior high EFL classrooms?

The qualitative data revealed a set of interrelated challenges perceived by both teachers and students. One of the most salient challenges was learners' fear of peer judgment. During interviews, some students admitted that they worried about being laughed at if they mispronounced words or forgot their lines. This fear was particularly strong among lower-proficiency students and those who were already shy in regular classroom discourse. Observational data confirmed that, in the initial sessions, some students tried to "hide" behind more confident peers, speaking very

little or letting others dominate the dialogue. Another challenge was the tendency of students to revert to their first language during preparation, especially when they could not find the English expressions they needed. This code-switching sometimes reduced the amount of meaningful English practice and required the teacher's intervention to redirect them back to the target language.

From the teacher's perspective, time management and uneven proficiency levels were also challenging. Preparing role-play scenarios, giving language support, and managing performances within limited class periods required careful planning. The teacher noted that if the instructions were not sufficiently clear, students spent too much time organizing the scene and too little time actually speaking. Moreover, differences in proficiency meant that strong students could dominate the conversation, while weaker students remained passive, unless roles were carefully distributed and monitored. These challenges highlighted the need for continuous adjustment of grouping strategies, task difficulty, and teacher support across action research cycles.

At the same time, several facilitating factors emerged that helped role-play function as an effective tool for building speaking confidence. Clear scaffolding was crucial. When the teacher provided model dialogues, key phrases, and sentence starters—but still allowed room for improvisation—students felt more secure and were more willing to speak. Pair and small-group rehearsals before performing in front of the whole class were also reported by students as helpful, because these “practice spaces” reduced anxiety and allowed them to negotiate vocabulary with peers. A supportive classroom climate, in which the teacher consistently emphasized that mistakes were a natural part of learning and encouraged peers to applaud or give simple positive feedback, further reduced fear of embarrassment.

The teacher's own reflective practice, built into the action research cycles, also acted as a facilitating factor. After each cycle, the teacher modified the role-play tasks based on observation and student feedback—for instance, by simplifying dialogues, clarifying instructions, or assigning roles that better matched students' comfort and proficiency levels. Students noted that these gradual adjustments made the activities “easier to follow” and “more enjoyable.” Thus, the findings suggest that while role-play can present significant affective and logistical challenges, these can be mitigated through intentional scaffolding, thoughtful grouping, explicit norms of respect, and iterative refinement of the tasks. Under such conditions, role-play becomes not only a vehicle for language practice but also a structured mechanism for gradually developing speaking confidence.

Table 1. Summary of Findings on Role-Play, Confidence, Challenges, and Facilitators

Aspect/ Theme	Evidence from Observations	Evidence from Interviews / Reflections	Interpretation in Line with CAR Design
Increased willingness to speak	More students volunteered; longer student-student exchanges	Students reported feeling “braver” and “less afraid of mistakes” during role-play	Role-play cycles created a safer space for experimentation, leading to greater participation and more sustained spoken interaction.

Aspect/ Theme	Evidence from Observations	Evidence from Interviews / Reflections	Interpretation in Line with CAR Design
Reduction in speaking anxiety	Fewer signs of avoidance (less hiding, more eye contact)	Learners said speaking "as a character" reduced embarrassment and fear of being judged	Adoption of roles allowed emotional distancing, which helped lower anxiety and build speaking confidence over time.
Development of spontaneous speech	Gradual shift from fully scripted to partly improvised talk	Students felt more comfortable "adding their own words" and not just reading from scripts	Repeated exposure to familiar role-play scenarios supported movement from memorization toward more spontaneous, communicative language use.
Improved non-verbal confidence	Clearer voice, more gestures, increased eye contact	Students described feeling "more natural" and "less stiff" when speaking	Non-verbal behaviors reflected growing confidence and contributed to overall communicative effectiveness.
Fear of peer judgment (challenge)	Some students stayed quiet or let peers dominate early on	Learners expressed worry about being laughed at for errors or pronunciation	Peer evaluation pressure remained a key barrier, especially at the beginning of the intervention cycles.
First language use (challenge)	Frequent L1 use during preparation stages	Students admitted switching to L1 when they did not know specific vocabulary	L1 use sometimes limited English practice and required teacher prompts and support to redirect to the target language.
Time and classroom management (challenge)	Activities occasionally exceeded planned time	Teacher reflections highlighted difficulty balancing preparation and performance time	Role-play requires careful planning and pacing; without it, the communicative part of the task can be reduced.
Scaffolding and modeling (facilitator)	Greater participation when key phrases/models were provided	Students stated that sentence starters and examples helped them feel secure when speaking	Linguistic scaffolding lowered cognitive load and allowed students to focus more on expressing ideas than on "finding words."
Small-group rehearsal (facilitator)	More active participation in pairs/groups than whole class	Students preferred practicing first with peers before performing in front of everyone	Rehearsal spaces functioned as "low-stakes" environments that supported gradual confidence building.
Supportive classroom	Increased applause, positive peer	Learners mentioned feeling supported	Shared norms of respect and encouragement

Aspect/ Theme	Evidence from Observations	Evidence from Interviews / Reflections	Interpretation in Line with CAR Design
climate (facilitator)	responses over cycles	when classmates encouraged them	reduced fear of ridicule and promoted risk-taking in speaking.
Iterative refinement of tasks (facilitator)	Adjusted roles, clearer instructions in later cycles	Teacher reflections and student comments noted that tasks became easier to follow	The cyclical nature of CAR enabled continuous improvement of role-play design, enhancing its effectiveness for confidence development.

Table 1 presented the findings of the observations and interviews that reveal a significant increase in students' willingness to speak, with more students volunteering and engaging in longer student-to-student exchanges during role-play activities. Students reported feeling "braver" and less afraid of making mistakes, which was attributed to the safer environment created by role-play cycles. This facilitated experimentation, allowing for greater participation and more sustained spoken interaction. The reduction in speaking anxiety was also evident, as students showed fewer signs of avoidance, such as hiding or avoiding eye contact. Learners indicated that assuming a character during role-play reduced embarrassment and fear of being judged. By adopting roles, students could emotionally distance themselves from their performance, which helped lower anxiety and gradually build confidence in speaking.

However, the study also highlighted challenges, particularly related to peer judgment and first language (L1) use. At the start, some students hesitated to participate, fearing they would be laughed at for making errors or mispronouncing words. This fear remained a key barrier, especially in the early stages of the role-play cycles. Additionally, during preparation, students frequently switched to their first language when they lacked the vocabulary in English. This L1 use sometimes limited their practice of English and required the teacher to prompt them to return to the target language. Moreover, time and classroom management proved challenging, as some activities exceeded the planned time, and teachers reflected on difficulties in balancing preparation time with performance. These factors revealed that while role-play activities were effective in engaging students, careful planning and time management were crucial for maintaining a balance between preparation and communicative practice.

On a positive note, the role-play cycles facilitated the development of spontaneous speech. There was a noticeable shift from fully scripted speech to more improvised language use, with students feeling more comfortable "adding their own words" instead of relying solely on scripts. This shift was supported by repeated exposure to familiar role-play scenarios, which helped students transition from memorization toward more spontaneous and communicative language use. Non-verbal confidence also improved, with students showing clearer voices, more gestures, and increased eye contact. They reported feeling "more natural" and "less stiff" when speaking. The classroom climate played a crucial role in fostering this growth, as positive peer responses, applause, and encouragement created a

supportive environment that reduced fear of ridicule and encouraged risk-taking in speaking. The iterative nature of the CAR model enabled continuous refinement of tasks, making them easier to follow and more effective in promoting student confidence. Scaffolding, small-group rehearsal, and modeling were all identified as key facilitators in this process, helping students feel secure and reducing their cognitive load, allowing them to focus more on expressing ideas than on searching for words.

Discussion

The findings of this classroom action research confirm and extend previous work on the role of performance-based pedagogy in fostering EFL learners' speaking confidence, particularly in junior high school contexts. Overall, the implementation of carefully scaffolded role-play activities led to increased willingness to speak, reduced anxiety, more spontaneous language use, and richer non-verbal communication among learners. These changes emerged gradually across the action research cycles, suggesting that confidence is not a sudden product of a single technique but develops through iterative practice, reflection, and task refinement.

In line with earlier role-play studies, this research supports the claim that performance-based tasks can create opportunities for meaningful oral interaction that go beyond mechanical drilling. Samaranayake (2021) reported that role-play using authentic materials improved Thai undergraduates' oral proficiency, particularly in terms of fluency and engagement. Similarly, Suchada and Asama (2018) found that role-playing simulations enhanced business English oral communication by promoting more extended and interactive talk. The present study resonates with these findings: students initially constrained by short, hesitant utterances began to sustain dialogues and negotiate meaning with peers as they became familiar with role-play routines. However, this research adds a stronger affective dimension by showing how these linguistic gains were accompanied by visible reductions in avoidance behaviors. This affective trajectory suggests that the benefits of role-play should be understood not only in terms of performance outcomes, but also as part of a broader process of confidence-building in adolescent EFL learners.

The results also align with the growing body of work linking speaking confidence, self-efficacy, and willingness to communicate (WTC). Drawing on Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, recent empirical studies have highlighted how learners' beliefs about their ability to speak English influence participation and achievement (Burhanuddin et al., 2023; Rosmayanti et al., 2023). SAKA and Merç (2021) demonstrated that linguistic self-confidence is a strong predictor of Turkish EFL learners' WTC in English, while Lee and Lee (2019) identified affective factors and intercultural experiences as key components in students' readiness to initiate communication. In this study, learners' gradual shift from reluctant to more active participation can be interpreted as a rise in classroom WTC fostered by role-play. The fact that students reported feeling safer when speaking "as a character" echoes MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) argument that situational confidence and affiliation are central to WTC. By allowing learners to perform through fictional roles rather than as their "real selves," role-play appears to buffer the fear of negative evaluation and create a context in which they can experiment with language with reduced psychological risk.

The reduction of speaking anxiety documented in this study further confirms findings from research on drama and anxiety-reducing pedagogy. Galante (2018) showed that drama activities decreased L2 speaking anxiety among Brazilian EFL learners, while Kiruthiga and Christopher (2022) emphasized the impact of affective factors on speaking skills more broadly. The learners in the present study similarly described role-play as “fun” and “less boring” than traditional activities, and they attributed their increased comfort in part to repeated practice with familiar communicative situations. This is consistent with Jin’s (2023) study on shadowing in a metaverse platform, which found that systematic practice in a semi-authentic yet protected environment can strengthen learners’ self-beliefs and oral proficiency. Together, these findings reinforce the notion that pedagogical designs which incorporate repetition, authenticity, and emotional safety can gradually reshape learners’ affective orientations toward speaking.

At the same time, the challenges identified here echo well-documented barriers in the literature. Fear of peer judgment, a central theme in the present data, has been widely cited as a source of silence and avoidance in speaking classrooms (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zamir & Jabeen, 2023). Adolescents’ heightened sensitivity to how they are perceived by classmates (Wong & Yunus, 2021) makes them particularly vulnerable to embarrassment when performing in a foreign language. The tendency to revert to the first language during preparation also mirrors concerns raised by Adrian et al. (2015), who observed that learners rely on L1 when they lack sufficient lexical resources to manage complex communicative tasks. In this study, the teacher’s ongoing scaffolding and explicit redirection to English were essential to prevent L1 use from eroding the communicative value of role-play, indicating that role-play cannot simply be “set in motion” without sustained pedagogical support.

The findings regarding facilitative conditions add nuance to existing accounts of role-play and cooperative learning. Prior work has emphasized the value of scaffolding, peer collaboration, and supportive classroom climates for promoting enjoyment and engagement in foreign language learning (Ayala et al., 2024; Zheng & Zhou, 2022). This study corroborates those insights by showing that role-play was most effective when learners received model expressions and sentence starters, had time to rehearse in small groups, and worked within explicit norms of mutual respect. Students’ preference for rehearsing in pairs or small groups before performing for the whole class is consistent with Togimin and Jaafar’s (2020) conclusion that role-play activities should be structured progressively from low-stakes to higher-stakes contexts. It also resonates with Wu’s (2023) scaffolding-based account of interaction, suggesting that layered support—linguistic, social, and affective—is indispensable if role-play is to build rather than undermine confidence.

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in its use of a qualitative classroom action research design, which allowed the teacher-researcher to iteratively refine role-play tasks across cycles. This contrasts with many intervention studies that apply role-play as a fixed treatment over a short period (e.g., Suchada & Asama, 2018; Marlina et al., 2025). Through cyclical reflection, the teacher in this study adjusted role assignments, clarified instructions, and aligned scenarios more closely with students’ linguistic and affective readiness. These adjustments were noted by learners as making the activities “easier to follow” and “more enjoyable,” underscoring the

importance of responsiveness and flexibility in role-play implementation. From a theoretical perspective, this supports an ecological view of classroom practice, wherein the effectiveness of a method depends on how it is adapted to the interplay of learners' needs, institutional constraints, and socio-emotional dynamics rather than on its abstract merits alone.

The findings also carry practical implications for EFL teachers working in junior high schools. First, they suggest that role-play should not be confined to occasional "entertainment" slots but integrated systematically into the speaking curriculum as part of a broader strategy for developing confidence. To do this effectively, teachers need not only engaging scenarios but also simple, context-appropriate assessment tools that capture both linguistic performance and affective growth. While this study did not implement a full analytic rubric like those used in pharmacy and nursing simulations (Kubota et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2018; Wettergreen et al., 2022), it points toward the value of observation checklists and descriptive feedback that highlight improvements in fluency, interaction, and non-verbal communication. Second, the results emphasize the need for deliberate classroom climate building: regular encouragement, normalization of errors, and structured peer support were not peripheral "extras" but central mechanisms through which confidence was nurtured.

This study contributes to the broader conversation about how to support adolescent EFL learners' motivation and WTC in an era of diverse pedagogical options and technological tools (Larasaty et al., 2024; Zou et al., 2025). While digital platforms and AI-assisted speaking practice are gaining prominence, the present findings underscore that low-tech, interaction-rich strategies such as role-play remain powerful when carefully designed and contextually grounded. Theoretically, the study enriches the literature by foregrounding the intersection of role-play, speaking confidence, and classroom ecology in a junior high school setting—an area less represented than tertiary contexts. Practically, it offers teachers a model of how role-play can be enacted, observed, and refined through action research to address both linguistic and affective dimensions of speaking. In doing so, it reinforces the view that building students' confidence is not an incidental by-product of speaking instruction, but a deliberate and central goal of communicative language teaching.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this classroom action research highlight the significant impact of role-play strategies on enhancing junior high school EFL learners' speaking confidence and communicative performance. The study revealed that structured role-play activities led to an increase in students' willingness to speak and a reduction in speaking anxiety. Over the course of the action research cycles, learners began to show more spontaneous speech and greater non-verbal confidence, such as improved voice projection, eye contact, and gestures. The use of role-play allowed students to emotionally distance themselves from the fear of negative evaluation by assuming fictional roles, which in turn created a safer environment for linguistic experimentation. Interviews confirmed that students felt more comfortable speaking "as a character," reducing their fear of mistakes and enabling them to engage more fully in communication. This finding aligns with previous studies that emphasize the role of affective factors, such as speaking confidence, in fostering successful language acquisition.

However, the research also highlighted several challenges in implementing role-play in EFL classrooms. Peer judgment, particularly among lower-proficiency students, remained a significant barrier to full participation. Students expressed concerns about being laughed at for errors, which initially led to some avoidance behaviors in speaking activities. Moreover, the tendency to revert to the first language during preparation stages was another challenge, often hindering the amount of English practice. These difficulties were mitigated by the teacher's scaffolding strategies, such as providing sentence starters, pre-teaching vocabulary, and allowing small-group rehearsals. These interventions helped reduce anxiety and encouraged more active participation. The study also emphasized the importance of a supportive classroom climate, where positive peer feedback and encouragement fostered a sense of safety and respect. Ultimately, the cyclical nature of Classroom Action Research allowed for continuous refinement of the role-play tasks, ensuring that they became more aligned with students' needs and capabilities, thus enhancing their overall speaking confidence and communicative skills.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

This study acknowledges the use of AI-assisted tools, including ChatGPT, to support specific stages of the writing process such as improving clarity, coherence, and academic tone; refining literature synthesis; and organizing methodological descriptions. All analytical decisions, interpretations of findings, and final arguments presented in this manuscript remain the sole responsibility of the researcher. AI tools were used only as supplementary writing support and not as substitutes for human judgment, data analysis, or academic integrity.

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