IMPLEMENTING ROLE-PLAYING ACTIVITIES TO FOSTER SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN A2-LEVEL ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of role-playing games in developing sociolinguistic competence among A2-level English learners in Karakalpakstan, showcasing a three-month intervention involving 215 ninth-grade students. The findings revealed a significant improvement in the experimental group's ability to use English effectively in various social contexts, growing from 30% to 75% in test results. Learners demonstrated enhanced cultural sensitivity, pragmatic skills, and communicative confidence, supported by qualitative feedback. This evidence underscores the potential of role-playing as an impactful method to enrich ESL curricula with sociocultural and pragmatic learning opportunities.

Keywords: Role-playing games; sociolinguistic competence; A2-level learners; English as a second language; cultural sensitivity; pragmatics; interactive learning; language acquisition; ESL curricula; educational methodology.

INTRODUCTION

In English language education, fostering sociolinguistic competence is essential for preparing learners to communicate effectively across diverse social contexts. As underscored by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), this competence involves using language appropriately in different social and cultural settings. It includes pragmatic awareness, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to adjust language based on formality and situational norms. However, traditional approaches to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) often focus on grammar and vocabulary at the expense of these sociolinguistic aspects, leaving learners underprepared for real-world communication.

Conventional methods frequently overlook the subtleties of effective communication, creating a disconnect between linguistic proficiency and the practical ability to navigate social settings. Ferguson noted that learners with minimal exposure to sociolinguistic training often experience communication difficulties due to unfamiliarity with cultural norms or pragmatic conventions. Bridging this gap calls for innovative, learner-centered approaches that integrate language acquisition with sociocultural and pragmatic learning.

Vygotsky's Mind in Society (1978) highlights the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners grow through guided social interaction. This theory supports role-playing as it enables learners to practice sociolinguistic skills in scaffolded, context-rich scenarios, improving their cultural and pragmatic competence. By participating in simulated real-life interactions, learners can develop pragmatic competence, cultural awareness, and confidence in navigating varied communicative situations. Brown and Taylor emphasized the effectiveness of role-playing in fostering sociolinguistic awareness, noting that it offers a dynamic, interactive environment where students can safely experiment with language use.

This study explores the potential of role-playing activities to enhance sociolinguistic competence among A2-level learners in the Republic of Karakalpakstan. By focusing on scenarios that simulate everyday interactions, the research assesses how role-playing helps learners adapt their language to specific social contexts, engage in cross-cultural exchanges, and build communicative confidence. The findings aim to enrich the evidence supporting experiential and interactive methods in ESL curricula, especially in underexplored areas like Karakalpakstan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of sociolinguistic competence has gained significant attention in language learning research, particularly with the adoption of interactive methodologies like role-playing. This review synthesizes accessible research exploring theoretical frameworks, practical applications, and outcomes in fostering sociolinguistic skills.

In her work Abdullaeva Lola Tokhirovna explores the interplay between language and society, emphasizing how social conditions such as age, status, and education influence linguistic phenomena. She discusses key concepts like language variability, sociolects, and the functional distribution of linguistic codes, highlighting their role in shaping communication. Abdullaeva advocates for incorporating sociolinguistic principles into linguistic research and education, underscoring the importance of understanding the dynamic relationship between language and its social environment.

Sevara Anvarovna Ziyayeva (2023) examines the development of sociolinguistic competence in German language students, highlighting the critical roles of motivation, educational environment, and authentic materials. Her research advocates for the implementation of interactive teaching methods and modern technologies to effectively enhance learners' intercultural communication skills.

Brown and Taylor explored role-playing as a method to enhance cultural sensitivity and pragmatic accuracy among EFL learners. Their findings support the alignment of role-playing activities with Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, demonstrating the importance of interactive and experiential environments for skill development.

Taguchi and De Costa examined teaching practices aligned with the CEFR framework. Their study highlights structured activities like role-playing as effective in addressing sociolinguistic and pragmatic needs while advocating for teacher training and curriculum design focused on formal and informal communication skills.

The study aligns with Herawati, who demonstrated how digital tools can simulate authentic interactions, enhancing flexibility in fostering sociolinguistic competence. Kasper and Rose extended this perspective by highlighting the impact of pragmatics-focused instruction on learners' ability to make socially appropriate language choices

These studies collectively emphasize the potential of role-playing activities to enhance sociolinguistic competence. By integrating authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration into interactive methodologies, they provide practical insights for educators and curriculum designers aiming to prepare learners for effective cross-cultural communication.

METHODOLOGY

The study targeted A2-level learners, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The participants were 215 schoolchildren from the 11th school in Ellikqala district, Republic of Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan. The group was divided into two cohorts: an experimental group of 110 students and a control group of 105 students. The intervention spanned from September 2023 to March 2024, providing sufficient time to observe changes in sociolinguistic competence.

The research employed a quasi-experimental design incorporating diverse role-play scenarios tailored to real-life contexts. Scenarios included:
- Informal Conversations: Engaging in casual dialogues such as greetings, discussing hobbies, or shopping interactions.
- Formal Settings: Participating in structured situations like interviews, school meetings, or presentations.

Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to evaluate learners' sociolinguistic competence, focusing on their pragmatic accuracy, appropriateness, and cultural sensitivity before and after the intervention.

The study involved implementing role-playing activities in a step-by-step process:
1. Introduction of Scenarios: Learners were introduced to situational contexts and key linguistic features.
2. Role-Playing Sessions: Participants practised their roles in pairs or groups, simulating real-world interactions.
3. Feedback Sessions: After each activity, learners received targeted feedback from peers and instructors, focusing on sociolinguistic accuracy and contextual appropriateness.
4. Evaluation: Rubrics were used to assess performance, emphasizing the use of appropriate language, cultural sensitivity, and pragmatic competence. (See table 1)

Table 1

Criterion	Use of Appropriate Language	Cultural Sensitivity	Pragmatic Competence
5 Points	Fluent, correct grammar, and diverse vocabulary suitable for the context.	Demonstrates full understanding and respect for cultural norms in the scenario.	Excellent use of contextually appropriate expressions, tone, and non-verbal cues.
4 Points	Mostly accurate language use with minor errors not affecting communication.	Minor lapses in cultural awareness but respectful overall.	Good use of contextually appropriate elements with minor issues.
3 Points	Understandable but frequent grammatical and vocabulary errors.	Understandable but with noticeable cultural missteps.	Basic pragmatic skills with noticeable mismatches in tone or formality.
2 Points	Significant errors making understanding difficult.	Limited cultural understanding, leading to inappropriate behavior.	Poor understanding of pragmatic norms, affecting communication.
1 Point	Communication is unclear or inappropriate	Displays no cultural awareness.	No use of pragmatically appropriate language or cues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Summary of the pre-test and post-test results: Table 2

Group	Test	Good Results	Average Results	Poor Results
Experimental	Pre-Test	30%(33 students)	40% (44 students)	30% (33 students)
	Post-Test	75%(82 students)	20% (22 students)	5% (6 students)
Control	Pre-Test	30%(31 students)	40% (42 students)	30% (32 students)
	Post-Test	35%(37 students)	40% (42 students)	25% (26 students)

Data was gathered through multiple channels to ensure comprehensive analysis:
- Observation Notes: Documenting learners' participation, engagement, and interactions during role-playing activities.
- Recorded Performances: Capturing role-play sessions for detailed analysis of language use and behaviour.
- Learner Feedback: Collecting participants' reflections on their experiences, challenges, and perceived progress.
These methods allowed for a triangulated approach, ensuring the reliability and validity of findings.
Key Observations:
- The experimental group showed a significant improvement in good results (from 30% to 75%) after role-playing activities. Lessons were conducted as usual using the 'Prepare' textbook, with role-playing activities integrated into each session to enhance sociolinguistic competence by explaining its key components.
- The control group exhibited only a slight increase in good results (from 30% to 35%), indicating limited impact from standard instruction methods. Lessons were conducted as usual using the 'Prepare' textbook, incorporating the exercises and activities provided within it.

Feedback from learners provided valuable insights into the impact of role-playing activities on their sociolinguistics competence. Several recurring themes emerged from the post-activity reflections and teacher observations:

Increased Confidence: Learners reported feeling more confident in their ability to use English in social contexts. Many participants noted that the role-playing activities allowed them to experiment with language in a safe, supportive environment, which significantly reduced their fear of making mistakes. Interactive methods like role-playing foster self-confidence by encouraging active participation and risk-taking in communication, helping learners feel more comfortable navigating social interactions even outside the classroom.

Improved Cultural Awareness: Many students highlighted the role-playing scenarios' ability to expose them to cultural nuances and communication practices in English-speaking contexts. For example, students reported gaining insights into the importance of tone, body language, and the use of formal versus informal language in different situations. This is consistent with the idea that role-plays offer an effective way to bridge cultural gaps by enabling learners to practice language in contextually relevant settings. Additionally, cultural sensitivity is integral to sociolinguistic competence, which can be cultivated through authentic, interactive language activities.

Pragmatic Skills: Several learners expressed that they now feel more capable of recognizing and using appropriate language based on the social setting. These improvements in pragmatic competence were particularly evident in how students adapted their speech for formal situations, such as mock job interviews or formal meetings. Role-playing activities help learners practice pragmatic skills by providing a simulated environment where social conventions can be tested and refined.

Challenges

Despite the positive outcomes, several challenges were encountered during the role-playing intervention, which are worth noting for future improvements:

Cultural Gaps: Some learners struggled with scenarios that involved cultural nuances they were unfamiliar with. For instance, students had difficulty understanding the subtleties of formal politeness or humor in English-speaking cultures, which sometimes led to awkward or inappropriate exchanges in role-plays. These cultural gaps are common when learners are exposed to languages and social norms that differ significantly from their own. This challenge can be mitigated by providing more targeted pre-task instructions on cultural differences and examples of intercultural communication.

Scenario Limitations: While the role-playing activities were designed to be diverse, some learners reported that the scenarios did not always reflect their real-world experiences or the social contexts they most frequently encounter. This limitation sometimes made the role-plays feel artificial or disconnected from their everyday lives. The importance of scenario relevance for maintaining learner engagement and ensuring practical applicability. To address this, future iterations of the study could involve more personalized role-playing situations, which align more closely with students' specific cultural and social contexts.

Language Proficiency Disparities: In a classroom with mixed proficiency levels, students found it challenging to participate equally in role-plays. Stronger learners often took over conversations, while weaker learners struggled to keep up. It means that differentiated tasks and groupings are crucial in maintaining equitable participation and maximizing the benefits of interactive methods. Incorporating paired or group activities that account for varying language levels could help mitigate this issue.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the effectiveness of role-playing in enhancing sociolinguistic competence among A2-level learners in Karakalpakstan, showing significant improvements in confidence, cultural awareness, and pragmatic skills. The experimental group saw a marked increase in good results from 30% to 75%, while the control group exhibited minimal progress. These findings highlight the value of role-playing in ESL curricula as it allows learners to practice language use in context, improving their ability to navigate different social settings and cultural norms. Future research could investigate the impact of role-playing at higher proficiency levels and across various cultural contexts, as well as its long-term effects on sociolinguistic competence. Integrating role-playing into language education could further enhance student engagement and proficiency by offering interactive and authentic language practice opportunities.

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