

# The Effectiveness of Role Play Strategy in Teaching Vocabulary

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**Abstract**—Vocabulary is a key element of students' understanding and communicative ability in any language. However Saudi students of English are observed to face many difficulties with vocabulary, which have been attributed to the widespread use of traditional methods focusing on memorization and rote learning. Role-play potentially offers an enjoyable way to encourage students to use vocabulary appropriately in simulated authentic situations. In a quasi-experimental study in a girls' secondary school in Al-Madinah, pre and post-test comparisons were made of vocabulary test achievement between two first year classes. One (experimented) taught two units of their English course book through role play, the other (control) taught by traditional methods. T –test revealed no significant difference in vocabulary proficiency in the pre-test; however, in the post-test, the mean score of the experimental group was significantly higher than that of the control. The evidence supports the beneficial effect of incorporating role-play in EFL teaching.

**Index Terms**—vocabulary, role-play, EFL, teaching methods, communicative approach

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is considered the key element of students' understanding and successful communication with other people whether in L1 or L2. No comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language, without understanding vocabulary (Laufer, 1997). Learning vocabulary is very important in EFL, but knowing vocabulary is not enough; what matters is using it in various situational contexts (Lajoee & Barimani, 2013). Therefore, teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia try to familiarize students with words and their meanings, derivational patterns, grammatical and social usage, through using various strategies, activities, and drills to enable them to use vocabulary appropriately and effectively in real situations.

Role-play is a well-known strategy that helps students to familiarize themselves with new social environments. Shankar, Piryani, Singh, and Karki indicate that "Role plays early in the course can expose students to different situations they are likely to face in their future career" (Shankar et al, 2012). Moreover, role plays are considered as simulating more authentic situations for EFL learners. The results of a descriptive study done by Sadeghi & Sharifi (2013) showed by comparing different pre- and post-teaching activities, that participants had higher vocabulary achievement in the role play activities.

According to the above overview of role-play and vocabulary learning, the current study focuses on the role play technique in teaching vocabulary to Saudi female students in secondary school.

### Statement of Problem

Unfortunately, teachers in Saudi schools often use the same old strategies and activities for learning vocabulary, relying heavily on memorization and rote learning, which makes students feel bored. The learning process requires some change and variation from time to time, because too much repetition and structure make it much harder for students to engage and practise new language vocabulary activities. Anuthama (2010) states, "Vocabulary is difficult to teach because of the complexity of its linguistic, semantic and psycho-cognitive aspects. So teachers should keep looking for ways to substitute rote repetition with more effective techniques" (Anuthama, 2010, p.10).

In learning vocabulary, the most popular technique among Saudi learners is by using the dictionary. Alabsi (2015) found most Saudi learners use iPad for translation of vocabulary, rather than other aspects of the language. Also Alhammad (2009) found that the most frequently used strategies in learning vocabulary among Saudi students were guessing from context, writing the meaning of new words, and looking up the meaning in a dictionary" (Alhammad, 2009). However, current levels of proficiency among students suggest these methods are not sufficient.

The researcher's experience and the results of an exploratory study suggest that some of the difficulties facing Saudi EFL students are vocabulary limitations so extreme as to prevent effective conversation and comprehension, misapplication of words, incorrect pronunciation of new words, rephrasing words because of limited vocabulary and frequent hesitation.

For this reason, the present study aims to investigate the effect of role play to enhance and enrich vocabulary teaching in order to enable learners to use the foreign language effectively in real situations.

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study seeks to answer the following main question:-

What is the effect of using role-play strategy on enhancing vocabulary among female secondary school EFL students'?

On the basis of this research question, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

1. "There is no significant difference in the average mean score on the vocabulary achievement test between learners who will be taught by using a role-play strategy (experimental group) and those who will be taught without a role-play strategy (control group) in the pretest."
2. "There is no significant difference in the average mean score on the vocabulary achievement test between learners taught by using a role-play strategy (experimental group) and those taught without a role-play strategy (control group) in the posttest."

#### **The research significance**

The current study is significant for the following reasons:-

1. It might provide EFL teachers with solutions for developing vocabulary effectively and may attract them to practise role play strategy in the classroom.
2. It may benefit and help learners use role play to master and enrich vocabulary.
3. It may help students to overcome problems they face in acquiring and conveying meaning of vocabulary through communication.
4. With specific reference to current attempts to improve EFL vocabulary learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia, it might contribute suggestions for course designers, and curriculum developers for using role-play in Saudi schools.
5. It might open up new vistas for researchers for further studies in the field of learning vocabulary using role-play in the classroom as it puts theory into practice.

#### **Research Delimitation**

This study was conducted in a girls' secondary school which is located in Al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia, in the first term of 2015. The participants in this study were using the "Flying High for Saudi Arabia" textbook, including units 2 and 3. The study was delimited to the use of role-play strategy in teaching vocabulary to 40 female first year secondary school EFL students who were at the first level of secondary school English proficiency, with an average age of 15 to 16 years old. Their mother tongue was Arabic.

#### **Terminology**

##### *Vocabulary*

The term vocabulary has a range of meanings. For example, some teachers use the term to mean sight-word vocabularies, referring to students' immediate recognition of words in print; other teachers refer to words students understand as their meaning vocabulary. Still other teachers use the term to mean listening vocabulary, or students' understanding of words that they hear in the spoken language. Content teachers use the term academic vocabulary to refer to content-specific words (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005). Within this research, the term vocabulary has been used to refer to students' understanding of and ability to use words through role-play strategy.

##### *Vocabulary Learning Strategy*

It refers to "any set of techniques or learning behaviours, which language learners use to understand the meaning of a new word, to restore the knowledge of newly learned words, and to expand one's knowledge, of vocabulary" (Intaraprasert, 2004, p. 53. Cameron (2001) describes vocabulary learning strategies as "the actions that learners take to help themselves understand and remember vocabulary items" (p. 92).

##### *Role-play Strategy*

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2015) role play is acting out of the part of a particular person or character, for example as a technique in training or psychotherapy. Role-play is a strategy in which students are required to act specific roles through saying, doing and sharing (Altun, 2015).

In relation to the research purpose, role play is used to encourage students to make connections between vocabulary, experiences and the content that is being studied. The students are introduced to new vocabulary and then given the chance to use the words in context through role-play. The process of role-playing the words helps to increase the students' understanding of the words and how to use the words in a real world context.

#### **Related Studies**

This section is allocated to review the literature related to vocabulary learning strategies, and role-play as an effective strategy for learning vocabulary.

English has become an international and communicative language, with the increase in communication technology in the world generally. Vocabulary is considered the key element for communication and plays a vital role in English language learning. In learning vocabulary, it is necessary not only to know the meaning of a particular word, but to know all the aspects of the word. This calls attention to process in which information is obtained, stored, retrieved, and used.

The use of role-play activities develops communication skills and students are encouraged to master and enrich vocabulary learning through conversational activities. Students find difficulty in learning English language vocabulary because of vocabulary limitations, misuse of words, use of wrong words, inappropriate terms, or poor pronunciation (Afdillah, 2015). Using role-play can enhance students' exposure to language, which is considered as the key factor to speed up the language learning process. Students via producing speech in role-play activities can enhance their

communicative competence (ibid). Moreover, conduct of role-play activities can provide a stress free learning environment where students enjoy using the language.

The learning of vocabulary is important because of the relationship between vocabulary and overall learning development. A number of studies have shown that vocabulary size in bilinguals is a strong predictor for success in the future because they have access to and participate in communication events in two language communities (Fernandez et al. 1992, Umbel, 1992 and Allman, 2005).

Sadeghi & Sharifi (2013) investigate the effect of four post-teaching activities, namely games, narrative writing, role-play, and speaking tasks on vocabulary gain of 111 elementary Iranian EFL learners across gender. The results show statistically significant main effects for vocabulary learning across different activity types, with role-play leading to the highest vocabulary compared to other strategies. Moreover, the impact was more significant for female than male learners.

Nair, Yusof, & Arumugam (2014) studied the effects of using the role-play method and the conventional method to teach the Malay Language to preschool children. The sample was 100 pupils from government preschools. The experimental group was taught using the play method and the control group was taught using the conventional method for a period of six weeks. The findings indicate that the utilization of the role-play method significantly enhances the mastery of vocabulary and interest in learning the Malay Language among the pupils.

Toumpaniari, Loyens, Mavilidi, & Paas (2015) investigated whether incorporating physical activities and gestures could improve foreign language vocabulary learning in preschool children. The results after a 4-week intervention programme showed that learning by embodying words through task-relevant gestures and physical activities holds great promise as an enhancer of children's learning.

Altun (2015) conducted a case study on the implementation of role-play activities to explore the benefits of such activities in developing language. It was found that conduct of role-play activities can provide a stress free learning environment where students enjoy using the language. Findings show that role-play activities enable students to gain self-confidence enhance, motivation and promote the speaking skills of foreign language learners.

#### *Reasons for choosing role-play strategy*

There are several broad reasons for using role play as a teaching strategy for learning vocabulary. It is a major strategy in the communicative approach and has many advantages, as it can encourage forms of social interaction that provide an important stimulus to use the language in real life and challenge learners' existing beliefs. Also it is suggested by many researchers that effective learning takes place when teachers challenge students with problems and facilitate the process of finding the solution (Vincent & Shepherd, 1998; Piaget, 1972). Most importantly, role play engages learners in activities that bring realism to their learning and help them to apply it in real situations. Vocabulary should be learned in such a way that learners will be able to communicate effectively, successfully and appropriately. Students should be capable to recall vocabulary easily, recognizing how to use and when to use the appropriate words. Al-Jabri (2005) indicates that "learners of English have often faced communication barriers in various situations which require control over a large variety of vocabulary items rather than a narrow range of syntactic structures" (p.1)

Role play can be used as a means of achieving a wide variety of outcomes, such as the acquisition of knowledge, application of knowledge to develop further understanding and skills, and attitudinal change. It is a particularly useful strategy in learning vocabulary, where learners are required to increase their knowledge of vocabulary and understanding by reading, researching, selecting and organizing relevant materials, analysing and synthesizing information, and discussing/arguing/debating different issues.

Learning in a relaxed and playful environment lets learners know it is safe to play around with what they are learning, and use their vocabulary in a real situation and in new creative ways. Afdillah (2015) indicates, "Many students will be more creative and active to play their role because the teacher gives opportunities to students to explore their actions" (p.20). Also, according to Ladousse, "Perhaps the most important reason for using Role Play is that it is fun" (2004, p.29). Role-play gives students the chance to practise the language in real life situations in an interesting and fun way and at the same time stimulates unmotivated students to share and use the language when they play their roles in front of the class.

#### *Advantages of using role-play*

Role-play strategies have proven their effectiveness in teaching English to learners, as role-play can increase students' enthusiasm, self-confidence, and empathy, and encourage critical thinking. Role-play is a teaching strategy that models vocabulary learning in a cost-effective, controlled, and fun way for both students and teachers (Kuipers & Clemens, 1998; Huang and Shan, 2008; Altun, 2015).

Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) indicate that by using role play, L2 learners can experience many kinds of real situations in which they will use the language and words; and as they develop a sense of mastery in them, they should be able to apply the language more easily to new situations. Acting out a situation encourages the students to use the natural expressions and intonations of native speakers as well as gestures. Teaching of social skills increases motivation, develops creativity, promotes interaction, encourages peer learning and helps learners to communicate more freely. According to Sasaki (1998), role plays are regarded as simulating more authentic situations. Incorporating role-play into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language production and also a lot of fun.

#### *Procedures of using role-play*

Liu & Ding (2009) explain the procedures of role-play as an effective technique for teaching and learning a language. They focus on how to apply role-play successfully, what are the procedures, what teachers will do if the situation is "out of control", and how the teacher should respond to the errors made by students. They identify four vital factors for role-play success: the topic chosen should be real and relevant; the teachers need to 'feed-in' the appropriate language; they should correct errors in a proper way; and teachers' roles are as facilitator, spectator or participant. Afdillah (2015) indicates some steps for good use of role play: first, arrange or prepare scenarios to be performed by the students, choose some students to learn about the scenario several days before, classify students into groups of five, explain competence to be achieved, request a group to play the prepared scenario, while students in other groups observe, end performance, each student is given work sheet for discussion of the performance, every group gives a conclusion about scenario performed, the teacher gives a general conclusion, evaluation, and closing (p. 25).

*For the current study the instructor used the following Steps and Procedures*

The experimental group was taught vocabulary by using the following:

**I. warm-up activities:** (flash cards, story, watching movie, real objective ...etc)

**II. role play:**

1. preparation content: context/background information.(voc, functions, instructions, time alter, task).
2. activity participation: (interaction, observation, counselor).
3. evaluation content:(follow-up tasks multi-choice questions- fill in the gap, discussion, communicative competence, delay error correction).

Moreover, the study used supplementary materials such as; cue dialogue: examples (visual clues, verbal clues, allowing students' own phrasing, cue cards, naming of situation and people involved, giving clear instruction as to what should be said.

To sum up, previous studies support the idea of using role-play in learning language (Toumpaniari et al, 2015; Hernandez et al, 1992; Umbel, 1992; and Allman: 2005). All research asserted the importance of role-play strategies and some considered it as the best strategy for learning language (Sadeghi & Sharifi: 2013, Nair et al., 2014). It is clear from the studies that using role-play has various advantages and benefits as indicated by Afdillah (2015); Kuipers & Clemens (1998); Huang and Shan (2008), Altun (2015); Vincent & Shepherd (1998); Piaget (1972); Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010); and Sasaki (1998). In addition some studies examine the best procedures of using role-play, such as Liu & Ding (2009), and Afdillah (2015). It is hoped that the present study will help to increase and improve students' learning vocabulary through using role-play in their learning process.

## II. THE METHODOLOGY

The current research uses a quasi-experimental method by using a "pre-test and post-test" design. It aims to see whether the role play technique is effective in teaching vocabulary to first year secondary school students. There were two classes in this research, namely, the experimental class and control class. This research was conducted over eight meetings. Each meeting was conducted with a lesson plan specifically designed by the researcher based on the existing curriculum, "Flying High". Farhady (1995) illustrates the design of this kind of research as follows:



Figure 1 Research Design Method

### *Sampling*

The sample of the study is EFL students at a secondary school in Al-Madinah, West Saudi Arabia. There are six classes in the first year. The researcher took two classes for sampling; class 1 for the experimental group and class 2 for the control group. Each class contained 20 students. Thus, the total populations from the two classes were 40 EFL female students who were in the first year of secondary school with an average age of 15 to 16 years old. Their mother tongue was Arabic, and they had been learning English for 4 years.

### *Materials and procedures used in the treatment*

In teaching vocabulary through role play, the materials applied for the experimental group were cards containing roles to be practised in the class (see Appendix). The participants in the control group did not experience working with role play cards. Instead, they were given materials based on the traditional method of teaching a foreign language. The researcher asked the teacher to use the following procedures:-

- 1 Present a topic based on the selected unit in the first year of secondary textbook.
- 2 Use warm up activities to introduce the new topic.

3. Present and discuss the new vocabulary by using different techniques such as pictures, realia, and mime, direct questions in order to focus on pronunciation, repetition, and meaning. Then write the new words on the board, to reinforce spelling.

4. Give a scenario to students to perform (designed and arranged by researcher) about the topic discussed earlier in the class. Ask them to deliver meaning in short, simple, transactional and interpersonal conversation to interact with their surroundings, involving the new vocabulary and functions used in the lesson. As examples of speech acts: ask for, give, or refuse a favour, accept and reject things, admit and deny, and ask for and give opinions.

5. Ask students to learn about the scenario several days before performance activity.

6. Divide the class into groups of students, consisting of five or six girls per group.

7. Explain and give instructions to achieve communication competence and timing.

8. Select a group of students and ask them to play the prepared scenario

9. Observe and monitor the scenario being performed

10. Discuss and evaluate each group's performance.

#### *Instrument*

The researcher developed an achievement test based on the instructional material of the English book "Flying High". The aim of preparing the test was to achieve the following objectives: (1) measuring the effectiveness of using role-play in enhancing female students' vocabulary competence and accuracy compared to the traditional methods and (2) providing data about the students' vocabulary progress before and after the study. Both groups, the experimental group and the control group, were taught by the same teacher.

The test contained 42 items divided into three main parts which tested vocabulary. Students were asked to choose the correct words to fill in the blanks in conversation; they had to match some words with their meanings; they were also asked to write the spelling of the relevant word under each of a set of pictures (14.14.14 respectively). Each item scored one mark. The final question was a multiple choice question with 8 items. The total score was out of 50 points.

A t-test was conducted at the start of this programme to make sure that there were no significant differences between the control group and the experimental group in their prior knowledge of English vocabulary.

#### *Validity and Reliability*

To confirm that the achievement test measures what it is mainly designed to measure, it was evaluated by a panel of experts in educational studies and EFL Specialists. Their recommendations and comments were carefully considered. Test questions were reformed according to their suggestions. Moreover, prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted, with a group of 20 students who were excluded from the sample, to check the reliability of the pretest and posttests. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for all the questions. The total value for the pretest was (0.80), while the alpha value for the posttest was (0.83), which indicates that the questions were highly reliable.

#### *Data Analysis*

Following the implementation of the pretest and post-test, the of scores were calculated and analysed by using the SPSS for Windows version 17. The mean and independent sample t-test were used to compare the mean scores of the two groups.

### III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Regarding the results obtained from the pretest to ensure the equivalence and homogeneity of the two groups of participants in terms of vocabulary performance before starting the treatment, the results are revealed in table 1

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS RESULT OF PRE-TEST

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre test	Experimental group	20	28.5	8.3	1.86
	Control group	20	27.5	8.1	1.80

#### *Hypothesis 1*

The first hypothesis assumed that "There is no significant difference in the average mean scores of the vocabulary achievement test between learners who will be taught by using a role-play strategy (experimental group) and those who will be taught without a role-play strategy (control group) in the pretest."

The findings show that the mean score of the experimental group was 28.5 with a standard deviation of 8.3, and the mean score of the control group was 27.5 with a standard deviation of 8.3. This indicated that the two groups were alike in vocabulary achievement before conducting the treatment with the role-play strategy. Consequently, the first hypothesis was accepted.

#### *Hypothesis 2*

The second hypothesis indicates that "There is no significant difference in the average mean score on the vocabulary achievement test between learners taught by a using role-play strategy (experimental group) and those taught without a role-play strategy (control group) in the posttest."

The results of the analysis of the posttest scores are shown in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS RESULT OF POST-TEST

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post test	Experimental group	20	36.0	10.2	2.28
	Control group	20	32.6	9.2	2.06

The mean score of the experimental group was 36.6 with a standard deviation of 10.2, while the control group's mean score was 32.6 with a standard deviation of 9.2. Table 3 shows a difference in the mean scores between the experimental group and the control group.

TABLE 3  
T-TEST ANALYSIS FOR STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN THE POST-TEST

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Posttest	.46	.50	2.25	38	0.03	7.10	3.14

Table 3 proves that there was a significant difference between the results of the control group and the experimental group, as the (t) value was 2.25, which is statistically significant at  $\alpha < 0.05$ . This is lower than the set criterion where the hypothesis will be rejected if  $p \leq 0.05$ . Therefore, from Table 3, the second null hypothesis is rejected and the first research question is answered, concluding that there is a significant difference in vocabulary competence between learners taught with role-play and those taught by the traditional method in favour of the experimental group, because its mean is higher than that of the control group. Moreover, Table 3 shows the difference was statistically significant ( $t = 1.102$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The previous statistical analyses achieve the main purpose of the present study which was to investigate the effects of using role-play strategy on secondary school students' vocabulary achievement. The mean value of the experimental group observed (36.0) was greater than the mean for the control group (32.6). This indicates that the experimental group showed a significant advantage over the control group with regard to the scores gained in the post-test. In other words, the results are in favour of using role-play strategy in teaching words. This means that using a role-play strategy in EFL classes is worthwhile, and more effective than using the traditional vocabulary teaching. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies showing that role-play is an effective strategy for enhancing student vocabulary achievement in specific and in learning English language in general (Toumpianiari, et al., 2015; Hernandez et al., 1992; Umbel, 1992; and Allman, 2005; Sadeghi & Sharifi, 2013; Nair et al., 2014). The reason for the great development in vocabulary achievements of the experimental group is that the role-play strategy is far more pleasant and engaging than the traditional method, which is conducive to highly motivated students and a more creative learning environment (Piaget, 1972; Vincent & Shepherd, 1998; Sasaki, 1998; Clemens, 1998; Huang and Shan, 2008; Liu & Ding, 2009; and Aliakbari and Jamalvandi, 2010) and also consistent with most recent studies, such as Altun (2015), Afdillah (2015), and Kuipers & Clemens, (1998).

The main question for the current study asked whether there would be a significant difference between the pre- test and post- test for the control group, taught in the traditional way. Findings showed that there was no significant difference between them. This result revealed that the traditional method was ineffective in teaching vocabulary, which may be because students were bored in learning English vocabulary due to the old teaching method. Therefore, the evidence supports the use of role-play as an effective strategy in teaching, to have the best results in learning.

As mentioned before, this study was designed to empirically investigate the effects of 'Role Play' as a strategy for teaching vocabulary and whether it can increase EFL learners' lexical ability. Adopting this technique and running the procedures for a period of four weeks yielded remarkable outcomes. Moreover, during lessons pupils enjoy learning and the learning experience becomes more pleasant, entertaining, and full of fun. According to the results, the participants in the experimental group achieved better than those in the control group. In other words, through the results derived from the study, role-play, recommended by many experts in the field, was practically shown to be an effective and successful activity school student, to be used in English lessons among Saudi secondary school students.

Based on the results of the study, the researcher suggests the following recommendations:

1. Teachers should apply role-play strategy in teaching vocabulary.
2. EFL learners should be encouraged to use role-play to enhance their vocabulary proficiency.
3. EFL syllabus developers are advised to integrate the use role-play in the English curriculum.
4. Training courses should be provided for EFL teachers to give them practice on the use of role-play strategy in the learning process.

It is recommended to conduct similar studies that investigate the following.

1. Researchers should apply further studies to explore the effect of role-play strategy on other English skills.
2. Students' and teachers' attitudes toward using role-play strategy in learning English lesson could be investigated.

3. The effects of role-play strategy not only on language proficiency but also other variables, such as motivation for learning the target language, should be explored.

4. Further research can be conducted to evaluate existing EFL teachers' training programmes in Saudi Arabia toward using role-play strategy.

#### APPENDIX. AN EXAMPLE IN A LESSON ABOUT "LEISURE & RECREATION"

Give students cards and through role-play activity students perform and discuss their opinion and use the expressions in the cards to help them.

#### **Card:**

**I think ... I agree. And I think ...**

**I don't agree. In my opinion, ... is more relaxing than ...**

**Boring interesting exciting dangerous stressful**

#### **Scenario 1**

**Student 1: I think running is relaxing because when you exercise, you have less stress.**

**Student 2: I do not agree. In my opinion running can be boring**

**Student 3: But running is easier than swimming.**

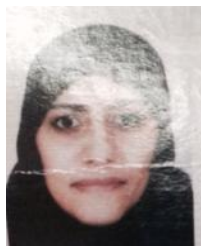
**Student 4: In my opinion it is good for healthy heart.**

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