

ACTION RESEARCH: THE USE OF iROLE PLAY IN DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF EFL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

iRole Play is one of the most authentic communication activities that students in tertiary level can have in the university to learn the nuances of communication strategy in maintaining discourse. The integration of iRole Play in classroom promotes the integration of innovative pedagogical tool to enhance communication skills amongst pre-university EFL students engaged in simulated classroom interactions. This study investigates the use of iRole Play as a digital learning strategy to improve students' communication competence in simulated classroom interactions. The study aims to examine how iRole Play activities enhance students' ability to manage the situation in the classroom in different types of situations. Conducted as a mixed-method action research project, data were collected from surveys and student recorded iRole Plays. Findings suggest that iRole Play encourages varied communication skills, increases awareness of proper discourse, and boosts confidence in real communication settings. This study proposes that integrating iRole Play into the communication classroom offers a learner-centered method to foster critical speaking skills aligned with the demands of everyday communication. The findings have implications for the incorporation of digital tools in pre-university EFL curricula and classroom communication pedagogy.

Keywords: iRole Play, Communication Skills, Technology in Learning, Pre-University Students.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the common challenges and struggle faced by many EFL students in the higher learning institution is the ability to converse fluently in English language. Despite being exposed to the language since they were children, many students have the inability to speak confidently in class and during presentations. As the EFL student who need to be

conversing in the target language and the need to have good command of English is pertinent.

Communication skills refer to the ability to manage conversational interaction, allowing speakers to respond effectively by understanding when to speak, pause, and respond, which is crucial for maintaining smooth communication, especially in discussions among English language students (Eva et al, 2023). Therefore, some of the challenges faced by EFL students which are multi-faceted, stemming from linguistic, educational demands and specific demands of the discourse can be addressed with methods that involved technology that can remove barriers in achieving fluency and confidence while speaking in English.

PREVIOUS PRACTICES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

In reality, speaking skills are a crucial component of language acquisition, particularly in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The ability to communicate effectively in spoken English is essential for EFL students as it enhances their overall language proficiency and boosts their confidence in using the language in real-life situations. According to Rao (2019), speaking activities encourage students to engage with the language actively, rather than passively absorbing information. This active engagement helps students to internalize language structures and vocabulary more effectively.

Some of the activities that are usually done during the teaching and learning session are group presentations, public speaking, mini-debate or storytelling. It is imperative in developing communicative competence among EFL students as Sadykova et al. (2014) emphasize that communicative competence involves not only the knowledge of grammatical rules but also the ability to use language appropriately in various contexts. By practicing speaking, students learn to navigate different social interactions, which is essential for real-world communication. Regular speaking practice in such environment amongst EFL students can help alleviate the fear of making mistakes, which is a common barrier for EFL students (Ibrahim & Hashim, 2021).

Additionally, these activities can significantly reduce language anxiety. These speaking activities supports communication skills, active learning and polish their communicative competence. This reduction in anxiety leads students to be more fluent and confident speakers. By prioritizing these activities, educators can help EFL students to become more proficient and confident English speakers as better preparing them for the real-world communication.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

To exemplify, many EFL students exhibit poor language proficiency especially in conversational skills due to lack of practice and fear of making errors (Mofareh, 2019). Furthermore, the linguistic challenge also derived from the shyness and embarrassment that hinder their willingness to engage in a conversation (Mofareh, 2019). Hence, the need to reduce the shyness and comfortability whilst speaking in English need to be addressed by English language instructors to ensure that the EFL students possess the necessary skills needed to be a confident and well verse speaking of English not just in class but outside of it.

In response to the challenges and struggles faced by many EFL students in higher learning institutions who are shy, anxious and do not have the self-esteem required to speak confidently in class, iRole Play is one of the ways to practice in a low-pressure environment leading to fluency and improved pronunciation (Ivan, 2024). According to Khairuddin, getting better at grammatical forms, perfecting pronunciation, and clarity of content, boost higher confidence amongst student who video record the roleplay (2022). This reduced the challenges faced are related to lack of vocabulary, worry about the faulty sentence structure and lack of ideas to converse in English confidently.

Therefore, one of the activities introduced in English class is iRole Play. The advancement of the digital revolution has profoundly transformed the educational landscape. With the ubiquity of mobile technologies and the growing influence of social media, educators are increasingly exploring innovative approaches to engage and empower their students. It is a dynamic and engaging medium that offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between traditional classroom instruction and the digital-savvy preferences of today's pre-university students. By leveraging the power of video, educators can tap into the inherent interests and motivations of their students, fostering a more immersive and meaningful learning experience.

This is to allow students to learn how to be an English-speaking EFLyers who knows how to apply their English language skills to everyday situations and contexts, providing essential guidance to ensure they can work confidently in different settings and mediums that includes activities based on real-life scenarios (Costello., Louise & Kulbicki, 2023). Hence, the integration of iRole Play activities for EFL students in the English classroom aligns seamlessly with the positive attitude towards improving speaking skills on the students reported from 13 recordings made by students as a learning tool in English class (Anita et al, 2020)

iRole Play is a highly engaging task that required lots of language and technical attentiveness. This concurs with Zhou (2021) statement that by immersing students in the language through specific tasks, they will not only become acquainted with the tools being used but also actively participate digitally. It enveloped pre-recording and whilst recording-speaking production.

Pre-recording iRole Play activities had enhanced greatly the pre-university students in terms of organising their iRole Play contents into a well-structured context with their ideas carried out creatively (Eka Wulandri, 2018). As a result, students were thrilled to see a substantial improvement in their delivery.

In light that a recording would display word error more significantly, accurate word pronunciation and fluency delivery were rehearsed before recording, so that whilst recording errors are reduced. Significant effect that the students reported was their pre-recording abilities improved a lot and influenced the improvement of their self confidence in speaking English publicly.

4.0 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Integrating iRole Play into the EFL classroom can further enhance speaking skills. iRole Play provide a platform for students to practice speaking in a creative and engaging way. According to Ayar (2023), iRole Play helps students build self-confidence and improve their language skills by recording and sharing their experiences. This method not only encourages students to speak more but also allows them to receive feedback from peers and instructors, fostering a collaborative learning environment.

The advent of iRole Play has transformed the way individuals communicate and share their personal narratives. iRole Play are a form of digital storytelling where creators engage with audiences through visual and verbal mediums. The dynamics of interaction within individuals can also be analyzed through the principles of communication theories, which traditionally focus on conversational exchanges. Communication theories, as introduced by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), describe the structured organization of conversational interactions. These theories highlight the mechanisms by which speaker's alternate turns, minimize overlaps, and manage transitions (Sacks et al., 1974).

The integration of communication theories into recordings analysis reveals how recordingsgers construct their narratives to maintain viewer engagement. By employing techniques such as self-selection and adjacency pairs, recordingsgers create a sense of

dialogue. For example, a recordingsger might pose a question to the audience, followed by a pause, inviting viewers to respond in the comment section. This practice mirrors the turn allocation component of communication theories, where the current speaker selects the next participant (Sacks et al., 1974).

In short, iRole Play is one of the strategies used in English class to allow the students to practice speaking in English with the society outside the classroom to reduce their fear and anxiety. Even though iRole Play is typically monologic, the interactional nature of iRole Play emerges through comments, responses, and audience engagement. For instance, communicators often anticipate audience reactions and incorporate rhetorical questions or pauses, simulating a conversational communication structure. Hence, this study is carried out to discover whether iRole Play activity managed to improve students' communication skills, which is one of the most important conversational aspects in the classroom

PARTICIPANTS

The central aim was to investigate the effectiveness of iRole Play as an instructional strategy in enhancing communication skills in simulated classroom interactions among pre-university EFL students. There were 87 tertiary students randomly selected from the EFL foundation program within an English language class at a university to evaluate the effectiveness of iRole Play in enhancing their English-speaking skills. Initially, participants engaged in traditional English-speaking activities, including group discussions, presentations, and language drills, conducted bi-weekly over an 8-week period. These activities are known to support language development by fostering interactive communication and practical application of language skills (Harmer, 2015).

Following this period, participants were introduced to iRole Play activities, where they created and posted video roleplays on designated English language topics, also conducted bi-weekly over an 8-week period. This phase provided structured guidance on video content, language use, and speaking techniques, aimed at improving fluency and presentation skills (Zhang & Chen, 2020). IRole Play was chosen due to its potential to increase student engagement and provide immediate feedback, which can enhance language learning outcomes (Boulton, 2016). By comparing the effectiveness of traditional methods versus iRole Play, the study aims to offer valuable insights into the practical applications of iRole Play in educational settings and its potential benefits for language acquisition.

THE ACTION RESEARCH

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method action research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a cyclical framework of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Action research was deemed appropriate due to its practical, classroom-based focus and its emphasis on iterative improvement and reflective practice.

Quantitative descriptive research is ideal for providing a comprehensive overview of how specific interventions, such as iRole Play, impact language skills (Polit & Beck, 2017). This design is implied in this study as focuses on systematically describing and analyzing the current state of variables, without manipulating them, which allows for an objective assessment of iRole Play's effects on speaking proficiency. By employing descriptive statistics, such as mean scores and frequency distributions, the study aims to provide clear insights into how iRole Play influences students' English-speaking skills (Davis, 2019) for their communication skills. The data collected can be statistically analyzed to identify trends and patterns related to the effectiveness of iRole Play (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative research method is integral to exploring how iRole Play influences the development of communication skills in classroom interactions among pre-university EFL students because it captures the depth and nuance of students' communicative experiences.

Furthermore, qualitative research highlights the subjective and social dimensions of classroom interactions that are often overlooked in purely quantitative studies. It allows the researcher to understand how iRole Play facilitates peer learning, confidence-building, and self-regulation, all of which contribute to more effective communication. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that qualitative research is particularly effective for uncovering such complex behaviours and the meanings attached to them. iRole Play, as narrative artifacts, offer insights into how students perceive their communication strengths and weaknesses and how they use instructor and peer feedback to refine their strategies. This reflective element aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner," where learning is deepened through ongoing self-examination. Thus, qualitative research not only supports a richer analysis of how iRole Play influences communication but also provides a basis for adapting teaching practices to better support student growth in overall communication.

6.2 Research Instrument

A survey was distributed to assess the quantitative aspect to acquire data on the students' baseline English-speaking proficiency and their attitudes towards both traditional and iRole Play-based activities (Dörnyei, 2007) over a 16-weeks period of lesson in total.

Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-intervention assessments using a rubric-based evaluation during mock classroom sessions, which measured key indicators such as timing, cue recognition, interruption management, and appropriateness of contributions.

Additionally, survey questionnaires were administered before and after the study, containing Likert-scale items designed to assess students' confidence, awareness, and perceived competence in classroom communication. These activities are designed to promote active language use and provide practical speaking experience (Harmer, 2015), which provided insights into their language development and engagement levels (Boulton, 2016). This survey included questions on speaking fluency, pronunciation, confidence, and engagement with language learning through a Likert-scale questionnaire.

The instrument used in this study was adapted from Andiappan, Seng and Shing's 2022 research paper entitled 'The use of iRole Play to enhance speaking performance of EFL students in a Malaysian secondary school'. The instrument used in Andiappan's, Seng, and Shings' (2022) research consisted of 20 items, measured using a Likert-scale from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. The adaptation of the survey was made to suit the main objective of this research which focuses more on tertiary level students. Hence, changes in the language such as vocabulary of certain items were made to fit with the level of the participants' language. (Example from our questionnaire). Some items from the adapted questionnaire were also taken out and replaced as their objectives were not required in this research (Example from our questionnaire).

Complementing this, qualitative data were gathered through thematic analysis of students' recordings, which provided insight into their reflections on communication behavior, self-regulation, peer interaction, and learning processes. Further qualitative input was obtained through focus group discussions conducted at the end of each cycle with 6–8 randomly selected participants, aimed at exploring their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the iRole Play activity. The researcher also maintained a reflective journal throughout the study to document classroom observations, teaching reflections, and emergent themes, all of which contributed to a deeper understanding of how iRole Play influenced the development of classroom communication skills.

Research Procedure

This study focuses on students' iRole Play in harnessing their speaking skills. Hence, the iRole Play phase included structured guidance on video content, language use, and speaking techniques, designed to improve fluency and enhance speaking confidence

(Zhang & Chen, 2020). These recordings were assessed for language use, fluency, and coherence. Participants received feedback on their recordings to guide improvement as well. The study followed an action research framework comprising two iterative cycles designed to assess and enhance students' communication skills in classroom interactions through the use of iRole Play (Figure 1).

In Cycle 1 (Week 4-8), students engaged in traditional English-speaking activities, including group discussions and presentations of language drills activities. The latter week, data were collected, and adjustments were made to instructional materials and feedback methods based on the findings from the first cycle. Then during the planning phase (Week 9), iRole Play task were introduced and briefed. The activity planned is explained as the instructions that they need to prepare such as mock classroom scripts need to be in accordance with the iRole Play content assigned.

During the action phase which is at Cycle 2 (Week 10-14), students engaged in classroom simulations of weekly recordings. Observation focused on collecting performance data and reflective insights from students. The reflection phase involved analyzing this data to assess the EFL students' communication skills as well from the iRole Play activity.

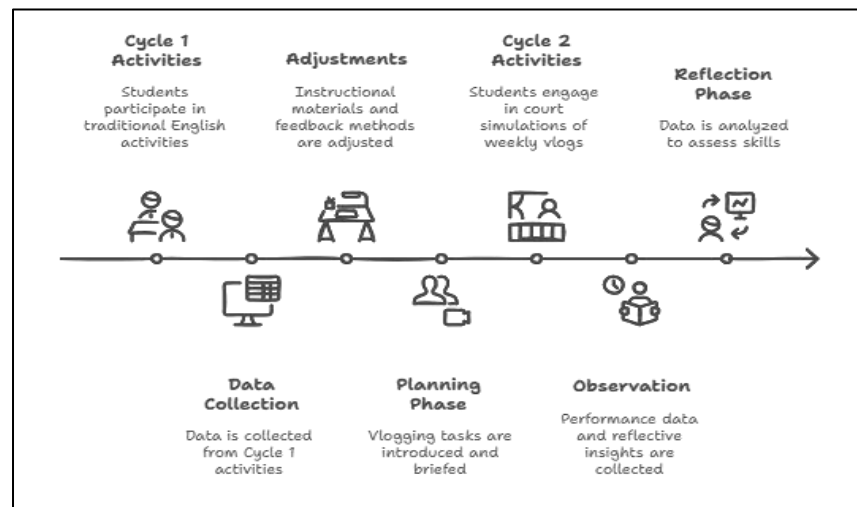


Figure 1: The action research of the study

Data Collection

Data collection employed both quantitative and qualitative methods (Figure 2). Quantitatively, students' communication skills were assessed before and after the intervention using a rubric that evaluated timing, cue recognition, interruption management, and appropriateness of contributions, while Likert-scale questionnaires

measured changes in confidence, awareness, and perceived competence in classroom communication.

Qualitatively, recordings content was thematically analyzed to uncover insights into students' communication behavior, self-regulation, peer dynamics, and learning progress. Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted with 6–8 students at the end of each cycle to explore their experiences and perceptions of the iRole Play activities. A researcher journal was maintained throughout the study to document classroom observations, teaching reflections, and emergent themes, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how iRole Play supports communication skills development in language education settings.

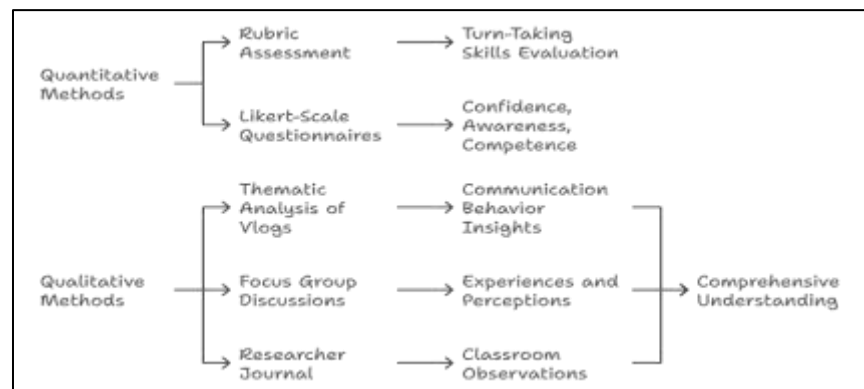


Figure 2: The data collection and analysis of the study

Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a comprehensive examination of the effects of iRole Play on the development of communication skills in classroom interactions among pre-university EFL students. By integrating multiple data sources, the study ensured triangulation, which strengthened the validity of the findings by providing a multi-faceted understanding of both the students' learning outcomes and their experiential insights throughout the intervention.

To evaluate the effectiveness of iRole Play in harnessing students' speaking skills quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed. Descriptive statistics were computed to provide a summary of participants' scores on various measures of speaking skills. This included calculating means, standard deviations, and frequencies to understand the baseline and post-intervention performance levels (Field, 2013). The results were interpreted to assess the overall effectiveness of iRole Play in improving students'

speaking skills. Detailed statistical reports were generated to present findings and support conclusions about the practical benefits of iRole Play in language learning.

While for the submitted recordings, there were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights related to self-regulation in communication, peer feedback integration, challenges in managing communication, and the development of classroom discourse awareness. These reflections offered a valuable look into students' thought processes, emotional responses, and personal growth throughout the study. Meanwhile, the journal also captured emergent insights that were used to adapt and refine the intervention during the action research cycles. As both a reflective and analytical tool, the journal played a key role in enhancing the trustworthiness and contextual relevance of the qualitative findings.

FINDINGS

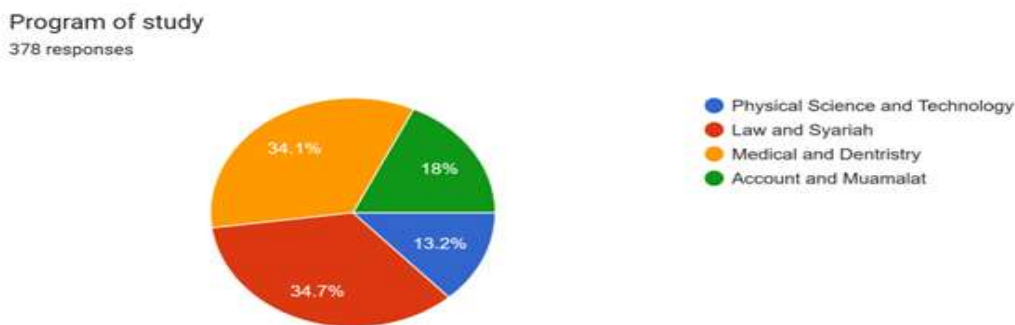


Figure 3: Percentage for Program of Study

In Figure 3, the percentage of the respondents is presented based on their study program. The majority of the respondents are from the Law and Syariah program as well as the Medical and Dentistry program. Respondents from the Law and Syariah program are 34.7%, slightly more from Medicine and Dentistry which are 34.1%. Followed by 18% from Account and Mumalat and the lowest percentage is from Physical Science and Technology with 13.2%. However, for this study, it will discuss on the quantitative data merely.

Communication Skills

For the quantitative data, Cycle 1 showed that 32.2% of students strongly agreed that the traditional speaking skills activity aids their communication skills. Meanwhile, 24.1% of students agreed, 23% of students were neutral, 16.1% of students disagreed, and 4.6% strongly disagreed.

On the other hand, the findings of Cycle 2 indicated that 36.8% of the students strongly agreed that iRole Play does improve their communication skills. Also, there were 40.2% students who agreed, 1.5% of students were neutral, 16.1% of students disagreed, while none of them strongly disagreed.

Learned New Vocabulary

Meanwhile, in Cycle 1, 1.9% respondents disagree and 1.1% strongly disagree with the statement that they learned new vocabulary while working on the role play in traditional English-speaking activities.

Yet, they agreed that they learned new vocabulary while working on the iRole Play in Cycle 2. Five options were given and slightly more than half of the respondents, which equals 56.1%, strongly agree with the statement given. As many as 30.2% of the respondents opted that they agreed, and 10.8% of the respondents felt neutral with the statement given.

Dialogue Helped to Understand English Grammar Better

The percentage of respondents in Cycle 1 agreed that helped them understand English grammar better traditional English-speaking activities. However, not as much as in Cycle 2 whereby 59.3% of respondents strongly agree that they said that the method helped them while 32% of respondents agree. Next, 6.6% of the respondents felt neutral towards the statement while 0.8% disagreed and 1.3% strongly disagreed that creating their own dialogue helped them understand English grammar better.

Playing a Character Helped Me Speak More Naturally in English

In Cycle 1, it reflects that 46.7% of traditional English-speaking activities help students to speak more naturally in English. Nevertheless, in Cycle 2, the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed that playing a character helped them speak more naturally in English is a majority of 67.7% respondents. In addition, 26.2% agree this method has helped them as well. 4.8% of the respondents felt neutral towards this statement and a small amount of 0.5% and 0.8% disagree and strongly disagree that playing a character helped them speak more naturally in English.

Felt More Confident Using English During the Performance

In Cycle 1, it shows that 46.3% felt more confident using English during traditional English-speaking activities performance. However, in Cycle 2 there were more than half of the respondents, as 57.9% strongly agree that they felt more confident using English during the iRole Play performance and 30.7% of the respondents agree with the given statement. 10.6% of those who felt neutral with the statement are 10.6%. While a minority

of 0.3% disagree and 0.5% of the respondents strongly disagree that they felt more confident to use English during the performance.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings from this study, through iRole Play, students' oral communication skills were significantly improved in the English for Communication class. Their vocabulary acquisition, grammar usage, and speaking fluency showed consistent improvements in the action research project. Quantitative data also revealed that the majority of students who prepare and perform their own scripts facilitated them in acquiring new vocabulary and language retention, simultaneously allowing them to be more confident conversing in English. This resonates with Alqahtani (2022), which highlighted an increase in students' intrinsic motivation, creative language exploration and impromptu communication. Similarly, Wong and Abdullah (2023) reported students' enhanced grammar, vocabulary and fluency with the integration of role play in ESL classrooms. These findings further strengthen Zipes' (2021) theoretical position in proposing a safe space for learners to learn and practice English with the use of storytelling and folklore. By immersing students with the repetitive use of English in meaningful contexts, particularly in the process of scriptwriting, rehearsing and performing, students' retention in the language can be achieved.

Overall, these findings shed light upon how role play aids communicative competence, highlighting the pedagogical aspect of culturally contextualized, narrative-based learning in ESL classrooms. The use of role play has tremendously helped shape classroom practice and fostered learner autonomy. Despite the challenges such as limited resources and an exam-oriented curriculum, pointed out by Ag-Ahmad et al. (2025), incorporating an action research method bridges the gap for instructors to integrate a holistic approach to ESL education, targeting culturally relevant interventions for more meaningful learning in pre-university contexts.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research, it could be conclusively generalised that EFL students could improve their speaking performance with the help of iRole Play activities. iRole Play activities could be used as a supplementary tool to improve students' confidence and motivation to use the target language in a more relaxed and flexible way. Compared to the conventional 'pen and paper' method of assessments such as quizzes, EFL students can take a more lenient approach to improve English especially in their turn-taking skills in communication.

iRole Play is expressively fun and done in a more natural setting which hinders students from feeling afraid. It should be noted that the positive outcome from this research is quite limited and may not be generalised to other various backgrounds of EFL students. Hence future studies need to be done, especially in a classroom interaction for the EFL students since this research was only focused in a normal EFL classroom setting.

Drawing from the action research conducted with Tamhidi students, it is evident that incorporating iRole Play into language education offers a promising avenue for developing essential communication skills crucial for effective classroom interaction. The iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection inherent in this research demonstrated a noticeable improvement in students' ability to initiate, respond to, and manage conversational turns within simulated classroom settings. The self-recording and peer-feedback mechanisms provided by iRole Play not only fostered self-awareness regarding their communication patterns but also allowed for targeted practice and refinement, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application of communication etiquette in language discourse.

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant potential of iRole Play as an innovative pedagogical tool to cultivate sophisticated communication skills among EFL students, particularly at the foundational Tamhidi level. The findings advocate for the integration of such practical, technology-driven approaches into language curricula to better prepare future language professionals for the demanding communicative dynamics of classroom proceedings. Further research could explore the long-term impact of iRole Play on communication apprehension and overall classroom performance, as well as its applicability across different stages of language education and in various language systems.

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