UNIMAS Students' Perception of the Use of Roleplay as an Assessment in Increasing Communicative Competence and Social Constructivism: An Action Research

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ABSTRACT

Roleplay or simulation are classroom activities that provide students with a 'safe' and less threatening environment for learning. In ESL for higher educational institutions, roleplay is used as one of the assessment strategies because of its authenticity and practicality. This study examined students' perception of roleplay to increase their communicative competence and social constructivism. One hundred eight participants from various faculties at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) were chosen using the purposive sampling method as the study's participants. SPSS 2.0 was used as the instrument, and several tests (T-test, F-test, Pearson) were conducted to obtain the results. The findings showed that 1) using roleplay as an assessment has increased their communicative competence; 2) the student's gender does not affect the students' roleplay and social constructivism; 3) the student's study programmes do not affect their roleplay and social constructivism, and 4) social constructivism appears to have a strong relationship with roleplay based on the positive correlation result. This study has shown that roleplay is an effective tool for ESL classrooms as it allows students to express themselves confidently, practise conversational English, and improve their communicative competence and social constructivism.

Keywords: students' perception, communicative competence, social constructivism, roleplay

INTRODUCTION

Academic roleplay can be regarded as one of the most efficient, interactive, and recurrent learning strategies in higher educational institutions to prepare future educators. It is a pedagogy that has been used in various contexts and content areas. Researchers have assessed the benefits of roleplay as the best strategy to improve the skills of initiative, self-awareness, problem-solving, communication, and working collaboratively in groups (Keezhatta, 2020; Kaovere & Mbaukua, 2018; MacDonald, 2012). According to Livingstone, as cited in Wulandari et al. (2019), roleplay is an activity that creates the opportunity for the students to become ultimately and actively involved in using the language. This strategy may help the students overcome their inability to speak English in real-life situations. In meeting the learning objective of the English language, the roleplay may allow the students to practice their English language speaking skills in a mentored and safe environment. It may improve confidence to speak in English in the real world. Most English language instructors encounter problems encouraging their learners to speak in the language classroom (Tsui, 1996; White & Lightbown, 1984; cited in Gabejan, 2021). With the increase in globalisation, there is a high necessity for English teachers to make sure their learners are in a position to communicate effectively and gain confidence to participate in oral classroom lessons (Liu & Jackson, 2009; cited in Gabejan, 2021).

'PBI1082 English of Occupational Purposes' is one of the generic courses in UNIMAS, and two of the CLOs are 1) Demonstrate oral communicative ability in specific professional situations and 2) Analyse situations in professional contexts using appropriate knowledge. This study was conducted to explore and examine the students' perception of the use of roleplay in increasing communicative competence and social constructivism through the assessment used in this course. The assessment was based on the Learning Unit: Meeting Skills, in which the students have to play a role in discussing an issue at a workplace chosen by their group. Each student had a specific role in the organisation and the meeting.

Communicative Competence and Social Constructivism

Communicative competence among non-native English speakers is a frequently debated topic in discussions on issues in Malaysian education. It is the ability to use language or communicate culturally appropriately to make meaning and accomplish social tasks with efficacy and fluency through extended interactions (Hymes, 1972; cited in Tarvin, 2015). Communicative competence is divided into four aspects; namely regulation, application, coherence and cohesion (Canale & Swain, as cited in Wulandari et al., 2019). In this paper, communicative competence will be examined from all the aspects mentioned in roleplay activities.

On the other hand, constructivism describes the way that the students learn and think effectively (Amineh & Asl, 2015). These authors pointed out that educators should consider what learners know and allow them to put their knowledge into practice. This is pivotal in tertiary language learning as it promotes learning within real-world and culturally relevant contexts, making language acquisition more meaningful. McLeod's study (cited in Zakaria et al., 2019) claimed social constructivism theory reveals that learning occurs through interaction activities among learners. Peer interaction does more than allow communication to take place in a less threatening environment, it also promotes the modelling of desirable behaviour among learners.

Roleplay

Roleplay is a common technique used in ESL classrooms, especially for the speaking skill component. Wulandari et. al (2019) view it as a scene in the real world, given to the students based on the identity of the roleplay character. Hidayati and Pardjono (2018) suggested that roleplays have numerous benefits for the learning process in universities and other ESL classrooms. Hence, this study aims to explore the use of roleplay in ESL classrooms, focusing specifically on a higher education institution. Below are the research objectives of this study:

a) To explore students' perceptions of the use of roleplay in increasing their communicative competence in the context of a Malaysian public university
b) To examine the difference across genders for roleplay and social constructivism
c) To examine the difference among undergraduates from different fields for roleplay and social constructivism
d) To investigate the relationship between roleplay and social constructivism

This study was conducted based on the following research questions:
a) How do students perceive roleplay in increasing their communicative competence?
b) Is there any significant difference across genders for roleplay and social constructivism in UNIMAS?
c) Is there any significant difference among students from various programmes for roleplay and social constructivism?
d) What is the relationship between roleplay and social constructivism?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative approach with a descriptive research design to answer the four questions investigated in the study. The course involved in this study was *PBI1082*, *English for Occupational Purposes*, one of the generic courses at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), a comprehensive public university in Malaysia.

Participants

In total, hundred eight participants completed and returned the questionnaires. The participants came from various faculties in UNIMAS; namely the Faculty of Economic and Business (17 students, 15.7%), Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development (32 students, 29.6%), Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology (27 students, 25.9%), and Faculty of Resource Science and Technology (32 students, 29.6%). In terms of distribution of gender, there were 38 male students (35.1%) and 70 female students (64.8%) from all study programmes. The purposive sampling method was used in choosing the participants, whom all had undergone roleplay activities in class before doing the roleplay assessment. Only second-language speakers of English were involved in this study and were from different years of study programmes.

Data Collection

Adaptation has been made to tailor the questionnaire content to the current study and needs. The questionnaire used is adapted from the previous study by Nursyuhada Zakaria, Noor Hanim Rahmat, Norhartini Aripin, Nurul Hijah Jasman, and Nursuhaila Ibrahim in 2019. It consisted of three sections; (A) Respondent's information, (B) Communicative competence, and (C) Social constructivism. In Sections B and C, the participants were asked to use a 5-point Likert scale (SD: strongly disagree, D: disagree, N: neither agree nor disagree, A: agree, SA: strongly agree) to respond to several statements relating to how they perceive roleplay assessment in increasing their communicative competence and social constructivism.

Data Analysis

SPSS 2.0 was used for data analysis to tabulate and interpret the data from questionnaires. Several tests were conducted for each section to obtain the required data and findings. An Independent T-test (male vs female) was used to examine any difference across genders for roleplay and social constructivism. Meanwhile, the F-test (ANOVA) was used to examine the influence of the students' study programmes on their roleplay and social constructivism. Descriptive analysis was also used to identify the mean (n) for the student's communicative competence using roleplay as an assessment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) **The student's perceptions of the use of roleplay as an assessment in increasing their communicative competence**
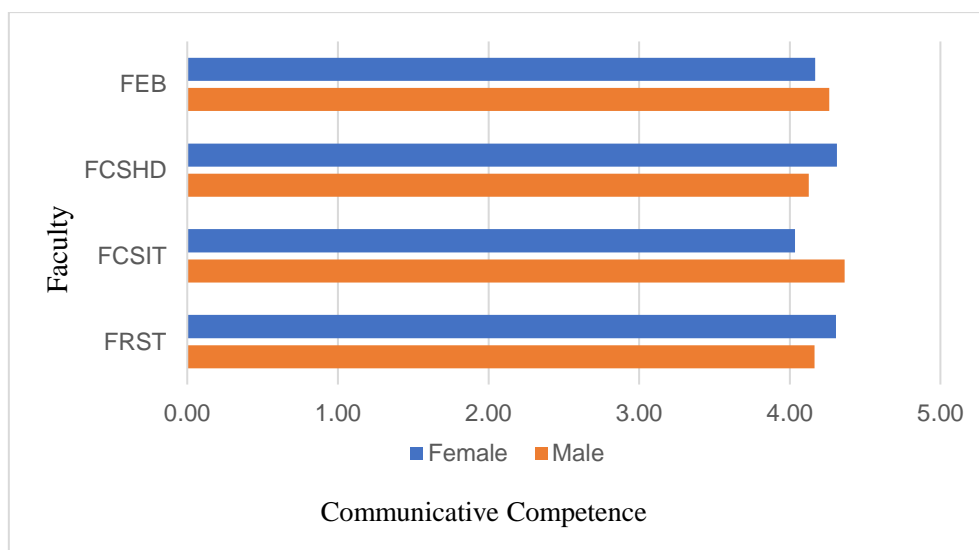

Figure 1. Mean value (n) for students' communicative competence

The descriptive analysis of the students' communicative competence is presented Figure 1. The analysis reveals that most respondents answered agree and strongly agree with Section B: Communicative Competence questionnaire statements. For instance, for item no. 14 – *My speaking competency has improved through roleplay*, most respondents (40.5%) have chosen strongly agree, 31.9% responded with agree, meanwhile 25.9% responded with N (neither agree nor disagree). For a different item (no. 12 – *I learn some new expressions and speaking strategies through roleplay,* 57.8% responded with strongly agree, 32.8% chose to agree, and only 8.6% responded with N. Overall, the mean value for students' communicative competence falls around n = 4 out of 5. This finding tallies with a previous study by Wulandari et al., where students get the chance to stimulate their speaking skills and practise the language through roleplay. The *n* value shows that the students responded positively to the statements on their perceptions of roleplay or how it helps them in their communicative competence. The finding shows that roleplay not only allows the students to practise their conversational skills but also develop their creativity and critical thinking skills. Past research by Wulandari et al. (2019) portrayed a direct association

between this, in which using roleplay in language class improves student's knowledge and can help them practice in the class. The study also highlighted that students get a chance to stimulate their speaking skills successfully and using roleplay in the learning process has made the class enjoyable. This result also tallies with the current result, where 45.7% of students answered strongly agree and 37.1% agree that speaking lessons become more interesting with the roleplay.

b) The influence of gender on roleplay and social constructivism

Table 1. Standard deviation for roleplay and social constructivism

Parameters	Gender		*t*-value	*p*-value
	Male (*n*=38;35.19%)	Female (*n*=70;64.81%)		
Roleplay	4.286 (0.637)	4.264 (0.631)	-0.17	0.867[ns]
Social constructivism	4.365 (0.549)	4.395 (0.612)	0.26	0.799[ns]
Note: Standard deviations appear in parenthesis below means. ns: not significant, *: indicate significance at 0.05 probability level.				

The influence of gender on roleplay and social constructivism is shown in table 1. Based on the data, it could be seen that there is no significant difference across genders for roleplay and social constructivism, which is at a 95% probability level. This finding shows that gender does not affect students' social constructivism using roleplay as an assessment. This finding parallels the study by Zakaria et al. (2019), where male and female students most likely had similar perceptions of using roleplay activities in ESL classrooms. The individual value plot for social constructivism in Figure 2 shows the details as follows:
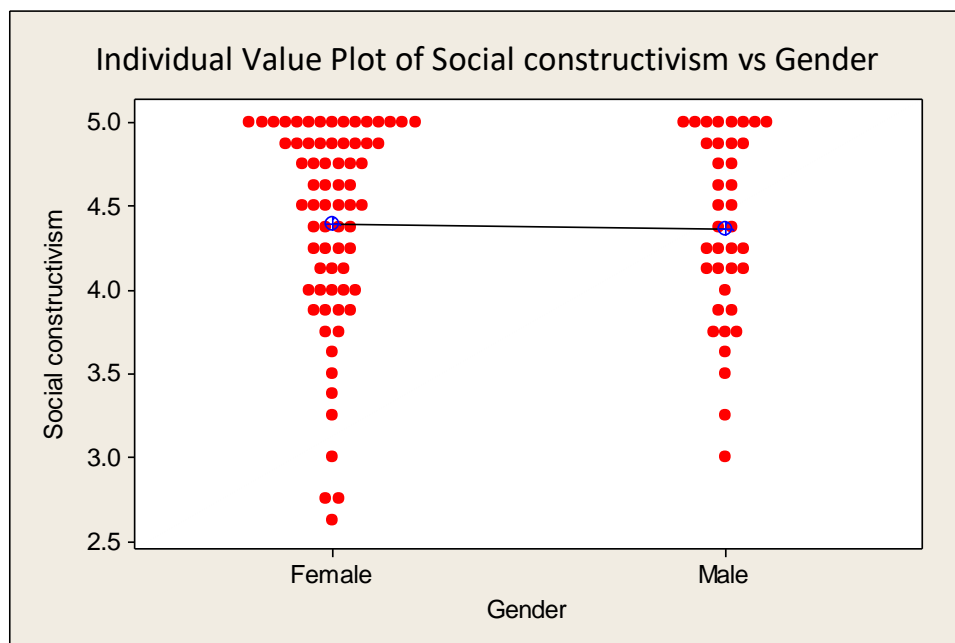

Figure 2. Individual value plot of social constructivism vs gender

The complete statements of the questionnaire, Section C: Social constructivism can be referred to in Table 2.

Table 2. Questionnaire Section C: Social Constructivism statements

1. *I am able to communicate freely in English during the roleplay*
2. *My peers guide me during roleplay session*
3. *I exchange ideas with my peers during roleplay*
4. *I gain confidence in speaking English when I practise roleplay with my peers*
5. *I feel comfortable when my peers encourage me to speak during roleplay*
6. *I learn a lot from my peers when watching the roleplay*
7. *I would like to have group members who are better than me*
8. *Roleplay helps me in understanding the speaking techniques such as turn-taking or asking questions*

c) The influence of study fields on students' roleplay and social constructivism

To recap, the respondents for this study comprised of 15.7% FEB students, 29.6% FCSHD students, 25.9% FCSIT students, and 29.6% FRST students. Based on the F-test in Table 3, there is no significant difference among undergraduate students from various faculties for their roleplay and social constructivism at a 95% probability level. The result indicated that the student's background field of studies does not influence their social constructivism in using English.

Table 3. Mean square for roleplay and social constructivism

Source of variation	Degree of freedom	Mean square	
		Roleplay	Social constructivism
Faculty	3	0.035^{ns}	0.019^{ns}
Error	104	0.407	0.355
Note: ns: not significant, *: indicate significance at 0.05 probability level.			

The F-test result signifies that although the students come from various study programmes, their social constructivism is not affected by this trait. For example, there were both Science and Social Science streams among participants from four faculties; however, this difference did not influence their perception of roleplay and social constructivism. The finding is supported by Zakaria et al. (2019), who proved that students from different programmes most likely had similar perceptions of using roleplay activities in ESL classrooms.

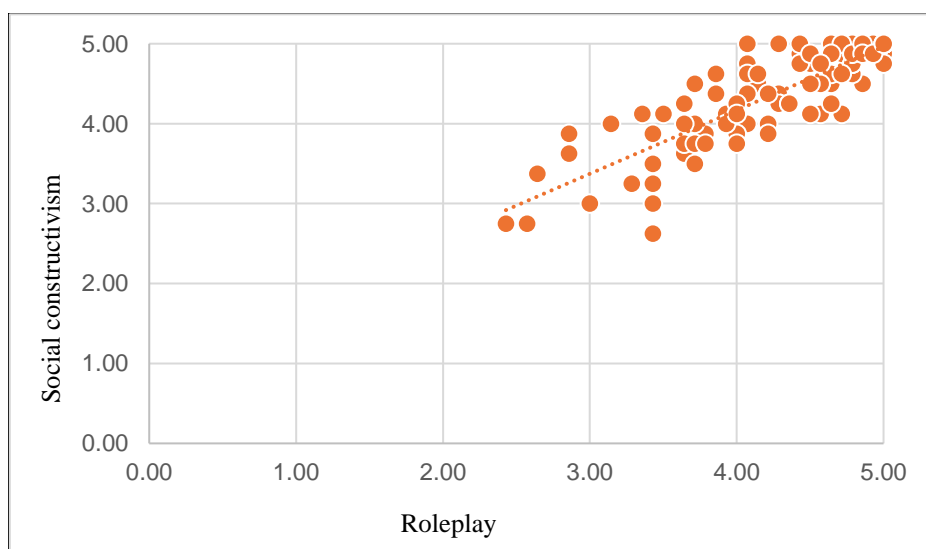### d) The correlation between roleplay and social constructivism

Figure 3. Pearson correlation between roleplay and social constructivism

This section discussed the correlation between roleplay and social constructivism to gain holistic answers to the research questions. Based on the correlation plot test as shown in figure 3, roleplay and social constructivism appear highly positively correlated, with Pearson correlation = 0.852. This means that roleplay supports social constructivism in ESL classrooms. For instance, statement no. 5 (*I feel comfortable when my peers encourage me to speak during roleplay*) has achieved 51.7% strongly agree and 35.3% agree with the statement. The respondents also answered that roleplay helps them understand speaking techniques such as turn-taking or techniques for asking questions, with 50.9% strongly agreeing and 31.9% agreeing with the statement.

As highlighted by Hidayati and Pardjono (2018) in their research, roleplay has trained the students' independence and responsibility as an agent of learning, it trains the awareness of others, and it trains the students as prospective teachers. This shows that roleplay activity or assessment can be used across faculties because of its flexibility, effectiveness and practicality. This is a good baseline since the results suggest that the two aspects included in the study are almost the same in how the scores are scattered. Hence, the use of roleplay not only can be applied in ESL classrooms, but also in inter-disciplined areas such as medical, engineering, science, and others.

CONCLUSION

From this study, students get a chance to discover their language abilities and shortcomings, apart from experiencing real-life situations through roleplay. This opportunity creates greater awareness of needs and makes students engage in a better conversation when instructions and themes are given. Students reported enhanced confidence, critical thinking, and adaptability in applying language skills, particularly in collaborative learning environments. In other words, students need to be engaged in roleplay, not detach themselves from the role, and remain just students participating in an activity. For this to happen, a clear, constructive alignment between the course learning outcomes and course content must be structured effectively.

This study concentrated on the students' insights into the use of roleplay and its relation to communicative competence and social constructivism, which is regarded as incredibly significant, especially during this current era of globalisation and digitalisation. The study's findings revealed that the student's communicative competence has increased with roleplay activity as an assessment. Also, it is evident that the students' social constructivism has a strong relationship with roleplay in ESL classrooms. Students improve their collaborative learning skills through roleplay and increase their learning motivation too.

Future studies can be carried out under the same context but from different angles to explore new knowledge and teaching principles useful for higher learning education. It is also significant to explore the effectiveness of roleplay for peer learning and developing creative and critical thinking skills among university undergraduates.

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