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Role-playing games to reduce language anxiety and improve oral English skills in higher education

Juegos de Roles para Reducir la Ansiedad Idiomática y Mejorar la Habilidad Oral en Inglés en Educación Superior

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ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language can cause students to feel unmotivated and anxious; thus, teachers must use playful and pedagogical resources that help them overcome disinterest and promote safe learning environments. This study examined whether the use of role-playing contributes to reducing anxiety levels and improving oral skills among a group of university students taking a beginner's English class. A mixed methodology was used, including a pretest and posttest application of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, two role plays evaluated by an analytical rubric, and a semistructured questionnaire. The results suggested that role play helped to reduce anxiety levels from moderate (95,125 points) to low (85 points). Similarly, the means of the oral skill components, assessed with the rubric, indicated that from game 1 to game 2, there was an average increase of 1 band (one level within the rubric), which favored oral expression. In addition, the questionnaire revealed that the students felt that the games helped them learn and use the content in real communication situations. It is concluded that this playful strategy promoted not only communicative competence but also values and attitudes such as creativity and teamwork.

Keywords: Language Learning; English as a Foreign Language; Language Anxiety; Role-Playing; Playful Strategies for Learning.

RESUMEN

El aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero puede causar que los estudiantes se sientan desmotivados y ansiosos, por lo que los profesores deben usar recursos lúdicos y pedagógicos que los ayuden a dejar atrás el desinterés y promuevan ambientes de aprendizaje seguros. Este estudio examinó si el uso del juego de roles contribuía a disminuir los niveles de ansiedad y mejorar la habilidad oral en un grupo de estudiantes universitarios cursando la clase de inglés para principiantes. Para ello se utilizó una metodología mixta que incluyó una aplicación pre-test y post-test de la Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, dos juegos de roles evaluados por una rúbrica analítica y un cuestionario semiestructurado. Los resultados sugirieron que el role play ayudó a disminuir los niveles de ansiedad, pasando de moderada (95,125 puntos) a baja (85 puntos). Asimismo, las medias de los componentes de la habilidad oral, valorados con la rúbrica, indicaron que del juego 1 al juego 2 hubo un aumento promedio de 1 banda (un nivel dentro de la rúbrica), favoreciendo la expresión oral. Además, el cuestionario reveló que los estudiantes consideraron que los juegos los ayudaron a aprender y usar los contenidos en situaciones reales de comunicación. Se concluye que esta estrategia lúdica no solo promovió la competencia comunicativa, sino también valores y actitudes como creatividad y trabajo en equipo.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de Lenguas; Inglés Como Lengua Extranjera; Ansiedad Idiomática; Juego de Roles; Estrategias Lúdicas para el Aprendizaje.

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of globalization, English has become an everyday language that is considered useful in commercial, productive, and social contexts because it is characterized as a lingua franca.[1] This is why it is estimated that an increasing number of people are interested in learning this language. However, the process of learning a foreign language can be frustrating and demotivating for many students for various reasons.[2] First, it is common to see language classes continue to use traditional teaching methods where the student is a mere recipient of information who performs hundreds of mechanical exercises—often in a textbook or workbook—that do not lead them to apply what they have learned in real life. Similarly, they may be affected by negative emotions such as distress, anxiety, and demotivation, resulting in a mental block that prevents the acquisition of the target language.[2,3,4,5] Therefore, how can the language teaching process be improved and lead students to successful learning? It seems that the answer to this question should focus on three aspects: 1) using gamified teaching resources that help overcome disinterest in foreign languages, 2) making connections between the teaching content and the students' interests, ensuring that they are immersed in real communication situations that stimulate learning, and 3) promoting safe environments, free from anxiety and distress, so that they can experiment with the language without fear of making mistakes.[2,4,5]

For these reasons, it was considered appropriate to carry out this research, in which the abovementioned elements were intertwined through an educational intervention to determine whether they have positive effects on English language learning. Before detailing how this was carried out, we reviewed the main theories and concepts that were considered for the design and implementation of this proposal. These are described below.

Theoretical Framework

According to Mora et al.[4], learning a foreign language can be demotivating, frustrating, and unnatural, as it seems to have little practical use in the students' immediate environments. Similarly, students tend to lose interest and give up on mastering a new language (a fundamental skill for their future) when learning the basic grammar of the language becomes a tedious task that discourages them.

Therefore, to address this situation, teachers must design playful learning experiences that help students overcome these feelings of apathy and demotivation. That is why this section delves into some concepts, such as the importance of play in English language teaching, role-playing, and language anxiety, since the intervention proposed here is based on them.

The importance of play in teaching English

Johan Huizinga is among the leading exponents of the relevance of play for society. In his words, play is a free and voluntary activity that takes place at specific times and in specific spaces, whose rules invite participants to feel happy and behave in a way that is different from what is expected in everyday life. This is how the concept of *the* magic circle arises, which establishes that playful activities take place within certain limits that separate the "world of play" from the "real world".[6] In this circle, players must:

- Enter voluntarily.
- Follow rules that are different from those that are socially accepted.
- Make decisions that help them experience a sense of autonomy.
- Allow themselves to make mistakes to explore all the possibilities.
- Be willing to have fun.

In other words, it is because of playful activities that foreign language learners can enter this "magical world" and thus learn a new language in a way that is much more fun and meaningful for them. Similarly, play in this field of education 1) increases participation, motivation, and interest; 2) fosters creativity, teamwork, and communication skills; 3) generates a positive attitude toward the learning objective and allows it to be approached in a more enjoyable way; 4) promotes content retention and the use of the communicative approach; and 5) helps to level emotional and affective filters by creating a safe environment for learning.[2,4,5]

Owing to the multiple benefits of games in language teaching, many playful activities have been adapted to these communicative contexts. These include crossword puzzles, word searches, video games, stories, songs, jokes, board games (such as *Pictionary* and *Guess Who*), role-playing games, etc. However, for the purposes of this research, we focused on the latter.

Roleplaying

In the words of Janampa[5], role-playing is a technique in which "a person's behavior in a real or imaginary situation is dramatized, that is, an activity in which people pretend to be or act like someone else, thus developing new learning skills". In foreign language teaching, *role play* is one of the typical activities applicable within the communicative approach, which shows that carrying out exercises of this type is highly important for practicing and promoting students' communicative competence, as they are immersed in different contexts and social roles. To conduct a role play in the classroom, Janampa[5] proposes the following phases. Notably, these were used for the planning and execution of the role plays established in this research.

1. Participation stage: the teacher communicates the objective to be achieved to the student. Similarly, they capture their interest and motivate them to participate.
2. Study stage: the teacher establishes the linguistic pattern that students must take into account when writing their scripts. The class is also divided into teams, and participants are monitored.
3. Activation stage: students reproduce their scripts verbally and nonverbally by interpreting their characters.

Finally, some research suggests that role-playing allows language learners to improve their oral skills, as they tend to perform with greater confidence and spontaneity when they participate in these activities, resulting in improved oral fluency and accuracy.[7] *Role* play also promotes creativity and critical thinking while helping to reduce resistance, such as nervousness, anxiety, and embarrassment, by fostering a comfortable and stress-free learning environment.[5,8,9] The latter is particularly important in combating what some authors recognize as language anxiety, which is described as follows.

Language anxiety

In foreign language learning, anxiety has been classified as one of the greatest obstacles faced by students.[10] In his affective filter theory, Stephen Krashen asserts that anxiety acts as a barrier that prevents information from reaching the part of the brain responsible for language processing and acquisition. This is how foreign language anxiety (FLA) is typically defined as a set of beliefs, feelings, self-perceptions, and behaviors related to the language learning process.[3] Some of its most common causes are 1) fear of negative evaluation by others when they make mistakes, 2) fear of speaking and/or communicating in the target language when one does not have the adequate level to do so, 3) tense learning environments, and 4) negative attitudes among teachers.

FLA has been extensively studied by linguists, and instruments such as the *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS), designed by Horwitz et al.[3], have been created to assess students' levels of language anxiety, as it has been shown to have negative effects on foreign language learning. First, high levels of anxiety are often associated with low academic performance and school dropout rates. Second, students who experience FLA are unmotivated and do not try to communicate with others, which affects their attitudes and communicative competence in the language.[11]

For all these reasons, it is essential that teachers design learning experiences that help reduce anxiety levels, with recreational activities being a great alternative. The methodology adopted in this educational intervention is described below.

Objective of the experience

The objective of this research was to examine whether the use of role-playing contributes to reducing anxiety levels and improving oral skills among a group of students in a beginner's English class. We also hoped to assess whether this role-playing game also helped them improve their oral skills in the language.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a mixed methodology, as quantitative and qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and combined to examine whether the use of role-playing contributed to reducing anxiety levels and improving oral skills among a group of students in a beginner's English class. In accordance with Creswell[12], this methodology provides a better understanding of the object of study, as it provides statistical analyses that allow for the assessment of the frequency with which a phenomenon occurs, as well as providing the "actual words" of those involved. Therefore, combining quantitative and qualitative data results in a "powerful mix" of information. Thus, as this study uses a Likert scale and an open-ended opinion questionnaire, it was estimated that this would be the best way to address the problem described.

To conduct this intervention, a group of eight students (five men and three women) from the English as a Foreign Language 1 class offered at a self-access language learning center (CAADI) at a public university in Mexico were selected as participants. The participants were chosen through nonprobability convenience sampling, as they were able to provide information to achieve the proposed objectives. Notably, this research was conducted in three 1-hour class sessions per day, during which students were required to internalize and use grammatical knowledge related to possessives (adjectives, pronouns, and nouns) and comparative adjectives.

Table 1 shows the stages into which the educational intervention was divided:

Table 1. Phases of educational intervention

Phase	Activity	Description	Session
Initial	Introduction to research.	Inform students of their participation in this intervention (without revealing its main purposes to avoid bias).	1
	Application of pretest questionnaire.	Administration of the FLCAS to measure students' initial anxiety levels	
Development	Role-playing	Educational intervention in which students performed two role-plays with themes designed to work on the grammatical topics of possessives and comparative adjectives The role-plays were evaluated using a rubric to assess whether they had any positive effect on the students' oral skills	1 and 2
Closing	Posttest questionnaire.	Application of the *FLCAS* scale to obtain the students' new anxiety levels and subsequent comparison with the pretest results. All this was done to determine whether the role-playing had had positive effects on FLA	Session 3
	Semiopen questionnaire administered	Application of the questionnaire to ascertain students' perceptions of the use of role-playing in English class	

The instruments used to collect the information mentioned in the table above are described below.

Instruments for collecting information

As mentioned above, the purpose of this section is to explain how the instruments for collecting information were structured and designed to help achieve the proposed objectives. The Likert scales, rubrics, and semiopen questionnaires used to collect the data are detailed below.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale

The FLCAS, created by Horwitz et al.[3], continues to be the instrument typically used by researchers to measure anxiety among foreign language learners in areas such as communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. It has been translated into languages such as Spanish, Persian, Arabic, and Thai;[13] however, for the purposes of this study, the Spanish version adapted by Pérez-Paredes et al.[14] was used, which has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0,89 and shows good reliability. It should be noted that it was appropriate to apply it in Spanish so that language would not be an impediment and students would be able to understand its elements. This scale consists of 33 items that are rated on a Likert scale with scores between 1 (I totally disagree) and 5 (I totally agree). Therefore, the FLA range is between 33 and 165, which means that the higher the score is, the more anxiety the student has. Notably, this questionnaire was created in Microsoft Forms, a tool that allows for the easy creation of online surveys and questionnaires. It was administered at the beginning and end of the intervention to compare students' anxiety levels and thus determine whether role-playing had a positive effect on FLA.

Rubric

To evaluate the role-playing games, the researcher used an analytical rubric, which offered a different score for each of the areas evaluated. Its use helped to provide the necessary information to assess whether role-playing had a positive effect on the oral skills of the participating students. It should be noted that this was taken from Cambridge Assessment English[15] and assessed the use of 1) grammar and vocabulary, 2) pronunciation, and 3) interactive communication, assigning a band (where 1 represents limited use of the areas assessed and 5 represents full use) for each of the areas mentioned. It should be noted that the bands, according to the Cambridge Assessment English (n.d.), represent the levels that students have demonstrated for each of the components assessed.

Semiopen questionnaire

The semiopen questionnaire, like the FLCAS, was self-administered online through *Microsoft Forms.* It was included in the same form as the posttest scale so that participants could access a single link. Its purpose was to invite them to share their experiences regarding the role-playing activities that were carried out. Similarly, the questions were related to understanding whether these had had a significant impact in the following areas:

1. Learning the topics of the week (possessives and comparatives).
2. Use of the content in real communication situations.
3. Experiencing confidence and less nervousness when they are in class.
4. Level of satisfaction with the use of this playful strategy.

The following section shows the results of applying the described instruments to determine the impact of the intervention.

Analysis of results

To present the results of this research, it was decided to divide them according to the instruments applied. Therefore, the pretest and posttest questionnaires are compared first. After this, the playful experience of role-playing is described to establish whether there was an improvement in oral skills. Finally, the responses to the semiopen questionnaire are analyzed.

Pretest and posttest questionnaires

As mentioned above, the FLCAS was applied at the beginning and end of the educational intervention. To analyze the results, the ranges proposed by Mayangta were used, which are as follows:

Table 2. Interpretation of the FLCAS

Score range	Interpretation
33-65	Very low anxiety
66-86	Low anxiety
87	Moderate anxiety
108	High anxiety
124	Very high anxiety

Similarly, to obtain the students' scores and interpret the results, the responses were coded and entered into *Microsoft Excel.* The internal validity of the instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0,82, indicating excellent reliability. The scores are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Pretest and posttest results

Participant	Pretest score	Interpretation	Posttest score	Interpretation
EM1	92	Moderate anxiety	76	Low anxiety
EF2	83	Low anxiety	73	Low anxiety
EM3	105	Moderate anxiety	86	Low anxiety
EM4	88	Moderate anxiety	81	Low anxiety
EM5	103	Moderate anxiety	94	Moderate anxiety
EF6	83	Low anxiety	74	Low anxiety
EM7	98	Moderate anxiety	88	Moderate anxiety
EF8	109	High anxiety	108	High anxiety
Average	95,125	Average	85	

The results of the pretest questionnaire-administered before the role-playing strategy was implemented—revealed that six of the eight participants had anxiety levels classified as moderate to high. Similarly, two of them had low anxiety levels. The average (95,125) indicated that the group, in general, experienced moderate anxiety. On the other hand, the posttest questionnaire—administered at the end of the role-playing games-showed that three of the students decreased their anxiety levels from moderate to low. The other five remained within the same range; however, the average score indicated that there was an approximate reduction of 10,12 points between the pretest and the posttest, so the group changed from having moderate anxiety (95,125) to having low anxiety (85). Notably, in the case of participant EF8, the difference was minimal. These findings suggest that all the participants managed to lower their anxiety levels by participating in this playful learning strategy. This is why it was possible to confirm that role-playing contributed to reducing anxiety in a foreign language. To determine whether these factors also have a positive effect on oral skills, the results obtained through the oral skills assessment rubric are described below.

Role-playing (rubric)

To assess the students' oral skills and their use of possessive and comparative grammatical structures, two role-playing games were conducted with the following themes:

- Role play 1: the students were siblings who argued about who owned an object (possessives).
- Role play 2: the participants were customers and salespeople who compared the characteristics of different items to sell and/or buy them (comparatives).

The results of the role-play evaluation, which is based on the rubric described above, are shown below:

Table 4. Results of role-playing and oral skills

Participant	Grammar and vocabulary		Pronunciation		Interactive communication	
	Role-play 1	Role-playing 2	Role play 1	Role play 2	Role play 1	Role play 2
EM1	3	4	3	3	3	5
EF2	4	4	4	5	5	5
EM3	4	4	5	5	4	5
EM4	2	3	2	3	4	5
EM5	1	2	2	3	2	3
EF6	5	5	4	5	4	5
EM7	0	3	0	4	0	4
EF8	3	4	3	4	4	5
Average:	2,75	3,62	2,87	4	3,25	4,6
General comments:	In the first role-playing game, the students were more nervous. In the second, once they understood the mechanics, they felt more comfortable. They seemed enthusiastic and enjoyed themselves while participating in the role-playing games. Most of them were excited to participate. Friends of the participants (who are not regular students in the course) joined our sessions to see their classmates "act." There was an improvement in possessive and comparative forms. They respected and followed the rules worked on in class. The students were extremely creative and used the content in common communication situations such as going to a popular convenience store to compare prices. Participant EM7 was absent and did not present role play 1.					

The averages for each of the components evaluated indicated that from role play 1 to role play 2, there was an average increase of 1 band (one level within the evaluation rubric). As seen, the grammar and vocabulary component increased from 2,75 (band 3) to 3,62 (band 4), which indicates that the students showed sufficient control of grammatical forms and used a variety of vocabulary (according to their level) to discuss possessions and comparisons. In terms of pronunciation, their averages increased from 2,87 (band 3) to 4 (band 4), suggesting that their pronunciation is clear at the word and sentence level. However, they need to continue working on it to improve even further. Finally, the interactive communication component increased from 3,25 (band 3) to 4,6 (band 5), indicating that the participants engaged in simple exchanges of information for which they needed very little support from the teacher.

Of the general comments written in the rubrics, the following are worth noting:

1. In the first role play, the students were more anxious because they did not understand what they had to do. In the second, they were calmer and more enthusiastic about their participation.
2. In both role plays, it was clear that they were having fun. One team in particular designed very creative scripts.
3. Some students who were not enrolled in the course asked permission to watch their friends "act."
4. The participants demonstrated good use of possessives and comparatives in real communication situations.
5. In the first role play, participant EM7 decided not to participate because he was very nervous.

These findings suggest that role-playing contributes to improving the oral skills of this group of students while fostering creativity, fun, imagination, and teamwork. Similarly, the participants showed themselves to be much more motivated to learn as they were applying what they had learned in real communication situations. To gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of this playful strategy, the questionnaire responses are analyzed below.

From the semiopen questionnaire

The students' perceptions of the use of role-playing for learning were positive. In this regard, participant EF2 added, "it improved my vocabulary and pronunciation of words, by clarifying the doubts I had and my oral expression when speaking." However, this learning strategy was not likened to everyone. For example, student EF8 mentioned, "Personally, I learn better by reading and answering questions from the book, but I do not think it is a bad technique for learning; it is just not the most ideal for me," but she clarified that it had helped her practice the language more and feel more confident in speaking English. Notably, she reported the highest levels of anxiety in the pretest and posttest questionnaires.

Similarly, the students said that these role plays brought them closer to authentic communication situations, such as "in a situation as real as shopping at OXXO" (a convenience store located primarily in Mexico), commented on participant EM4. They used phrases such as "good strategy," "I truly liked it," "they are a lot of fun and I learn quickly," "I was nervous but it went well," and "I felt great" to describe their experience in this activity. The main conclusions from the semiopen questionnaire are shown in table 5.

Table 5. Results of the semiopen questionnaire

Category	Key findings
Role-playing and content learning.	Role-playing made the class more entertaining and helped students learn better as they lost their fear of acting in class. Students improved their vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and oral expression. Two students (EM7 and EF8) mentioned that they learn better with traditional methodologies (reading and answering questions in the book), so they felt that this strategy was not the best for them. Role-playing helped participants understand meanings and apply them in real-life situations.
Role-playing and the use of content in real communication situations.	The students do not speak English outside the classroom, so role-playing helped them connect the content with real-life situations (such as shopping at an OXXO).
Role-playing and language anxiety	By participating, most students felt more confident and less nervous. They gradually lost their fear of speaking. Participant EF8 emphasized that she still felt very nervous when participating.
Role-playing and participant acceptance.	All participants mentioned that they liked learning through role-playing because it is fun.

Finally, with the aim of discussing the results achieved and presenting the conclusions reached with the design and implementation of this action proposal, the discussion and conclusion sections are presented. Similarly, recommendations for future studies are made, and the limitations observed in this research are stated.[16,17]

Contribution to knowledge in the field of education

The results of this study reveal that role-playing is a technique that promotes the learning of English as a foreign language, as it fosters communicative competence and helps to reduce students' levels of FLA. First, the results of the pretest and posttest questionnaires, where average anxiety levels decreased from moderate (95,125) to low (85), are consistent with the findings of Maley et al.[8], Cuitiño et al.[9], and Janampa,[5] who report that role play helps reduce resistance, such as anxiety and embarrassment. Similarly, students with the highest levels of FLA are also those who normally avoid participating in class and communicating with others, which is consistent with the findings of Oteir et al.[11].

Second, the findings obtained when role-playing games were evaluated with an analytical rubric, which showed an increase in each of the components evaluated (grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and interactive communication), are consistent with the findings of Cuitiño et al.[9], who concluded that "the use of role play as a technique promotes oral expression". In addition, the analysis of the responses to the semistructured questionnaire and the comments on the rubrics suggest that role-playing has the following benefits, which coincide with those proposed by Janampa[5] in his study:

1. It motivates students to participate.
2. It fosters teamwork, imagination, and creativity.
3. It creates a comfortable, anxiety-free learning environment.
4. It allows for communication in real learning situations.
5. It helps students have fun while learning.

Therefore, role-playing is an effective strategy for teaching foreign languages. Finally, the following section presents the most relevant points and limitations of this study, as well as recommendations for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this research was to examine whether the use of role-playing contributes to reducing anxiety levels and improving oral skills among a group of students in a beginner's English class. For this reason, it should be noted that although the information gathered confirms that this playful strategy helps to reduce FLA and improve communicative competence, it should be borne in mind that it may not be the best option for all students. Some of them may even experience higher levels of anxiety because of embarrassment and the stress of playing a role in front of their classmates, as was the case with the participants mentioned above. In this context, asserts that "learning the English language is a complex process that unfolds differently in each person according to their particular pace, age, situation, context, setting, and so forth". In this study, a number of limitations arose that may have affected the results presented here. First, the researcher's closeness to the participants may have influenced their positive evaluation of role-playing games. Second, the sample was not large enough to be considered representative. Finally, future research should seek to carry out longer-lasting interventions to obtain accurate results on how role-playing helps reduce FLA. It is also suggested that other gamification strategies—such as escape rooms—be incorporated to determine which other techniques have positive effects on foreign language teaching and learning.I n closing, it is worth noting that "the inclusion of recreational activities in higher education is a fundamental resource, as it fosters a positive attitude toward the foreign language among students and helps learners assimilate and internalize the language". Similarly, these strategies not only promote participants' communicative competence but also foster positive values and attitudes such as solidarity, respect, creativity, and many others.

FINANCING

None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

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