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Students’ perception on role-play in EFL/ESL-classrooms in relation to their speaking ability

Elevers uppfattning om rollspel i ett EFL/ESL klassrum i relation till deras förmåga att tala

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Contributions

The authors of this research have divided the workload evenly, and thereby state that they both have contributed with an equal amount of work throughout all stages of this project.

These stages being:
- Forming the research questions
- Finding relevant research
- Structuring the synthesis
- Discussing relevant results
- Composing the synthesis
Abstract

This research paper examines students’ perception of how role-play could affect their confidence in accordance with their speaking ability in EFL/ESL- classrooms. It has tried to respond to the research question “To what extent do Swedish EFL/ESL- students find role-play helpful for their confidence in their speaking ability?.” In addition, an analysis of relevant research supported the theoretical background on the subjects of Second language acquisition (SLA), Communicative language teaching (CLT), the Sociocultural perspective and the steering documents from Skolverket. Moreover, the research used a qualitative method through interviews. The interviews were performed with eight students from 7th-9th grade. To complement the study a questionnaire was conducted to show the distribution of students confidence on a scale from 1-5. The collected data was from a role-play activity that was tested similarly in six EFL/ESL-classes. At the end of the classes, they were evaluated in a Google Formula. Then, it was possible to see connections between the level of confidence and how helpful role-play was for the students. In the result, the interviewees all agreed on the role-play possibly being a helpful tool to improve the speaking ability. In addition, the questionnaire showed that 64% of the participants thought that role-play helped them to speak more confidently in English. Also, it was shown that students in the middle of the scale were the ones that found role-play most beneficial. At last, the factors that seemed to develop students’ confidence the most from the role-play were the structure of a group, the chosen themes, and the support students received from the framework.

Keywords: EFL/ESL, role-play, confidence, classroom activity
# Table of contents

1. Introduction 6
2. Statement of Purpose 8
   2.1 Research question 8
3. Theoretical Literature Review 9
   3.1 SLA 9
   3.2 CLT 10
   3.3 The Sociocultural Perspective 11
   3.4 Definition of Role-play 12
   3.5 Definition of confidence 12
   3.6 Task of the School 13
   3.7 EFL/ ESL 13
4. Methods 15
   4.1 Semi-structured Interview 16
   4.2 Description of Classroom Activity and Selection 17
      4.2.1 The Classroom Activity 17
   4.3 Ethical Considerations 19
   4.4 Limitations 19
5. Result 21
   5.1 Qualitative Result 21
   5.2 Results from the Questionnaire 26
6. Discussion 28
   6.1 Role-play’s affect on students with low confidence 29
   6.2 Role-play’s affect on students with medium confidence 30
   6.3 Role-play’s affect on students with high confidence 32
   6.4 Important factors according to the interviewees 32
   6.5 Role-play as a tool to develop confidence 33
7. Conclusion 35
References
Appendix 1: Questions for the individual interviews
Appendix 2: Interviewees
Appendix 3: Questionnaire
1. Introduction

In Swedish compulsory schools, students in EFL/ESL- classrooms do not always have enough confidence in speaking English during classes. Besides, Sandin (2017) claims that about 20% of teenagers are anxious about speaking out loud during EFL/ESL- classes. From our experiences, both being students but also as teachers-to-be during our teaching practice, we have seen students become quiet or turning into the mother tongue during EFL/ESL-lessons. Even responding to a question in English could sometimes be a challenge, and instead, learners continue in Swedish.

In the curriculum for English, languages are described as communicative subjects. Further, one of the essential goals is to develop the students’ ability to “express themselves and communicate in speech and writing” (Skolverket 2011, p 34). These skills could be practiced through different teaching methods to experience it in a variety of ways. In addition, different approaches should be presented for students to develop communicative skills, according to the core content for 7th-9th grade (Skolverket, 2011). Therefore, teachers need to discuss if their students fear or hesitate to speak English. Then, they need to find creative methods, which could help these students to develop and improve confidence in speaking.

Role-play is a method used to develop confidence among second language learners. In EFL/ESL- classes, Fadilah (2016), Jordan (2015), Oduke (2013) and Sağlamel and Kayaoglu (2013) state that role-play could create opportunities to learn speaking English in a new way that advocates confident learners. Further, they claim that role-play benefits from its aspect of giving learners characters, thoughts and opinions. Also, it facilitates their speaking ability through physical activities, joy and playfulness. In our previous paper called “Involve me and I will learn- the impact of role-play in EFL/ ESL- classrooms,” we found how role-play is one way to help students forward and to make them more confident in second language-communication (Bencic & Rosenkvist, 2019). However, what we have seen to be missing is the students’ perspective on how role-play may affect their confidence in relation to their speaking ability. In former studies, the focus has been on teachers’ experiences of role-play and not on students. According to the curriculum (2018), students should have opportunities to have an impact on their education, and therefore this paper wants to include students’ voices.
In this paper, a qualitative study was performed with interviewees from two different schools in the region Skåne, southwest of Sweden. It also presents a small-scale questionnaire from all students in six classes. One school is located in an urban area, while the other is located in the countryside. In the study, eight students from EFL/ESL-classes participated in an interview, where genders are equally divided. Further, the interview aimed to find out the participants’ perception of their confidence in accordance with speaking ability, and if they found role-play as a beneficial tool to improve their confidence.

With the perspective of students’ opinions in mind, the research excluded teachers’ views and experiences of role-play in an EFL/ESL- context. Also, in many previous research, teachers’ perspectives have been described while we have missed the students’ views of it. Therefore, the purpose of this research is not to focus on the result of role-plays’ impact on oral communication. On the contrary, the students’ reflections and thoughts are in focus here.

Finally, this degree project intends to examine students’ perception of confidence in relation to their speaking in the EFL/ESL- classroom based on the following research question; “To what extent do Swedish ESL/EFL- students find role-play helpful for their confidence in relation to their speaking ability?”.
2. Statement of purpose

The purpose of this paper is to study students, in 7th-9th grade, and their impressions of role-play in accordance with their speaking ability and confidence, in EFL/ESL classrooms in Sweden. Through a qualitative study, this degree project will show and discuss the results of students’ perception of role-play when it comes to oral communication.

2.1 Research question

“To what extent do Swedish EFL/ESL students find role-play helpful for their confidence in relation to their speaking ability?”
3. Theoretical Background

The present thesis has its theoretical basis on different language theories that focus on development, acquisition and confidence. The theories brought up in the paper are the following; Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective. In addition to these theories, definitions of “role-play”, “confidence” and “task of the school” are given to clarify the content of the research question.

3.1 Second language acquisition

Contemporary SLA develops linguistic skills in a higher sense among students than the traditional second language teaching. Over the years, it has been focused on learning, remembering words and doing studies of grammatical structures. Krashen, a linguistic and educational researcher, claims that language is best developed through acquisition, which is a subconscious process. He argues that interaction with the target language is the primary key in second language learning. Together with this idea, he has theorized the relationship between acquisition and achievement among second language learners (Krashen, 1985). Additionally, he explains that the learner acquires a language through a predictable sequence of inputs. This is most successfully done if the circumstances and conditions are good for learning. According to Krashen, these circumstances mean, for instance, conditions of high self-confidence, self-esteem, and motivation among the learners. If this is not the assets, mental blocks could be created and prevent learners from improvement and progression (Krashen, 1985; Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2013). Due to this, the teacher must help to establish and create an environment where individuals do not feel anxious but instead could build on their confidence and trust in themselves.

Krashen’s theory focuses on communicative skills and the ability to convey a message through speaking, which is relevant for role-play in education. To advance at most, Krashen argues that the focus should be on the message. If that is the focus, learners will learn without even noticing (Krashen, 1988). Therefore, role-play could be a tool within SLA through a scenario or an imaginative situation that takes place to help learners to interact in a playful, joyful and forgiving environment. Also, Oduke (2013) claims that imitating scenarios is beneficial for language acquisition, considering that learners interact without further thinking.
Forgetting about perfection and correctness is crucial in language learning according to Krashen and that is also significant for role-play (Krashen, 1988).

Further, what Krashen found important to improve students speaking skills were two key concepts; level and group dynamics. He proved that learners mastered the language better through communication if they were interacting with other students they were comfortable with (Krashen, 1985). If learners communicated with somebody slightly above their level, which he defines as comprehensible input, they improved at most (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). This is something to consider when putting students in groups during a role-play.

3.2 Communicative language teaching

For learners of EFL/ESL, it is nowadays widely recognized that communication and interaction are key-roles in educational contexts. Therefore, the theory of CLT, which is an alternative method to the traditional language teaching, has ended up in the spotlight among many second language teachers (Rahman, Singh., & Pandian, 2018; Richards, 2006). Consequently, the idea of CLT has changed the perspective of many teachers around the globe since its appearance in the 1960s, making them occupied with the learning process that happens within interactive activities (Alarmi, 2018). The method emphasizes the development of communicative competence among non-native speakers rather than memorizing words and phrases (Rahman, Singh., & Pandian, 2018 ). Thus, it is not uncommon for CLT to be often linked to role-play due to its communicative performance.

Because CLT is a communicative theory, it regards learners’ expressions, thoughts and choice of subject as necessary. According to Alarmi (2018) and Richards and Schmidt (2014), CLT aims to help learners to become more able to express themselves freely and naturally without further hesitation. To fulfill this, CLT advocates the importance of creating authentically situations, which helps learners to approach the real world and know the functions of a language. Though, it is most likely to happen when subjects as “lifestyle situations,” “personal questions,” or “own experiences” are used (Alarmi, 2018; Richards and Schmidt, 2014; Nunan, 1988). In connection, role-play is considered a helpful tool since it brings forward a wide spread of topics that helps learners to function in different situations and lets them play an active role in the learning-process (Gomez, 2010).
Lastly, CLT aims to learn in a low-pressuring and comfortable environment to help learners build their confidence. To create an environment that is relaxed for students, role-play is a commonly used activity among CLT-teachers. It helps them to develop their oral language skills through meaningful and exciting interactions in combinations with others (Boudreault, 2010). Moreover, the method prepares them to make social and cultural considerations, which is closely linked with adapting the language to its purpose, according to Bern (2013). Therefore, CLT creates collaborative activities such as role-play, communicative English speakers ready to converse in all different situations.

3.3 The sociocultural perspective

In the aspects of Lee Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, learning happens in the moment of interaction and exchange of knowledge with other people. It takes place through various tools, where role-play in language teaching could be one instrument. Vygotsky’s theory explains and discusses how language development could happen in an environment that allows the communicative competence to grow (Nunan, 1999). Based on this, Säljö (2013) states the importance of language from a sociocultural perspective as a key to solve problems and dilemmas, also saying it is a mechanism for the human being to understand, define and analyze its surroundings.

In the context of language development through social interaction, Rogoff (1990, 1998) identifies the relationship between an adult and a child, or a teacher and a learner, showing the distinctions in the different roles. In this situation, the teacher guides the students through a social activity, which is closely linked to role-play. Additionally, Paul (2015) highlights the importance of an educated teacher that leads the exercise to reach a good result. More, Rogoff explains this perspective of Vygotsky’s theory with the word “scaffolding” where the teacher, in this case, knows the task, how to solve it and what tools are required to answer it. From that, the teacher could assist the learner forward in the process towards the goal to improve the language skill. Moreover, Säljö (2013) states that when people interact, learning could always happen and it is the experience in different peoples’ lives that bring forward new knowledge. To put it differently, Säljö tells that learners could also learn from each other and it is not always necessary to have a teacher to improve a language.
3.4 Definition of role-play

Within education, the term role-play could be defined and explained in different ways. This paper defines it according to the authors’ Fadilah, Sağlamel, and Kayaoglu interpretation. First, Fadilah (2016) claims role-play as a “highly flexible” activity that leaves much more scope for the exercise of individual imagination and variation. In addition to this, Sağlamel and Kayaoglu (2013) state that role-play is a drama activity that allows learners to express themselves in ways that could be different from their identity. In this paper, the content of the word role-play does not mean playing for the theater nor a style of literature or emotional expression, but a scenario where the students can step into an imaginary situation or pretend to be someone else (Fadilah, 2016).

3.5 Definition of confidence

In this paper, confidence describes as a phenomenon connected to the ability to speaking English in the EFL/ESL- classroom. Confidence is about believing in oneself and one's abilities. Sandin (2017) claims that about 20 % of teenagers fear to speak out loud in the classroom. According to his study, the main reason is anxiety and lack of confidence when it comes to using a second language, such as English, even if the student knows how to master the language. According to Sandin, students get more self-conscious during the teenage period, where fear of speaking could appear as a new problem for some students. It seems that many students hesitate using the language, although they might have studied an advanced level of English (Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2013). Further, Sandin (2017) describes it as an unreasonable concern when it comes to speaking in front of others. Within Krashen's theory, it has been proven that language learning could be disturbed by anxiety, which is also confirmed by Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu (2013). In our study, students have decided by themselves where on the scale they belong, if they feel anxious or are confident speakers.
3.6 Task of the school

In the core content for English in 7th to 9th grade, Skolverket (2011) state that there should be opportunities for students to learn and develop communicative skills in different ways. Moreover, students should also be able to get in contact with linguistic phenomena to vary and enrich communication such as pronunciation and grammatical structures. In other words, the task of the school is to stimulate individuals and their progression. A form to do this is to include playful activities. Another responsibility of the school is to create curiosity and self-confidence among the students. Furthermore, Skolverket argue that English teachers should vary and combine content and different working methods. The following quote exemplifies this;

Students should have the opportunity of experiencing knowledge in different ways. They should also be encouraged to try out and develop different modes of expression and experience emotions and moods. Drama, rhythm, dance, music, and creativity in art, writing and design should all form part of the school’s activities.

(Skolverket, 2018, p 9)

One way to let students experience knowledge in a different way, which Skolverket ask for, is to bring role-play into the EFL/ESL-classrooms, which could encourage their creativity. Also, role-play is a useful technique to help students try out different emotions and expressions.

3.7 EFL/ESL

In this paper, two different concepts are used; EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language). Even though they seem to be equivalent, they are used in different situations, according to Trudgill and Hannah (2017). The definition of EFL is that learners aim to communicate, while ESL, on the other hand, is a term for countries where English is an official language. Even if English is not a foreign language in Sweden, neither it is a second language, despite its impact on the Swedish society and the school (Trudgill & Hanna 2017). However, Trudgill & Hanna state that Sweden is doing a transition, moving away from strict EFL-teaching to an ESL-perspective.
As a conclusion, we will use both terms because of the different backgrounds of our two partner schools. If our research had only taken place in Svedala, we had chosen to use the word “ESL,” but since we also use a school in Malmö where most of the students struggle with both the Swedish and the English language, “EFL” would be a more suitable term. Therefore, this paper will contain both EFL/ESL when describing Swedish students learning English in schools.
4. Methods

For this degree project, eight students from two different schools were interviewed. The participants were selected to represent students in 7th to 9th grade. Further, students with different speaking confidence were asked to participate. Even if focus is often put in students with low speaking confidence, we wanted to see if role-play could be helpful for students with various levels of confidence, or if it would differ. Therefore, eight students of those who were willing to participate were randomly chosen.

One of the two chosen schools is located in the outskirts of Malmö, where almost all students have another mother tongue than Swedish. The other school is located in Svedala, a community outside of Malmö, where the majority of the students are born in Sweden. The reason for choosing these two schools is that they represent two different catchment areas.

Trying to respond to the research question and to understand students’ perception and relationship to role-play in accordance with spoken English, a qualitative method was primarily used, together with a presentation of a small-scale questionnaire. The qualitative method is beneficial in the context of describing different phenomena. Moreover, this method has been chosen to create an increased understanding of role-play in EFL/ESL-classrooms. Also, this method is used to give the students an opportunity to develop their answers and share details in a way that is not possible in a questionnaire. Further, this will give us a deeper understanding of their perception on role-play in relation to their confidence in speaking English. According to Justensen & Mik-Meyer (2011), it is better to use the qualitative method in relation to research questions that are hard to delimit clearly. In this qualitative method, we have chosen to do interviews and the reason for this is the possibility for the interviewees to make their reflections and to express themselves freely (Longhurst, 2003). Also, the method benefits from its distinctiveness to avoid pre-assumptions and it does not contain an absolute truth but instead focuses on experiences and views. Since we were interested in students varying levels of confidence, we also used a questionnaire for the participating classes. The questionnaire allowed us to see how many of the students that had high or low confidence, and how useful role-play was in relation to improved confidence. Finally, the results from the questionnaire and the interviews will most likely show different findings. One reason for this would be that the interviewees have more time to develop their answer, re-phrase and ask questions if something is unclear.
4.1 Semi-structured interview

We have chosen the semi-structured qualitative method. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer follows different themes through main-/ and subquestions. However, there is still room to step outside the prepared questions and structure (Justensen & Mik-Meyer, 2011). This method is advantageous due to its possibility to find new information. At the same time, it reflects upon predetermined questions. Likewise, it helps the participants to respond in their own words rather than responding to “yes and no”-questions (Longhurst, 2003). From this stage, it will be the interviewers’ responsibility to uncover details in the given information (Allmark, et al. 2009). Additionally, all interviews were made in Swedish to make sure that the students could express themselves freely due to their language level.

Conducting an interview could go through four different phases. These phases are about “apprehension,” “exploration,” “cooperation,” and “participation” (Wood Johnson, 2008). First, to let the interviewee warm up with open-ended questions and become more comfortable to speak is the first stage called “apprehension.” This phase is critical to get through, especially since we are doing interviews with children. Doing this is necessary to establish trust and confidence and the purpose is to keep the informant talking. Second, apprehension opens up for the next step, which is “exploration.” During this phase, the interviewer introduces the subject, listens and observers. Third, the interviewer moves the interviewee into “cooperation.” Here, the aim is to establish an environment of trust, where the interviewee is no longer afraid of expressing him-/herself and answering personal questions. The final step, “participation,” gives a full sense of sharing and cooperation. Also, the subject itself often has become attractive for the interviewee on a personal level. Through all the stages, there is continuously a movement where the interviewee digs deeper into the questions. However, all the interviewees do not always reach all stages.

For this research, the aspects of questions for the individual interviews focus on revealing personal experiences and thoughts. By reading the form in the appendix and studying the questions, one can notice this structure in the questionnaire for the personal interviews; how it tries to discover students’ own experiences by transitioning from general questions into more deep questions on the theme. The interview-questions are connected to the following themes; personal background, experiences of role-play, role-play in relation to the exercise in the degree project and opinions related to role-play in English education.
When the interview finally is conducted and the result is written, a copy is sent to the interviewee to make the participation trustworthy and to avoid ethical dilemmas (Allmark, et al. 2009). In our case, this was part of the process to confirm that all participants comprehended and acknowledged the result.

4.2 Description of classroom activity and selection

The interest of role-plays’ impact on communicative skills in the EFL/ESL-classroom started on the practical education for the authors of this paper. Meeting students that were uncomfortable to speak English in the classroom raised the question about how teachers could help them to improve their confidence to use a second language. Furthermore, we could see that teachers in our partner schools that used the multimodal approach during lessons seemed to increase learners’ abilities to interact. This, together with experiences from University, gave the idea of investigating role-play in EFL/ESL-classrooms in relation to confidence.

In our previous work, we studied how role-play could improve learners’ oral communicative ability, but in this work, we changed to focus on students’ perceptions. When discussing how role-play could improve language skills, Jordan (2015) argues that role-play offers an active approach to learning, as well as it is strongly connected to SLA. Due to the positive result that the research showed, we wanted to ask for students’ opinions regarding role-plays’ effect on their speaking ability in combination with confidence in the EFL/ESL-classrooms. Students in six classes were, therefore, asked to do a role-play during an English lesson. All chosen classes were given the same instructions through a Powerpoint presentation regardless of the grade they were in. They were put in groups of three and were asked to solve different problems through given characters. At the end of the lesson, all students answered questions through a Google Formula, where they shared their opinions about the role-plays’ impact on their confidence to speak during class. In addition to this, we chose eight students for a more in-depth interview on the subject.

4.2.1 The classroom activity

The teacher introduced the activity and the purpose of the study, telling the students that the concentration will be on their speaking ability. The teacher also explained that there would be
a questionnaire in the end that was voluntary to take part in. The teacher went through a PowerPoint presentation, explaining each section that is presented below.

- First, the students were told that they are going on a class-trip to Copenhagen, and there will be one-hour of free time. In a group of three, they had to decide on an activity they would like to do.
- Second, the three characters were explained, and each student got a character to play during the class-trip. The teacher told the students that they had to follow Susan, Adam or John’s interest and personality when they were deciding on what to do.
- Third, students discussed and described the personality they had been assigned, and which activity their role would choose.
- Fourth, students were asked to agree upon one activity that all characters would enjoy, with their different personalities in mind, and explain what and why they chose a specific activity.
- Fifth, students participated voluntarily in evaluation through a Google Formula and afterward, eight chosen students took part in interviews for a qualitative study.

A selected group of students was conducted from both our partner schools to show a broad representation such as gender, age, and catchment-area. Four of the students came from Svedala, and the other four were from Malmö, with equally divided genders represented from each school. Also, in both schools, there was an interview with one from seventh grade, two from eighth grade, and one from ninth grade. In the paper, we have chosen to call them “student 1-8” to make them anonymous in the study. All the interviews were done individually to facilitate the interviewees’ chance to express themselves freely, but also to ensure that students did not impact each other. In addition to promoting their ability to express themselves, the interviews were held in Swedish. Moreover, the reason for choosing both our partner schools is because of their differences regarding; catchment area, students’ language proficiency in the English classroom, and input of English in everyday life. Through this choice, we hope to see a more comprehensive representation of students’ knowledge and experiences in the local area.

The analyzing of the interviews focuses on the eight selected students. First, the interviews are transcribed from the recordings; however, the warm-up talk, in the beginning,
is erased to limit the amount of gathered data (Ryen, 2004). Then the content is analyzed and key-words highlighted that together summarize each interview. Following, these summarize were sent back to each student, and from there, they could read through and give their approval that the interviewer had perceived him/her correctly. Secondly, the collected key-words from the different interviews are compiled to get an overview of the result, and if possible, highlighting themes and patterns that could expose learners’ perception of role-play in an EFL/ESL- context; in coherence with the research question.

Though the results from previous articles have shown the connection between oral communicative skills and roleplay, the paper has also decided to exclude the other abilities within the English subject. That is to say that reading, writing and listening will not be taken into account in any further discussion.

4.3 Ethical considerations

To guarantee that the interviewees have not been exposed to vulnerability and manipulative situations, ethical considerations have been made such as consent, confidentiality and trust (Ryen, 2004). One example of this is that the principal teacher participated during the introduction, the activity and evaluation. The principal teachers were also aware of which students have were selected for the interviews. Therefore, they follow up with the interviewees after some time. According to Ryen, it is essential to understand that youths are different from both children and adults. They express themselves as adults, but at the same time, they are still underage. Furthermore, since we were doing interviews with underaged, the interviews took place in an environment where the student felt comfortable to speak freely. More, the interviewee could choose a location in the form of, for instance, a classroom, the library or an office.

4.4 Limitations

Due to the matter of time, this research has several limitations. First of all, the study only includes students’ perspective. Adding teachers aspect would probably provide a wider support for the study. But, because of the limit of time we have chosen to focus on students’ perception. Also, the study is small scaled. For the interviews, eight students took part. Even if their perception is important and adds meaningful information to the study, it was still a
small scaled study performed in only two schools. Additionally, our 111 participant from the questionnaire cannot represent all Swedish students in 7th-9th grade. Finally, the classroom-activity that provided information for the study was only practiced once. If several role-plays would have been tried out in the classes, perhaps it would have affected the result.
5. Result

The result of this paper aims to show to what extent Swedish 7-9 students find role-play helpful for their confidence in relation to their speaking ability. In the following section, eight students’ experiences of a role-play activity will be presented. Additionally, to understand students’ knowledge in the broader sense, data from six classes will also be shown on a smaller scale.

5.1 Qualitative result

In the following section, a presentation of the results from the participants in the interviews is described. Since all interviews were made in Swedish, quotations are translated from Swedish to English by the interviewers.

Student 1

The first participating student is a boy, attending 7th grade in Svedala. He described his confidence in speaking English as 4 out of 5, in different situations, both inside and outside of school. But still, the student thought that the role-play helped him to feel more secure in his speaking ability. The reason, he said, was that he got a structure and did not need to improvise.

“It was easier to speak English because you knew what to say. When you feel more sure about what to say, it gets easier, and then you do not need to improvise”.

Besides that, the role-play facilitated conversational manners and the student mentioned that speaking with somebody on the same level was beneficial to him because it challenged, for instance, his vocabulary. Furthermore, the student believed that role-play could be a tool that helps him to become more confident in speaking English in the classroom.
Student 2

The second student is a girl from Malmö, and she attends 7th grade. In the interview, she explained that the role-play was helpful because she was put in smaller groups with people she was comfortable with. Usually, she feels that she is a 2 out of 5 concerning her confidence in speaking.

“It felt like everybody in the group would help you if you would say something wrong.”

What was characteristic of this student was that she said that she often felt uncomfortable speaking English. There would be few situations when she would practice the language, and she mentioned that if she were traveling, her family would often go to her home country. Therefore, she claimed it was essential to her that the other group members would support each other since she often felt afraid of speaking English. Another prominent thing student 2 mentioned was that she thought she could trust everybody in the group and knew they would not laugh if she did not find the word or pronounced something differently. Moreover, she believes that role-play could be helpful in her ability to speak English, but only if she would be comfortable with the group.

Student 3

The third student is a boy in 8th grade, and he lives in Malmö. In the interview, he said he is very confident in speaking English and in his opinion, he assessed himself as a 5 out of 5 on the scale. In his spare time, he often plays computer games, where he speaks English with people from all over the world. Because of this, he experience that the classes are too simple and that his English is better than the average group. The students’ experience of role-play was that it felt like an activity for children. Also, he said that the level was too low and did not improve or challenge his English.

“Because I already know how to speak English.”
In the end, the student said that perhaps role-play could be helpful for other students that feel insecure, but for him, it did not improve his skills since he already felt confident.

Student 4
The next student is a girl from Malmö in 8th grade. She described her confidence in speaking English as low and did not have previous experiences of role-play, even if she had experience of dialogues in textbooks with a similar structure. However, she finds the dialogues more as a reading exercise, instead of a speaking exercise because it uses full sentences. The student said that she is a 1 out of 5 on the scale of confidence.

“Although I know my class and everybody is kind, I still don’t dare to speak English in front of the others in the class. However, I think the role-play was good because it used pictures and words.”

According to student 4, the important part of role-play is that the learners practice speaking in smaller groups, and she pointed out how insecure she feels when it comes to speaking in a full class. Moreover, she described how she found the role-play was different from the dialogues, due to the use of only words and pictures instead of complete sentences. It gave her ideas of what to say, but it was still her that had to create the conversation instead of reading something written by somebody else. Although the student found it hard to express herself.

Student 5
The fifth student is a boy in 8th grade in Svedala. He put himself on level 3 out of 5 when he described his confidence in speaking English in class. When gaming in his free time, he thinks it is easier to speak English because then he uses a vocabulary he is familiar to. According to this student, role-play could be helpful when it is used in smaller groups.
“It was easier to speak in the class when you were divided into smaller groups. I feel more comfortable when I first can speak to a friend before I have to talk before the whole class.”

To clarify, this student put much focus on the small groups in the interview. He thought that this was the most important factor when describing why the role-play was helpful. However, he felt that role-play had another effect than other speaking exercises, mostly because it was more fun, according to the student.

Student 6
The sixth student also comes from Svedala and is a girl attending 8th grade. On the scale of confidence, she described herself as a 3 out of 5. She usually only speaks English in school or on vacations and thinks that she control the language, even if she does not always find the right words. She has tested role-play before and finds it helpful in order to gain confidence in speaking.

“It feels like I can relax more while speaking in class when I first had the opportunity to discuss the subject with a friend next to me”.

The student described a process teachers would define as “scaffolding”. She was positive on the fact that she first got words to work with, and then could try them in a small group before that group decided what to share in the class. Previous experiences from role-playing, the student argues that the subject plays an important part if students will find the task interesting and engaging.

Student 7
The seventh student is a boy in 9th grade from Malmö. He described himself as insecure in speaking English, and on the scale, he said his confidence in English was 2 out of 5. He does not watch TV-shows or play games in English very often and is not speaking English frequently at home either. He already struggles with Swedish and finds it challenging to
master a third language. However, he discovered that the role-play was beneficial because it gave him ideas of what to say, and it facilitated the speaking through the given vocabulary, characters, and opinions.

“It was helpful because of the character you were assigned. Sometimes it can be difficult to speak about yourself, and I often feel insecure about what to say or how to express myself, but because of this, you knew what to discuss or talk about, and it did not have to be so personal. It was good that they gave us opinions.”

This student believes that role-play could be a helpful tool when it provides students with information. In those cases, students do not have to be creative to be able to talk about given topics, according to student 7.

Student 8
The last student is attending 9th grade in Svedala and is a girl. She described herself as quite fluent in English, at least for the purposes where she has to use the language. Her family often travels abroad and she is used to speaking English with people from other countries without any significant difficulties. Still, she thinks it can be harder to speak English in the class, mostly because she is afraid that other students will laugh if she gets something wrong. Therefore, she has given herself a 3 out of 5 because the interview focused on English in EFL/ESL-classrooms instead of situations outside school.

“It is much more fun to speak when it feels like a game. It doesn’t matter if something gets wrong or you mess up a sentence. I feel more comfortable when you are allowed to play around, and not everything has to be too serious, then it’s easy to feel pressured, and everything just gets wrong”.

The student says that there should be more similar exercises in class, where they can play with the language without being afraid of making mistakes.
5.2 Results from the questionnaire

The following section will present the result that is a collection of all students in the six classes in 7th-9th grade that have been part of this project. Three classes were from Malmö, while the other three represented a school in Svedala. In total, the questionnaire conducted 111 students’ answers. Furthermore, this section shows how confident students are to speak English in the classroom, but also if role-play facilitates speaking in the class.

To compare how beneficial role-play is for students’ confidence in speaking English; first, the questionnaire asked how comfortable they already are.

The chart shows students’ perception of their confidence in relation to speaking in the EFL/ESL- classrooms. About 20 % were anxious about speaking English in front of other students, while nearly 30 % considered themselves speaking without hesitation. In between these numbers, almost 60 % found themselves quite/mostly confident when speaking in the classroom. Afterward the students were asked to explain how helpful this kind of activity for their confidence in speaking English.
"Did the role-play help you to become more confident in relation to speaking English?"

In this graph, the result shows students’ perception of role-plays’ effect on their confidence in regard to speaking in the EFL/ESL-classrooms. To this, the majority found that the role-play facilitated their confidence in regard to speaking. In contrast to this, about 30% did not find it helpful or beneficial.

When looking at the relationship between where students put themselves on the scale of confidence and if they thought role-play improved their confidence in accordance with the speaking ability some conclusions were drawn. For those students who put themselves on a 1 or 2 on the confidence scale, 45% thought that the role-play helped them to become more confident in relation to speaking English. Students who put their confidence on a 4 or 5 on the same scale, had a slightly higher number on 65%. The third group, who found role-play most helpful for their confidence, were the ones who gave themselves a 3 on the scale. In this group, 87% thought that role-play increased their confidence in relation to speaking English in the classroom.
6. Discussion

The purpose of this research is to understand students’ view on how roleplay affect their confidence in relation to their speaking ability in the EFL/ESL-classroom. To discover that, semi-structured interviews have been executed on eight students in two different schools for 7th to 9th grade. In addition, we have done a small-scale questionnaire with 111 participants. From both the interviews and the questionnaire, the result has demonstrated that those students that placed themselves in the middle of the confidence-scale were those who found role-play most favorably. Also, the result has shown that important factors to make role-play successful for students’ confidence were group dynamics, level of the groups, provision of material and interesting topics. Regarding this, the percentage in the discussion shows the results from the questionnaire. Above all, the questionnaires is mainly used to show how many of the 111 participants that were helped by the role-play concerning their speaking ability. Despite this, the focus has always been on the interviews, since they develop why and how in regard of how helpful the role-play has been.

The method we chose for the research was a semi-structured interview that aimed to find out about personal thoughts and opinions, and later on, go deeper within a specific topic. To begin with general questions and then moving deeper under a theme succeeded because the interviewees became more comfortable after a time. This result agrees with Wood Johnson’s theory about four phases moving from “apprehension” to “participation” (2008). In our interviews, we never reached the fourth phase, “participation,” where the interviewee him/herself begins to show a great interest in the subject matter. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview benefits from more extended interviews or doing interviews on repetitive occasions. Yet, we had difficulties to accomplish individual interviews that were longer than 20 minutes, because of, for instance, students’ schedules. Despite this, the advantage we had was that we for a longer period of time during different occasions came back to our practical placements, which have lead to good relationships with the students. These meetings have laid a foundation of trust and opportunities to speak personally with the different students. In total, 111 students participated in the questionnaire, and eight of those were interviewed according to the described method. Through these interviews, different numbers appeared that showed connections between role-play and confidence in speaking.
6.1 Role-play’s affect on students with low confidence

The interviews with students 2, 4 and 7 showed how everybody usually finds it difficult to speak in class but was helped by the framework in the role-play. The opinion from the interviews represented 45% of those students from the questionnaire who put themselves on the lower part of the scale of confidence. This group had the lowest numbers regarding students that thought role-play helped them to speak with improved confidence. In addition, Krashen’s theory could help us to understand why the majority in this group did not find role-play helpfully. According to him, learners with low confidence sometimes create mental blockages that prevent them from further progression (1985). If this was the case for the participants with low confidence in our study, these numbers are not surprising. Further, we could find differences between student 2, 7 and 4, who are the examples from the lower confidence-group. Student 2 described how she thought it was easier to speak during the role-play; however, it depended on the fact that she was in a smaller group comfortable with the other students. It agrees with Krashen’s theory, stating that group dynamics are very important to consider in a learning situation. He continues that learners benefit from being in groups with other students they are comfortable with. From this, one could conclude that if students are insecure in the group, learners would probably not feel pleased with trying to express themselves in English. Additionally, Spada and Lightbown (2013) indicate the importance of knowledge-level in the group, saying that there should be a balance between security and students that challenge the language level. Therefore, the teacher’s task, when using role-play in education, is not only to focus on creating creative lessons but to be conscious of other surrounding parts. For instance, it is necessary to understand the group and not only from the perspective of having students relaxed with others but also to know their pre-knowledge.

While student 2 found group dynamics as the most important factor in the role-play activity, student 4 found most support in the tools, such as provided pictures and words. These devices gave the student a positive experience of role-playing, but still, the student did not speak very much. The question is if one could argue that role-play benefits speaking if the student does not make a progression in the classroom. On the other hand, if the student found role-play as a positive experience in relation to speaking, that is a goal in itself.
Because according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learning could always happen in an environment of interaction with other people (Säljö, 2013). Due to this discussion, it could be enough that learners only participate and listen.

Student 7, who usually not speak in classroom situations, appreciated getting words to use in the role-play and that he could hide behind a “role.” Thus, he did not need to be personal during the role-play, which he thought as positive. Similarly, Sağlamel and Kayaoglu (2013) claim that role-play benefits from the participants’ opportunity to express themselves far from their own opinions and personalities. Another factor that impacts the student is his background. He explained that he did not learn English before he came to Sweden. Further, student 7 found it difficult because he said that he did not have the same pre-knowledge as the other students in the class.

6.2 Role-play’s affect on students with medium confidence

The individual group that found role-play most helpful for their confidence in speaking were those who assessed themselves as a 3 on the scale. In this group, almost 90 % found role-play as beneficial, according to the questionnaire. In line with Krashen (1985), to reach the most successful condition for language acquisition self-confidence is required. This would explain why this group found role-play more helpful for their confidence since they already were comfortable to speak.

Student 5 also emphasized the importance of group dynamics. In his opinion, it was crucial who you were in a group with to feel confident to speak. Besides that, student 5 highlighted the significance of the assigned vocabulary on the given topic. He exemplified it with his gaming-community, where he has established a language for that specific context. As a teacher, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the subject matter. In the method of CLT, role-play is a standard tool, due to its focus on introducing different subjects and preparing students for diverse topics and situations. In other words, if the teacher uses it correctly, it is possible to establish an environment where learning could happen and where the teacher could provide students with real-life situations. This, to help them make social and cultural considerations (Bern, 2013). Finally, this means that learners are supported to achieve a language adapted to different situations and purposes asked for by Skolverket.
One term that many teachers, but even students in language learning, often face is scaffolding. This term describes a process where the teacher builds and prepares a task where learners face different stages within the task. The role-play that was used in our research was created to help students gather information and to let them practice in small groups before they spoke in the class. To practice before was something student 6 was positive to since she appreciated that she could go through words before she had to speak out loud in the class. Additionally, this process allowed her to make mistakes and try sentences among classmates in the group she belonged to, which she believed increased her confidence and trust in herself. Even this student had tried role-play before, and thought it was helpful in accordance with speaking for the same reasons as mentioned last. Nevertheless, she stated that the subject is significant because if the subject does not attract learners, she claimed that they would not participate in the role-play or take it serious. Moreover, she said it does not necessarily have to be “fun,” but it needs to be meaningful and adapted to the level of the group. Together with this opinion, CLT advocates the importance of authentic situations to facilitate learning to engage students, deepen the knowledge, and approach the real world (Alarmi, 2018; Richard and Smith, 2014). Further, this is something for teachers to consider when teaching through role-play; to adapt subjects to suit the target age-group together with real-life situations to make it meaningful and attractive.

One part that many researchers have mentioned as something beneficial with role-play is its forgiving environment. According to student 8, this was what she appreciated saying it felt more like a game instead of a classroom-situation. Usually, this student is afraid of speaking in the classroom because she believes that somebody will laugh at her. However, in this situation, she thought that the teacher had created a friendly environment and, therefore, she felt more comfortable to speak. That is to say; it is the teachers’ challenge and responsibility to establish this kind of environment, according to Boudreault (2010). Also, Krashen states that teachers should not correct mistakes or have a focus on grammatical errors, but instead, emphasize the joy of talking because it will develop students’ confidence in speaking (1988). To not focus on mistakes, but instead on the speaking process, would be one example of how teachers could create a friendly and comfortable climate asked for by student 8 and Boudreault.
6.3 Role-play’s affect on students with high confidence
The last confidence group is a blend between those students who put themselves as a 4 or 5 on the scale. Almost 60 % of all the students in the questionnaire considered themselves as confident or very confident while speaking English in the EFL/ESL- classroom. Despite this, a majority of these students found role-play as helpful for their confidence to grow even more. In light of these numbers, it is discovered that role-play favorable those students who already consider themselves as confident speakers in the classroom. Nevertheless, this might not be surprising numbers since this group of students already think speaking English is not too hard. During the interview with student 1, who considered himself as confident, it appeared that he still appreciated the role-play activity. To him, it was beneficial since it contributed to a structure for speaking. A factor that made the student more confident was that he did not have to improvise during the role-play. According to Fadilah (2016), it is helpful to step into an imaginary character with predetermined personalities and opinions. In other words, this provided student 1 with a framework of what to talk about, which gave him a chance to focus on speaking production. At the same time, Fadilah states that these kinds of activities bring flexibility for teachers to adapt the level in the classroom, targeting different students. Moreover, the level of the activity was the main reason why student 3 did not find role-play helpfully. According to him, the task was too easy, although he thought that other students on a lower level could appreciate it. On the one hand, role-play benefits for its possibility to adapt levels; on the other hand, the challenge for the teacher is the disseminated knowledge-levels in classrooms.

6.4 Important factors according to the interviewees
The most prominent part from the qualitative study that has recurred among almost all the 8 participants were the small groups. To them, the groups have been relevant for different reasons, such as language level, the composition of groups, and opportunities to scaffolding. In other words, the students stress the importance of preparing a task, and it is not enough for the teacher to have a creative task, but they need to consider other factors. The schools’ responsibility is to stimulate learners through creative activities, but one can not do it without clear structures (Skolverket, 2011). Even if the core content mention creative activities, it does not say how to practice it. Further, from the students’ point of view, the group-dynamics
and the scaffolding-part of the task are very important. Another significant part that we have seen was that students need to have reached a certain level of confidence to be able to express themselves freely. It could be one argument why students with the lowest confidence did not think that role-play developed their confidence in speaking. Since one of the aims in the English curriculum is to help all students to develop their confidence, the school needs to discuss how they could help and reach students with lower confidence for further progression that improves their confidence in speaking.

Significant from the qualitative study was the construction of the role-play that provided students with tools to help them speak. Student 1, 4 and 7 all agreed on how helpful pictures, words, and opinions were for giving them an idea of what to say. In similarity, these students appreciated that they did not have to be creative, but could depend on the characters. According to Oduke (2013), a role-play provides students with prepared scenarios that help them to speak without further thinking, which also allows the acquisition to happen. Moreover, these three students put themselves on different levels on the confidence-scale, which shows that students on different levels could be helped by a clear framework in a creative task as role-play and thereby increased their confidence. These students felt more secure with the given structures, which made it easier for them to express themselves in the role-play.

6.5 Role-play as a tool to develop confidence

These findings, about how role-play affects students’ confidence, are relevant in the communicative classroom. About 20% of our participants, which is the same number for ninth graders in Sweden (Sandin, 2017), mentioned in the questionnaire that they usually fear to speak in the EFL/ESL-classrooms. Still, 45% of the students with low confidence in our questionnaire said that they gained more confidence to speak during the role-play. Therefore this tool could be useful in language education among students with low confidence. However, teachers need to discuss how they could improve their confidence and help students move their mental blocks. Moreover, role-play, as a tool to develop confidence, is most beneficial among those students who consider themselves as 3 on the scale of confidence, according to the interviews and questionnaire. This means that classes that contain a large group of quite confident students could use role-play as a method to improve
their confidence even more in relation to their speaking ability. But to make it most successful for these students, the circumstances need to be considered. According to the result, the most important parts to consider for the teacher would be grouping. Here, the teacher needs to plan the level of the group carefully but also the constellation of people to make sure students are safe together. Finally, it will hopefully lead to that students are not afraid of making mistakes or trying out new phrases.
7. Conclusion

This paper has answered the research question, “To what extent do Swedish EFL/ESL-students find role-play helpful for their confidence in relation to their speaking ability?.” Moreover, it aimed to investigate if role-play could be a tool to improve confidence in speaking ability among students in 7th to 9th grade in Swedish schools. The study was conducted from semi-structured interviews, and in addition, a smaller questionnaire together with a review of existing research.

From the interviews, the students all agreed on the role-play possibly being a helpful tool to improve the speaking ability. However, the most confident student claimed that it is better for those who are less confident. Further, we have seen that students that improve their confidence in their speaking ability the most, in the EFL/ESL-classroom, are those who considered themselves having medium confidence. In opposite, the group that was least favorable of role-play, according to how many students from the interviews that found role-play helpful, were the ones that considered themselves having low confidence or being doubtful about their ability. Despite this, the students with low confidence enjoyed the role-play, although one still felt insecure, probably because of mental blocks or lack of vocabulary.

Additionally to the interviews, the questionnaire showed that 64% of 111 participants thought that role-play was beneficial for their speaking ability. From these numbers and the qualitative study, conclusions could be drawn. The essential factors for the students to perceive that development took place were the following: constellations and size of groups, attractive themes, and support in the framework. Therefore, teachers that use role-play as a teaching method within language learning for EFL/ESL-students should keep these factors in mind to reach better results. As an example, the interviewed students felt more safe when practicing role-play with peers that they knew would not laugh if they would make mistakes. Also, if using a theme students can relate to, students will think it is easier to step into the role that they are assigned.

Finally, we would propose that further research about role-play in EFL/ESL-classrooms should focus on how it could target students that have a lack of confidence. This is an interesting group from two perspectives. First, this group could risk being without final grades in the end of 9th grade. Also, they were the group that was least favorable of role-play,
according to our study. Therefore, this could be a field to investigate further to see if role-play is a tool that specifically could reach Swedish students with low confidence.
References


Bencic, N., & Rosenkvist, L. (2019). *Involve me and I will learn - The impact of role-play in ESL/EFL classrooms.* (Basic level independent project in the major subject, Malmö ‘ University). Retrieved from 2019-12-12 http://muep.mau.se/handle/2043/28259


Appendix 1

Questions for the individual interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tema</th>
<th>Frågor</th>
<th>Följdfrågor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduktion/ Bakgrund</td>
<td>Hur gammal du?/ Vilken klass går du i?/ Kön <em>(end. kvantitativt syfte)</em></td>
<td>Hur bekväm är du med att prata engelska i klassrummet på en skala mellan 1-5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vad är din relation/ erfarenhet av att prata engelska utanför skolan?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vad är din relation/ erfarenhet av att prata engelska i skolan?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Erfarenheter av rollspel</td>
<td>Vad har du fått erfarenheter av rollspel/ drama i skolan? Exempelvis från textböcker.</td>
<td>Om du har erfarenheter- har du några specifika ämnen/ teman?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rollspelet i klassrummet - övningen</td>
<td>Hjälpte rollspelet dig att bli mer trygg i att prata engelska?</td>
<td>Varför blev det (inte) lättare?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vilka delar i övningen var det som gjorde det enklare att prata engelska?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Åsikt kring rollspel i engelskundervisning</td>
<td>Tror du rollspel skulle kunna göra dig mer trygg att tala engelska i klassrummet?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tror du rollspel skulle kunna hjälpa dig att förbättra din talade engelska?</td>
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Appendix 2

Interviewees

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<th>Grade</th>
<th>School/ city</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>“Student”</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>Svedala</td>
<td>Boy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>Malmö</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>Malmö</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>Malmö</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>Svedala</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>Svedala</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>Malmö</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>Svedala</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>8</td>
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## Appendix 3

### Questionnaire

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<th>Kille</th>
<th>Tjej</th>
<th>Annat</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Årskurs</td>
<td>Åk 7</td>
<td>Åk 8</td>
<td>Åk 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hur bekväm är du att prata engelska i klassrummet i vanliga fall?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blev det lättare att prata engelska med rollspelet du nyss provade?</td>
<td>Ja</td>
<td>Nej</td>
<td>Ingen skillnad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Om du svarade ja/nej, vad var det som gjorde/ inte gjorde skillnad?</td>
<td>Öppet svar</td>
<td></td>
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</table>