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Teacher's Strategies in Developing English Speaking Skills of Students With Intellectual Disabilities Trough Role-Play Activities: A Case Study

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates teachers' strategies for developing English speaking skills in students with intellectual disabilities using role-playing activities in an inclusive high school classroom. This study takes a qualitative approach, with a case study design centered on an 11th-grade student with an intellectual disability. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the English teacher, field notes, and documentation. To increase the credibility of the findings, data were analyzed thematically using source triangulation. The findings show that the teacher used several key strategies, including providing meaningful communicative contexts through simplified role-play scenarios, scaffolding with modeling and cue cards, and consistently providing positive reinforcement during learning activities. The research findings also show that students' speaking skills gradually improve, particularly in terms of participation, confidence in speaking, and willingness to use English in simple communication. Although linguistic improvements such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation are limited, role-playing allows students to engage in more authentic and contextual communication practices. This study confirms that role-playing, when combined with adaptive learning strategies, can help to create a more inclusive learning environment and promote the development of speaking skills in students with intellectual disabilities.

1. Introduction

Speaking is a core component of English language competence because it enables learners to express ideas, feelings, and opinions effectively in everyday communication, and in the context of globalization, spoken English proficiency is increasingly treated as an essential skill rather than a supplementary one (Nathir Ghafar & Raheem, 2023; Sawalmeh & Dey, 2023). However, many EFL learners

still experience persistent difficulties in speaking English despite years of study (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2013; Kulsum et al., 2025; Septiawati & Hadi, 2026). These difficulties generally arise from three interrelated sources: linguistic factors, such as limited vocabulary, grammatical weakness, inaccurate pronunciation, and low fluency (S. Alrasheedi, 2020; Kulsum et al., 2025; Ocktavia & Srisudarso, 2025); psychological factors, including fear of making mistakes, anxiety, lack of confidence, shyness, and fear of negative evaluation (Khudhur Omar, 2023); and environmental and pedagogical factors, such as limited speaking opportunities, unsupportive classroom environments, large class sizes, insufficient exposure to English, and teaching practices that do not encourage active oral participation (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2013). Evidence across studies also suggests that these factors interact rather than operate separately, so speaking problems in EFL classrooms are best understood as a multidimensional challenge involving language knowledge, emotional readiness, and learning context(Anggraini et al., 2025; Nathir Ghafar & Raheem, 2023).

Speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involve not only producing grammatically accurate speech but also participating meaningfully in oral interactions(Oktavani et al., 2024; Purnamaningwulan, 2024). However, differences in students' language proficiency require differentiated instruction, materials, objectives, and learning support (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023; Purnamaningwulan, 2024; Tajik et al., 2024). This challenge is more pronounced in inclusive education, where all learners, particularly students with intellectual disabilities (ID), must be provided with equitable opportunities to participate and achieve (Anggraini et al., 2025). Because students with ID experience limitations in intellectual and adaptive functioning that affect language development, they require adaptive strategies such as simplified materials, repetition, individualized support, and the implementation of an Individualized Education Programme (IEP) (Mosquera, 2023).

Among these strategies, structured role-play is particularly suitable because it provides repeated speaking practice, promotes social interaction, and can be adapted to students' cognitive and language abilities. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), simple and structured role-play creates meaningful communication opportunities through scaffolding and authentic interaction, enabling students with ID to develop speaking skills in a safe and predictable learning environment (Alwehebi, 2025; Mosquera, 2023; Pishadast, 2022; Yasin, 2024).

Research on English language learning for students with intellectual disabilities was conducted by Desmiyanti et al. (2020) through the implementation of the “Make a Match” model to improve students’ conversational skills at a special education school. The results of the study showed that the model was effective in improving students’ participation, self-confidence, and conversational skills through a classroom action research approach focused on the effectiveness of the learning model (Anwar, 2020). However, the study has not thoroughly examined how teachers develop teaching strategies during the learning process, including forms of adaptation, scaffolding, feedback, and support provided to students based on their

individual characteristics. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a special education school (SLB), and therefore does not provide insight into the implementation of teaching strategies in the context of inclusive education.

Beginning with this gap, this study focuses on teacher strategies for improving the English speaking skills of students with intellectual disabilities through role-playing activities. Using a qualitative approach, this study aims to explore the implementation of role-play as a pedagogical strategy to reduce pauses and repetitions and enhance speaking confidence among students with intellectual disabilities in English oral communication. In addition, the study examines the effectiveness of structured role-play activities in improving the English-speaking fluency of students with intellectual disabilities in an inclusive EFL classroom. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more inclusive and evidence-based instructional practices for teaching speaking in EFL settings.

2. Methodology

Design and Participant

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate a phenomenon in depth within its real-world context. Researchers could use qualitative case study methodology to investigate complex issues in their natural settings. It was especially useful for answering “how” and “why” questions that cannot be separated from context (Baxter & Jack, 2015) This system was examined holistically using a variety of data sources (observations, interviews, and documents) in a real-world context to better understand the processes, meanings, and dynamics at work. This study used a case study design because it allowed the researcher to investigate a phenomenon in depth within a real-world context. A case study was especially useful when the researcher wanted to answer "how" and "why" questions, especially when the boundary between the phenomenon being studied and its context is unclear. In this study, the teacher's role-play strategies for developing English speaking skills among students with intellectual disabilities were inextricably linked to the classroom context, student characteristics, and daily teaching practices, so the case study approach is appropriate. The participant in this study was an English teacher who used role-playing activities in English language instruction in a classroom with an intellectually disabled student. The teacher was chosen using purposive sampling because they were directly involved in designing and implementing instructional strategies to help students improve their speaking skills. Teachers were also expected to have relevant experience and knowledge in adapting teaching methods for an inclusive learning environment.

Technique of Collecting Data

This study used a variety of data collection techniques to gather detailed and comprehensive information. First, the researcher made direct observations in the classroom throughout the learning process. The observations were conducted using a non-participant method to investigate teacher-student interactions, particularly

during role-play activities. These observations focused primarily on teachers' teaching strategies and the nature of teacher-student interactions. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with English teachers and, as needed, with selected students to investigate their perspectives on the use of role-play activities and the development of students' speaking abilities. This study also relied on the teachers' field notes, which included reflective comments about student progress, participation levels, and various specific incidents that occurred during speaking activities, particularly those involving students with intellectual disabilities. To support and strengthen the research findings, the researcher gathered documentation such as lesson plans, student worksheets, assessment records, and photos or short video clips of classroom learning activities.

Technique of Analysis Data

The data for this study were analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique for identifying, analyzing, and summarizing patterns or themes that appear consistently in a dataset. This method is adaptable, allowing it to be used with a variety of research paradigms and types of qualitative data. During the analysis, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke's six systematic steps. The first step is to become acquainted with the data by reading and re-examining it for example, interview transcripts and observation results to fully comprehend the context.

The second step was to create initial codes by labeling data segments that are thought to be relevant to the research focus. In the third step, the researcher identified themes by organizing codes with similar meanings into preliminary themes. The fourth step was to review the themes, which entails re-examining their alignment with the raw data and research objectives so that they can be refined, merged, or deleted as necessary. Following that, the fifth step entailed clearly defining and naming the themes so that each one has distinct boundaries and meanings. The final step was to create a report of the analysis results by presenting the identified themes along with relevant data quotes, thereby increasing the credibility of the research findings and making them easy to understand for readers.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies are used to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. The research's credibility is established through data triangulation, which includes observation, interviews, and documentation, as well as participant verification (member checking) and peer review. Transferability is achieved by providing a detailed description of the research context, participant characteristics, and learning process, allowing the research findings to be understood and applied in similar settings. The creation of an audit trail and the use of consistent data analysis processes, such as systematic coding, help to ensure research reliability. Furthermore, reliability is ensured by maintaining the researcher's objectivity through reflexivity, providing an audit trail, and using triangulation to support data obtained from multiple sources.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the results of observations, interviews, the teacher's field notes, and documentation, the role-play activity was implemented in stages over the course of one month of instruction on the topic of Hortatory Exposition Text. Before the activity began, the teacher first simplified the material into a short dialogue containing expressions of opinion ("I think," "In my opinion") and recommendations ("Students should"). The teacher also prepared cue cards containing keywords and examples of simple expressions to serve as visual aids for students with intellectual disabillities. After the preparation phase, the teacher acted out the dialogue with one of the students to demonstrate pronunciation, intonation, and the flow of the conversation. The teacher repeated the sample dialogue several times so that the students would understand the context of the communication before being asked to role-play on their own. As the teacher explained,

"I first demonstrated the dialogue several times."

Next, students were paired with cooperative classmates to act out scenarios related to daily life, such as the importance of wearing school uniforms, keeping the school clean, and the use of cell phones at school. Throughout the activity, the teacher provided prompts, guided students in using cue cards when they had difficulty recalling vocabulary, and gave students the opportunity to complete the dialogues step by step. After each role-play session, the teacher provided individual feedback through praise, constructive corrections to pronunciation, and encouragement for students to keep trying to speak English. According to the teacher,

> *"I always provide positive reinforcement every time he tries to speak, even if his pronunciation isn't perfect yet."*

The program was implemented repeatedly over the course of one month, with the level of teacher assistance gradually decreasing so that students had the opportunity to use English more independently at each session.

Role-Play as a Meaningful Context for Speaking Practice

According to table 1, teachers primarily use role-playing to provide students with intellectual disabilities with more contextually relevant speaking opportunities. When teaching expository texts, teachers do not ask students to memorize long passages but rather simplify the material into dialogues about everyday life, such as the use of cell phones at school, the importance of school uniforms, and keeping the school environment clean.

Table 1. Observational Results

Data Source	Findings
Interview	"Through role-play, they can learn by doing. So they don't just memorize vocabulary or sentence patterns, but also try to use them in more real-life contexts."

Obsevation	1.	Teachers use topics that are close to students' lives, such as the use of cell phones at school, the importance of school uniforms, and maintaining a clean school environment.
	2.	Students appear more active when participating in simulations compared to just reading text or listening to teacher explanations.

Additionally, observational results show that students are more engaged in simulated scenarios than when they are just reading or hearing the teacher explain things (Alwehebi, 2025; Yasin, 2024). Students participate in straightforward discussions that enable them to directly voice their opinions and offer suggestions, according to learning documentation (Alwehebi, 2025; Purnamaningwulan, 2024). This finding suggests that using role-play in language learning gives students opportunities to practice in authentic and relevant communicative situations, allowing language to be used in meaningful contexts and fostering confidence and fluency in speaking.

Direct, concrete, and hands-on learning experiences have been shown to be better suited to the cognitive characteristics of students with intellectual disabilities than overly abstract material; thus, instructional materials must be adapted to provide real and contextual learning experiences (Mosquera, 2023; Purnamaningwulan, 2024; Tajik et al., 2024). This approach is consistent with constructivism and experiential learning theories, which emphasize that language knowledge is actively constructed through interaction, exploration, and reflection on learning experiences rather than passively receiving information (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023; Tajik et al., 2024).

The students' progress was also evident in their increased engagement during role-play activities. Based on initial observations, students were mostly silent and merely repeated the teacher's sentences. However, after participating in several simulations, students began using simple expressions such as "I think..." when expressing their opinions on the learning topic. This change indicates that presenting a communicative context relevant to students' lives helps increase their willingness to participate in speaking activities (Alwehebi, 2025; Purnamaningwulan, 2024; Yasin, 2024).

Scaffolding Through Modeling and Cue Cards

The study's findings suggest that the success of role-play implementation is determined not only by the activity itself but also by the teacher's support during the learning process. During the observation, the teacher consistently used different types of scaffolding, such as providing dialogue examples in advance (modeling), using cue cards, repeating instructions in simple terms and providing prompts when students experience difficulties. Field notes from the second meeting also indicate that the use of cue cards helped students follow the flow of the conversation more effectively. These are shown in Table.2.

Table 2. Observational Results

Data Source	Findings
Interview	1. "I first demonstrated the dialogue several times" 2. "I also gave him cue cards containing keywords and simple expressions so he wouldn't be too confused."
Teacher's Field Notes	Meeting 2: "I also gave him cue cards containing keywords and simple expressions so he wouldn't be too confused." Meeting 4: "Students can follow the dialogue more fluently and require less direction from the teacher than before."

According to the findings, scaffolding is critical for supporting the participation and academic performance of students with intellectual disabilities, especially when support is tailored to their needs and gradually reduced as independence increases (Mosquera, 2023; Purnamaningwulan, 2024). Visual and verbal supports, such as visual aids, concrete objects, gestures, and structured verbal cues, have been shown to help students with intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities understand tasks, bridge abstract concepts, and facilitate task responses, thereby reducing processing load (Mosquera, 2023; Purnamaningwulan, 2024; Tajik et al., 2024).

This practice is aligned with the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between a student's current abilities and the potential abilities they can achieve with the assistance of a more competent individual; within this framework, scaffolding is viewed as a form of temporary, tailored support designed to help learners progress from what they can do independently to higher levels of ability through social interaction and guidance (S. Alrasheedi, 2020; Shabani et al., 2010). The teacher's field notes indicate changes in the students' ability to participate in the dialogue. In the second session, the students still relied on cue cards to read almost the entire dialogue. However, by the fourth session, the students began to recall some simple phrases without always having to look at the cue cards. The observations also showed that the frequency of the teacher's prompting decreased as the students' understanding of the conversation flow improved (S. Alrasheedi, 2020).

Positive Reinforcement as a Strategy to Build Speaking Confidence

According to Table.3, teachers consistently used positive reinforcement during role-play activities. Verbal praise, expressions of appreciation, encouragement to keep trying, and recognition of students' English language efforts were among the forms of reinforcement provided. Despite students' limited language skills, teachers continued to encourage their participation, resulting in a safe and supportive learning environment.

Table 3. Observational Results

Data Source	Findings
Interview	"I also gave him cue cards containing keywords and simple expressions so he wouldn't be too confused."
Observation	1. Teachers give verbal praise and encouragement when students successfully express their opinions or answer questions. 2. The teacher appreciates the student's effort even tho there are still mistakes in pronunciation and grammar.

Teacher's Field Notes	Meeting 4: "Student's self-confidence began to develop during the role-play activities."
	Meeting 6: "Student appears more confident than at the start of the activity."

According to the findings, scaffolding is critical for supporting the participation and academic performance of students with intellectual disabilities, especially when support is tailored to their needs and gradually reduced as independence increases (A. A. Alrasheedi, 2018; Dey & Sawalmeh, 2021; Mosquera, 2023). Visual and verbal supports, such as visual aids, concrete objects, gestures, and structured verbal cues, have been shown to help students with intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities understand tasks, bridge abstract concepts, and facilitate task responses, thereby reducing processing load (A. A. Alrasheedi, 2018; Dey & Sawalmeh, 2021; Purnamaningwulan, 2024).

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From an affective perspective, the most noticeable change was in the students' confidence in speaking. During the first week, students tended to avoid eye contact and wait for the teacher's instructions before speaking. After receiving consistent positive reinforcement, students began to be willing to answer simple questions and participate in role-plays without showing the same hesitation they had at the beginning of the lesson.

Gradual Improvement in Speaking Participation and Confidence

The study's findings indicate that students' speaking abilities have gradually improved, despite no discernible improvement in linguistic domains like grammar and vocabulary mastery. Table.4 show that at the beginning of the role-playing exercises, students hardly ever spoke spontaneously and instead tended to simply mimic the teacher's utterances. Pupils started answering basic questions from peers or the teacher, completing brief conversations with less help, and expressing basic opinions using expressions like "I think" and "In my opinion,". The frequency of the teacher offering help and prompts declined over time, according to observation results. Compared to the early learning phases, students were able to participate in basic conversations more independently in the study's last sessions.

Table 4. Observational Results

Data Source	Findings
Interview	"Although the progress was not very significant, I could see some improvements. He is more confident in saying some simple sentences independently now."
Teacher's Field Notes	Meeting 1: "Students only repeat sentences modeled by the teacher and still need a lot of help to speak."
	Meeting 3: "Student is able to speak one or two simple sentences during role-play."
	Meeting 5: "Student can express simple opinions using some of the vocabulary they have learned."
	Meeting 6: "Student is able to complete simple dialogues with less assistance."
Observation	The frequency of teacher assistance decreases gradually during the implementation of the role-play.

The findings of this study support previous research showing that students' communication skills often develop first in terms of speaking confidence, participation, and independence in interaction, rather than in the mastery of more complex grammar or vocabulary (Pandu Rudy Widyatama*1, Muhajir2, 2025). Studies on the teaching of spoken English confirm that oral skills require specific pedagogical support and often develop through gradual practice in real-life interactive contexts (Sawalmeh & Dey, 2023). The psycholinguistic perspective also suggests that language acquisition occurs through comprehensible input and activities such as role-play; therefore, it is natural for students to first imitate, then answer simple questions, express basic opinions, and eventually become more independent in conversation (Dey & Sawalmeh, 2021; Tajik et al., 2024).

This study's findings show that a combination of meaningful communicative contexts, scaffolding via modeling and cue cards, and consistent positive reinforcement helps students with intellectual disabilities develop speaking skills through role-play. Although improvements in linguistic aspects such as grammar and vocabulary are still limited, students showed growth in self-confidence, participation, and willingness to use English. In inclusive education, the success of speaking instruction is measured not only by linguistic accuracy, but also by students' ability to participate, interact, and communicate independently. Furthermore, emotional support and positive reinforcement from teachers have been shown to increase students' motivation and self-confidence, whereas structured scaffolding promotes independence and engagement in learning. Thus, role-playing is an effective and inclusive strategy for promoting speaking skills in students with intellectual disabilities.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that the development of English speaking skills among students with intellectual disabilities through role-play activities depends not only on the use of this method but also on the supporting strategies implemented by teachers during the learning process. The findings reveal that teachers employed several key strategies, namely providing meaningful communicative contexts through

simplified role-play scenarios, offering scaffolding via modeling and cue cards, and consistently providing positive reinforcement to enhance student participation and self-confidence. Although significant improvements in speaking ability have not yet been observed in linguistic aspects, students demonstrate gradual progress in their willingness to speak, participation during learning, and willingness to use English in simple dialogues with decreasing levels of teacher assistance.

These findings confirm that, in the context of inclusive education, the success of speaking instruction for students with intellectual disabilities is measured not only by linguistic accuracy but also by increased communicative engagement and self-confidence. Therefore, role-play can serve as an effective pedagogical strategy for creating more authentic learning experiences and supporting the development of speaking skills among students with special needs. However, since this study involved only one participant over a relatively short period, future research is recommended to include more participants and a longer observation period to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of role-play in English language learning in inclusive classrooms.

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