Students' Preferences in Role-Play Activities for German Language Learning: Exploring Formats, Types, Modes of Performance, and Topics

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Abstract
Roleplay is one of the interactive methods often used in foreign language learning, especially to improve speaking skills. But students may have different preferences about the type of roleplay they enjoy and find effective. In German Language education, roleplay helps students become more confident and fluent in using the language in real-life situations. However, not all types of roleplay work equally well for all learners. Understanding which types of roleplay students prefer can help educators design more engaging and effective learning activities. This study explores the preferences of German language education students at Universitas Negeri Malang regarding different types of classroom roleplay. A Likert-scale survey and in-depth interviews were used to examine preferences in four aspects: pair vs. group roleplay, preferred themes (daily life, academic, or professional scenarios), preferred formats (improvised vs. scripted) and preferred show in (live presentation in class vs. making videotape). The results show that most students prefer to pair roleplay with familiar, everyday themes and a flexible format that combines improvisation and light scripting and prefer to do live presentations in class for the Roleplay. A total of 20 second semester students from Class C participated in a Likert scale questionnaire, and six of them were also interviewed for deeper insight.
This study suggests that aligning roleplay activities with student preferences can support more active participation and better language learning outcomes. Future research could further explore how these preferences relate to students' performance and confidence in real communication.

Keywords: *roleplay, student preferences, German language, scripted roleplay.*

Introduction

Speaking ability is often regarded as a benchmark of language fluency, leading many language learners to place greater emphasis on oral communication (Ur, 2024). Various demands require mastery of a foreign language to support smooth communication. However, acquiring speaking skills is not easy. This condition typically requires self-confidence, an adequate vocabulary, and opportunities to use the language in appropriate contexts.

To support the development of speaking skills, interactive teaching methods are essential. One of the most commonly used methods is role-play, which allows students to

practice real-life situations and use the language contextually. Role-play is effective in language learning because it is enjoyable, increases confidence, and encourages communication even with limited vocabulary (Altun, 2015). Furthermore, role-play can create a dynamic classroom atmosphere, introduce common phrases, and foster collaboration (ibid.).

Conversely, not all forms of role-play are equally favored or effective for every student. Some students feel more comfortable working in pairs, while others prefer group collaboration. Student preferences may also vary depending on the topic or format, such as scripted role-play versus improvisation. These differences can influence how actively students participate and how much they gain from the activity.

This study aims to explore the preferences of second-semester German Language Education students at Universitas Negeri Malang regarding various types of role-play used in class. By understanding student preferences—such as the choice between group work or pairs, interest in certain themes, comfort performing live in class or through recordings, and favored delivery formats—the learning process can be designed to be more suitable and engaging. It is expected that this will contribute to the creation of more effective and appealing role-play activities in future language learning.

Theoretical Framework

Definition of Role-Play in the Context of Language Learning

Role-play is a teaching method that involves students in taking on specific roles through speaking, acting, and sharing (Altun, 2015). In the context of this study, role-play is utilized to help students associate new vocabulary with experience and course content. The use of vocabulary in real-life contexts through role-play strengthens students' understanding and enhances their ability to apply the words in everyday situations. As noted by Elouali (2023), teachers commonly employ role-play as a practical means to stimulate student motivation and advance speaking competence. This strategy not only fosters fluency but also encourages students to take on various roles and identities in problem-solving scenarios, thereby stimulating creative thinking (Adams & Mabusela, 2014; Bakhshayesh et al., 2023). According to Richards (2015), role-play is an activity that requires students to assume specific roles and develop scenes or dialogues spontaneously based on provided information or prompts. Similarly, Brown and Lee (2015) define role-play as a task in which one or more group members are assigned roles and must work toward achieving particular objectives. Moreover, role-play has been shown to enhance student engagement by increasing participation and interaction (Lahbibi & Farhane, 2023; Najjemba & Cronjé, 2020), fostering the development of negotiation skills (Yu, 2022), and improving social competencies (Baca et al., 2020).

The Benefits of Role-Play for Speaking Skills

Wulandari et al. (2019) conducted a classroom action research study and found that role-play can effectively support the improvement of students' speaking skills. Furthermore, Daulay et al. (2022) stated that role-play has a significant impact on students' speaking abilities. In line with these findings, Lestari and Sridatun (2020) argue that the use of instructional techniques such as role-play has proven effective in enhancing both speaking proficiency and self-confidence, even among university students.

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Dimensions in the Implementation of Role-Play

The implementation of role-play in language learning involves several key dimensions that influence its effectiveness. These include the type of role-play (e.g., scripted vs. unscripted), the mode of performance (live performance vs. recorded), the format of participation (individual, pair, or group work), and the relevance of themes or scenarios used in the activity. Each of these dimensions can affect students' levels of engagement, comfort, and language output.

The type of role-play

According to Mattes (2011), role-play can be categorized into two types: spontaneous role-play and guided role-play. In spontaneous role-play, students are given specific situations related to real-life contexts and are free to develop their own roles (ibid., 2011). In contrast, guided role-play requires roles to be designed in a more detailed and structured manner (ibid., 2011). Therefore, teachers need to carefully consider the type of role-play to be implemented in accordance with the learning objectives. A similar point was also made by Ravshavnova et al. (2022), who explained that role-playing games could be categorized into two types: scripted and non-scripted.

A study by Santoso and Prasetyo (2024) indicates that scripted role-play can significantly improve students' speaking skills, particularly in pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. This activity fosters a supportive learning environment, promotes collaboration, and encourages active participation, thereby creating a communicative and interactive classroom atmosphere. Moreover, the use of scripts in role-play offers clear direction and attainable goals, which in turn enhances students' confidence. By knowing the structure of the scenario, students feel more comfortable, which motivates them to engage more actively in casual conversations. Overall, scripted role-play is considered an effective method for practicing language skills while also preparing students for real-life communication.

The mode of performance

The way role-play activities are presented, either live or through video recordings, plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences and results. Live role-play allows students to interact directly with their peers and respond in real time, enhancing spontaneity and communicative competence development. Similarly, Vygotsky (as cited in Piscesa & Aji, 2024) noted that role play allowed students to engage with peers and teachers in realistic contexts, which helped them gain a deeper understanding of the social world.

In contrast, video-recorded role-play offers different advantages. Video is considered one of the technological tools that can enhance students' motivation in learning (Halim, 2016). Many studies have also emphasized the role of technology as a medium for improving classroom instruction (ibid.). According to Tuan and Mai (2015), recorded performances allow learners to reflect on their use of language, pronunciation, and gestures through playback, thereby promoting self-assessment and self-correction. Furthermore, video recordings can serve as learning documentation that enables both students and teachers to monitor progress over time.

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The format of participation

Pair and group work have long been utilized by many teachers, especially since the rise of communicative language teaching in the 1980s. Even prior to this development, it was common for students to engage in pair activities involving simple role-plays and dialogues. Ellis (2015), summarizes several advantages of using pair or group work in language learning. First, student talk time can increase significantly, as teacher-centered classrooms are often dominated by teacher speech, whereas group work offers more opportunities for learners to speak. Moreover, there is a greater variety of speech acts, since students are not only responding to teacher instructions but also engaging in meaning negotiation and other communicative roles. Group work also allows for more individualized instruction, as learners' needs can be addressed more specifically than in whole-class settings. In addition, student anxiety tends to decrease, as speaking in front of peers feels safer than speaking in front of the whole class. From a motivational perspective, learners are often more engaged due to the supportive, non-competitive atmosphere of group activities. The learning process becomes more enjoyable through social interaction, while group work also fosters learner autonomy, enhances social integration, and builds essential collaborative skills for real-life situations. Overall, learning through pair or group work can increase instructional effectiveness by encouraging risk-taking and peer support during the learning process.

A study conducted by Otienoh (2015) in two primary schools in Nairobi, Kenya, aimed to implement pair and group work as learning strategies to enhance classroom interaction in large groups. This action research employed a mixed-methods approach using interviews as well as structured and unstructured observations for data collection. The findings showed that group work was more effective in creating opportunities for interaction among learners, particularly when core elements of cooperative learning were systematically applied. Meanwhile, although pair work was modified to encourage interactive responsibility both individually and in pairs, it did not yield the expected outcomes. Therefore, group work was considered more suitable than pair work for enhancing classroom interaction, especially in large class settings (ibid.).

The relevance of themes

Role-play is a powerful teaching tool that enables learners to engage actively with language in meaningful contexts. Turzák & Turzáková (2017) stated that role-play allows learners to experience challenges they might encounter in real life and apply their knowledge in simulated situations. In line with this, Halim (2016) highlights that imaginary scenarios — such as being at a restaurant, checking in at the airport, or searching for lost property — provide opportunities to activate and practice functional language. To enhance engagement, Nguyen (2017) emphasizes the use of realia and relatable contexts, making learning more vivid, realistic, and easier to internalize. Similarly, Schatz (2006) suggests that, particularly for adult learners, role-play should be connected to their life experiences and personal reasons for being in Germany, such as for work, study, or tourism, to foster meaningful and surprising moments in the learning process. Themes based on everyday life — such as shopping, ordering food, making appointments, or asking for directions — are commonly used in beginner and intermediate language classrooms.

Method

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This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using surveys and in-depth interviews as data collection techniques. This approach was chosen to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' preferences regarding the use of role-play tasks in German language learning, as well as to describe the implementation and individual responses of the students. The subjects of this study were 20 second-semester students from Class C of the German Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Malang, aged between 17 and 20 years old. The respondents consisted of 15 female students and five male students.

The instruments used in this research were a Likert scale questionnaire and an in-depth interview guide. The questionnaire focused on several key aspects related to students' preferences in role-play tasks, including their preferred work format — such as pair work, group work with more than two people, improvisation without a script, or using a scripted text. It also explored preferred role-play themes, which included daily life situations, academic contexts, professional or workplace scenarios, and interactions involving German-Indonesian culture. Additionally, the questionnaire examined students' preferences regarding the format of performance and the medium of presentation, whether through live role-play in class or through recorded video presentations.

Each statement in the questionnaire was measured using a five-point Likert scale, namely: "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree", and "strongly agree." The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms to all research participants. To complement the survey data, the researcher also conducted in-depth interviews aimed at exploring in greater detail the students' preferences regarding the implementation of role-play tasks. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, guided by a structured interview protocol, and involved six students from the same participant group.
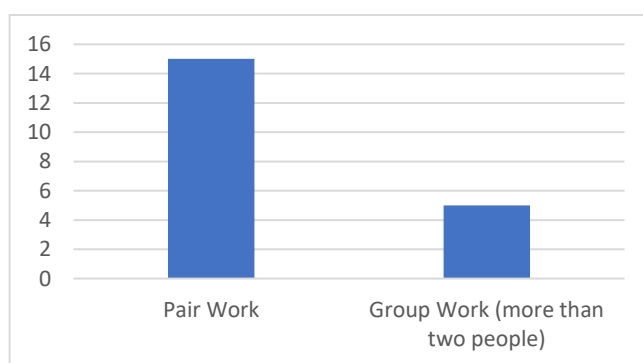
Results

Pair vs. Group

Figure 1. Preferred Types of Role-Play

Based on the questionnaires filled out by the respondents, the type of role-play most preferred was pair role-play (two people), followed by group role-play. This indicates that most students feel more comfortable and enjoy role-play in small groups or pairs. This is reinforced by the results of interviews with several respondents who mentioned that pair role-play provides more opportunities for two-way interaction, a variety of ideas, and

comfort in communication. Here are the opinions from the respondents:

(1) "(*Untuk*) *jenis roleplay* (*saya*) *lebih suka berpasangan, karena komunikasi dua arah lebih praktis.*" (DAR-01)

(For the type of role-play, I prefer pairs because two-way communication is more practical.

(2) "(*Saya*) *lebih suka berpasangan ….*" (SAV-01)

(I prefer role-play in pairs ….)

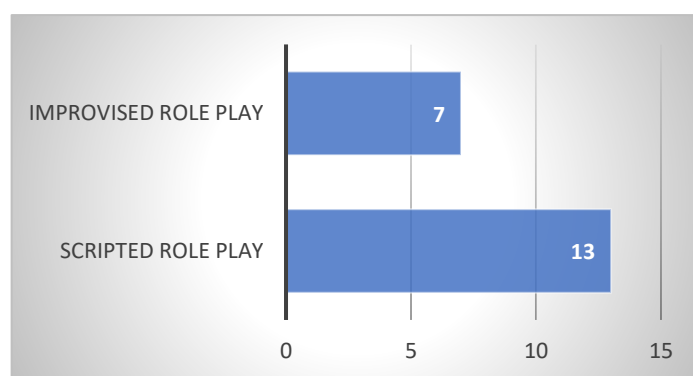*Improvisation vs. Scripted Role-Play*

Figure 2. Preferred Role-Play Format

Based on the responses from the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents favor performing role-plays with pre-prepared scripted texts. In contrast, improvisational role-play without a script is the least preferred choice among them. However, based on the interview findings, it can be summarized that respondents show a balanced preference between improvisation and scripted role-play. Many appreciate improvisation for its allowance of spontaneity, natural expression, and the added challenge it brings during live performance. At the same time, they recognize the advantages of preparing scripts beforehand, such as enhancing vocabulary acquisition, developing writing skills, and providing clear guidance for role execution. Several respondents indicated that combining scripts with improvisation is the most effective approach. In this method, the script acts as a foundation or framework, while improvisation offers flexibility for spontaneous adjustments and creative input. Although scripted role-play is viewed as beneficial for expanding vocabulary and understanding context, there is some concern that memorized scripted material may be forgotten more easily. Here are some excerpts of opinions regarding improvisation versus scripted role-play:

(3) "*(Saya) lebih suka impove pada saat-saat tertentu untuk mengikuti alur. Dan ketika (saya) membuat script sebelum melakukan roleplay (saya) dapat mengasah vocab dan membiasakan menulis.*" (SAV-02)

(I prefer to improvise at certain moments to follow the flow. And when I create a script before doing the role-play, I can sharpen my vocabulary and get used to writing.)

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(4) *"Role play langsung lebih menantang, bisa improvisasi, dan lebih memahami isi tugas."* (DID-02)

(Spontaneous role-play is more stimulating, offers room for improvisation, and enhances comprehension of the task.)

(5) *"Dalam role-play, saya mengikuti template yang sudah ada, sehingga secara otomatis saya mencari arti kata-kata yang belum saya pahami (dan akhirnya mengerti maknanya)."* (VIT-02)

(In role-play, I follow an existing template, which automatically motivates me to look up the meanings of words I don't understand and eventually grasp their meanings.)
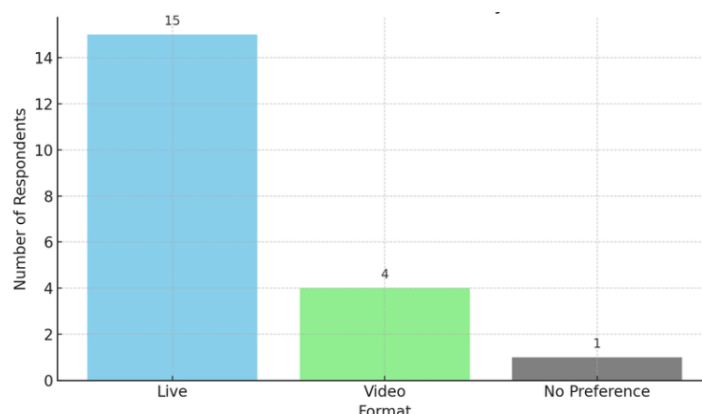
Live performance vs. recorded

Figure 3. The mode of performance

Based on the questionnaire data filled out by the research respondents, the majority preferred role-play conducted live in the classroom. This indicates that live role-play is perceived as more enjoyable, challenging, and helpful for developing spontaneous communication skills. Only a small portion chose the recorded video format, which might be seen as more flexible and allowing for more thorough preparation. Therefore, live role-play in class should remain a priority to create an interactive atmosphere and authentic communication practice. However, video-based role-play can be used as an alternative or variation to train language production skills and creativity, especially for students who need more time to prepare themselves.

Almost similar to the previous questionnaire results, the interview findings show that many respondents also prefer live role-play because it is considered more challenging, allows for improvisation, and provides real-time feedback that can accelerate the learning process. Live role-play is also seen as more natural, helps with contextual understanding, and supports facial expressions and more authentic social interaction. Some respondents feel that recorded role-play tends to make the learning atmosphere less dynamic due to excessive repetition and may reduce spontaneity.

(6) *"Role play langsung lebih menantang dan membantu pemahaman, karena dilakukan secara spontan dan harus paham arti kalimat sebelum tampil."* (KAR-03)

(Live role-play is more challenging and helps understanding because it is done spontaneously and requires understanding the meaning of sentences before performing.)

(7) *"(Menurut saya akan) lebih efektif (role-play) secara langsung daripada direkam karena (mahasiswa dapat) lebih cepat mendapat feedback dan lebih realtime."* (DAR-03)

(Role-play is more effective when performed live, as it allows students to receive immediate feedback and engage in real-time interaction.)
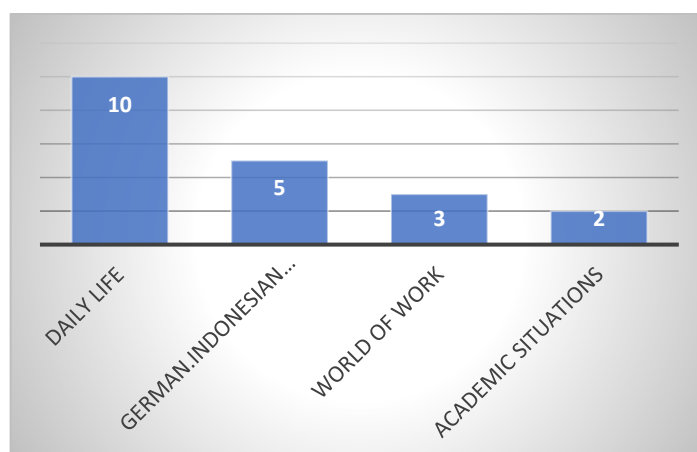
Role-play Topics

Figure 4. Favorite Role Play Topic

Based on the questionnaire results, the role-play topic that most respondents found interesting was daily life. This topic was considered the most relevant and closely related to their experiences and communication needs in real-life contexts. The topic of German-Indonesian cultural interactions also received considerable interest, indicating an enthusiasm for cultural aspects and cross-cultural communication. Meanwhile, academic and professional/workplace topics received less attention, possibly because they were perceived as more specific or challenging.

Meanwhile, from the interview results, it is clear that most respondents prefer role-play topics related to daily life, such as shopping, asking for directions, discussing professions, holidays, and casual conversations. These topics are considered the most relevant, applicable, and easily implemented in real-life contexts, as they align with the respondents' communication needs in everyday situations. Respondents also noted that such topics allow for direct practice with peers and provide a more meaningful learning experience. Therefore, choosing themes that are closely connected to daily life is key to increasing the effectiveness and engagement in role-play activities. Here are some statements quoted from interviews with the respondents:

(8) *"Tema yang paling disukai adalah berbelanja (…) bertanya arah, menjelaskan sesuatu."* (SAV-01)

(The most preferred topics are shopping, asking for directions, and explaining something.)

(9) *"Tema yang relevan adalah pekerjaan dan saat liburan."* (JEA-01)

(The relevant topics are work and vacation.)

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   (10) *"Tema favorit: Im Kaufhaus – karena relevan dengan kehidupan sehari-hari dan bisa praktik bertanya ke teman."*

(Favorite topic: In the department store – because it is relevant to daily life and allows practicing asking friends.)

Discussion

  Based on the questionnaires completed by the respondents and the interviews, the most preferred type of role-play is pair role-play (two people). This indicates that the majority of respondents feel more comfortable and enjoy role-play in small groups or pairs. According to the respondents, pair role-play provides more opportunities for two-way communication, a variety of ideas, and comfort in communication. This preference is supported by current communicative approaches in second language (L2) teaching, which emphasize small group work—including pair work—as a way to increase learners' chances to practice and use the L2 in the classroom (Storch & Aldosari, 2010). Furthermore, pair work aligns with the idea of providing students with the right balance of challenge and support within the Zone of Proximal Development, enabling them to successfully complete language tasks (Vygotsky, as cited in Meyer, 2022). It is especially effective during the "We do" phase of gradual release instruction, where guided practice helps students gradually develop independence as learners (Pearson & Gallagher, as cited in Meyer, 2022).

  Meanwhile, based on the questionnaire results, the majority of respondents prefer role-plays with pre-prepared scripts, while improvisational role-plays without scripts are the least favored option. However, interview findings reveal a more balanced perspective, with respondents appreciating both methods. Improvisation is valued for allowing spontaneity, natural expression, and the challenge of live performance. On the other hand, using scripts helps improve vocabulary, writing skills, and provides clear guidance for role execution. Many respondents stated that a combination of scripts and improvisation is the most effective approach, as the script serves as a basic framework providing structure, while improvisation offers flexibility for spontaneous adjustments and creativity. According to Santoso and Prasetyo (2024), the use of scripted role-play effectively makes the learning process more engaging and helps students build confidence in using their language skills in real-world contexts. Its contribution to boosting speaking confidence is considered highly important. Although scripts are useful for expanding vocabulary and understanding context, there is concern that memorized scripted material may be more easily forgotten.

  Based on this study, most respondents showed a clear preference for live role-play conducted in the classroom rather than recorded video formats. They found live role-play to be more enjoyable, challenging, and effective in developing spontaneous communication skills. This approach encourages improvisation, fosters more authentic social interactions, and provides real-time feedback, all of which help accelerate the learning process. That said, video-based role-play still holds value as an alternative or complementary method, especially for training language production and creativity among students who may need extra time to prepare. Supporting this, the study by Madzlan et al. (2023) concluded that asynchronous online role-play positively contributes to linguistic development, particularly by improving speaking fluency. This method, while structured, still allows for spontaneity, giving participants the freedom to practice speaking more naturally. Such findings suggest that role-play not only facilitates language practice in a controlled setting but also nurtures the fluency essential for spontaneous speech—an important component of second language

proficiency (Cucchiarini et al., 2002). Therefore, live role-play should remain a priority in learning to create an interactive atmosphere and authentic communication practice.

Finally, based on the questionnaire and interview data, most respondents prefer role-play topics related to everyday life, such as shopping, asking for directions, discussing professions, and holidays. This preference aligns well with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, which states that learners at the A2 level can understand frequently used expressions and simple sentences related to areas of immediate relevance— such as personal and family information, shopping, work, and local surroundings (*Gemeinsamer Europäischer Referenzrahmen (GER) Für Sprachen*, n.d.). They are also able to communicate in simple, routine situations involving the direct exchange of familiar information, and to describe their background, environment, and immediate needs using basic language. These everyday topics are not only practical but also help make language learning more engaging and meaningful for students. As Lee (2015) suggests, role plays tend to be more effective when they reflect real-life situations and when learners can take on roles that align with their own identities. This approach fosters greater comfort and involvement, leading to more successful learning outcomes. In addition, themes involving German-Indonesian cultural interactions also spark interest among learners, highlighting their enthusiasm for intercultural communication. In contrast, more academic and professional topics are less preferred, possibly due to their complexity. Overall, selecting role-play scenarios rooted in daily life significantly enhances both the effectiveness and enjoyment of language learning activities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that roleplay plays a significant role in the learning process of second-semester German language students. It has a positive impact on enhancing both their language skills and self-confidence. Students who actively participated in roleplay activities showed a stronger grasp of language structures and were able to communicate more fluently and naturally.

In addition to improving linguistic abilities, roleplay also encouraged greater student engagement during lessons. This active involvement contributed to higher learning motivation, as students felt more connected to the material and more comfortable expressing themselves in the target language. The interactive nature of roleplay helped create a dynamic and enjoyable learning environment.

However, the study also revealed several challenges in implementing roleplay effectively. Some students struggled with scenario preparation, while others experienced a lack of confidence when performing in front of their peers. These issues highlight the need for better support strategies, such as more comprehensive guidance from instructors and the use of varied and engaging learning materials.

The implications of this research suggest that roleplay can be an effective method for foreign language instruction, particularly in developing speaking skills and student interaction. For future research, it is recommended to explore in greater depth the factors that influence the success of roleplay in the classroom. Additionally, further studies could investigate complementary methods that enhance and support the roleplay approach to maximize its effectiveness.

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