

# Applying Role-Play as an Active Learning Activity to Stimulate English Speaking of Undergraduate Students

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Received June 25, 2023 Revised July 27, 2023; Accepted April 25, 2023

## Abstract

Role-play induces positive effects on stimulating English speaking of undergraduate students. This quantitative research was conducted to examine how the role-play influenced to the undergraduate students on English speaking. The population comprised of 158 undergraduate students who enrolled a general English communication course in the second semester of the 2022 academic year at Udon Thani Rajabhat University. Applying the cluster sampling and the lottery method, 76 undergraduate students were selected as samples of this study. A research instrument was an online questionnaire with 10 close-ended questions derived from the five point Likert scale. Data analysis was completed by means of descriptive statistics like mean and standard deviation. Results revealed that the role-play as an active learning activity affected to the undergraduate students' overall satisfaction at the high level ( $4.18 \pm 0.44$ ). Regarding the 10 close-ended questions, the first three items which were the most satisfied by the undergraduate students were respectively reported as follows: (1) the role-play helped the undergraduate students speak English more naturally ( $4.20 \pm 0.64$ ); (2) the role-play promoted the undergraduate students to achieve better articulation ( $4.20 \pm 0.81$ ); and (3) the role-play gave the undergraduate students more comprehension on English speaking ( $4.19 \pm 0.19$ ). The acquired results are useful for developing the general English communication course and as a database for creating other interesting active learning activities in English speaking class.

**Keywords:** Role-play, Active learning, Undergraduate student

## Introduction

Speaking is a crucial skill for students to acquire, as it forms an essential part of the process of constructing and understanding meaning. As Brown (2001) suggests; speaking involves the production, receipt and interpretation of spoken sounds. Similarly, Cameron (2005) posits that speaking is a means of expressing ideas in a way that others can comprehend. In essence, speaking is a critical tool for interpersonal communication. However, teaching speaking skills in the classroom can be a challenging task for educators. Many students are often hesitant to voice their thoughts in class, showing a low level of motivation. Nunan (1993) identifies these as common

challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where students often revert to their native languages due to a lack of motivation or confidence. For effective improvement of students' speaking skills, teachers must employ appropriate teaching techniques. The responsibility of crafting an engaging teaching and learning process lies heavily with the educator.

In this research, the role-play method is selected as a potential solution to the speaking problem. As suggested by Harmer (2007), role-play can simulate real-world scenarios, giving students the chance to practice communication in various social contexts and roles, an idea also supported by Larsen-Freeman (2000). The pedagogical strategy of role-play has emerged as a potential solution to these challenges. Rooted in the social nature of learning, role-play emphasizes interactive engagement, fostering an environment that stimulates learners both intellectually and socially (Jarvis et. al., 2002). This teaching method encourages active participation, enhances learners' interest, and ensures that students are not passive observers but active contributors to the learning process. Schaap (2005) discovered that role-playing has a higher likelihood of encouraging active learning among undergraduate students compared to traditional university lectures. When implemented correctly, role-play as an instructional method offers several benefits. Primarily, it can heighten students' engagement in classroom activities. As Poorman (2002) noted, incorporating hands-on learning experiences in the classroom piques interest in the subject and improves understanding of course content. Furthermore, role-playing enhances students' participation in the learning process. Instead of merely absorbing information from the instructor, they become active contributors. Besides, genuine learning is impossible when students are merely passive spectators of the teaching process. Additionally, role-playing equips students to handle real-life clinical situations that call for psychiatric nursing interventions more effectively, competently and empathetically. According to Riera et al. (2010), learning via role-playing helps students grow more confident and reduce anxiety. Additionally, role-playing fosters creativity, sharpens perception enables learners to comprehend group dynamics, promotes individual autonomy, and enhances their communication skills (Manzoor et al., 2011).

In a rapidly globalizing world, fluency in English as a second language is increasingly viewed as a critical asset. However, teaching English especially the spoken form poses significant challenges for educators, particularly in non-native English speaking environments. One of the primary issues that educators face is the reluctance of students to actively participate in speaking exercises, stemming from low motivation, lack of confidence or anxiety. This has significant implications for learners' ability to express ideas and engage in meaningful communication. While prior studies have established the benefits of role-play in medical education and other fields, less is known about its effectiveness in English language teaching, particularly in boosting EFL students' speaking abilities and confidence at the tertiary level. This research aims to fill this gap by delving into how role-play can stimulate real-world scenarios, enabling students to practice communication in different social contexts, thereby enhancing their intellectual skills focusing on speaking skills.

## Research Objective

The objective of this research was to examine how role-play affected undergraduate students' satisfaction on English speaking.

## Literature Review

Role-play is a valuable strategy for improving students' speaking abilities as it gives them abundant opportunities to embody diverse characters. Numerous studies have been conducted to explore various facets of role-play techniques in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This section provides an overview of some of these studies.

Liu and Ding (2009) implemented the role-play method to examine students' group performance when asked to act out a situation they were familiar with. They evaluated the students' language proficiency, analyzed the errors made and considered how feedback could aid in rectifying these errors and fostering further improvement. They observed that students responded positively when provided with familiar scenarios. Instead of providing immediate feedback, they suggested showing the students video recordings of their performances, accompanied by verbal feedback for self or peer-correction. In our study, we adopted a similar feedback strategy and observed that the students performed effectively when they acted out familiar scenarios. Upon reviewing their recorded performances with oral feedback, their performances showed noticeable improvement.

In his 2011 study, Xu experimented with role-play among intermediate-level students, noting that it could boost students' awareness of other cultures and enhance their overall communication skills. He argued that assuming another culture's role encourages experimentation and provides a meaningful learning context for both participants and observers. Xu also suggested that content-based role-plays allow students to delve deeply into another culture from multiple viewpoints. English speakers should possess the ability to express themselves correctly and comprehend the grammatical, strategic, and sociolinguistic factors related to any situation, which reflects a higher level of communicative competence. In our case study, we noticed a similar enhancement in communication. However, as our participants were native English speakers, they had minimal difficulties expressing themselves accurately in English.

Yuliana et al. (2014) argue that students taught through role-play displayed better results compared to those taught using the information gap technique. This is

attributed to the unique strategy employed by role-play. It offers students a platform to enhance their active participation in the educational process, providing a conducive environment to exercise their speaking skills, especially in front of the class. In essence, the role-play aids students in bolstering their speaking proficiency.

Similarly, Krebt (2017) discovered that role-play led to an improvement in the performance of Iraqi students studying English as a Foreign Language, especially during speaking tests. It appears that the students in the experimental group excelled owing to their involvement in and practice of role-play techniques such as group work and peer interaction. This suggests that when a classroom is structured as a collaborative community working towards shared goals, it promotes mutual understanding and interaction, forming a solid foundation for all learning. The findings of this study also substantiate that role-play techniques create an engaging environment for students, leading to improved attention and participation in learning. As students adopt new identities in role-play techniques, they acquire the ability to use a foreign language for everyday interactions.

Role playing is recognized as an instructional method that illustrates how individuals behave, respond, and communicate within social contexts (Acharya et al., 2018), thus promoting not only critical thinking but also the development of communication and interpersonal skills. Additionally, according to Rao & Stupans (2012), role playing offers a deeper understanding of the business environment, preparing students for real-world situations, problems, possible solutions and strategic approaches they may encounter in their professional lives. This teaching approach sharpens the skills needed for future employment (Ruhanen, 2006).

As Sogunro (2004) suggests, role playing enables students to perceive a situation from multiple viewpoints, rather than a singular perspective provided by a teacher or an individual. Hence, role playing is an influential active learning tool. Yet, it does come with limitations relating to students' diverse educational backgrounds (Qiu et al., 2018). Further research has employed role playing in marketing education to empower students to design positive customer experiences without constant teacher supervision (Paul & Ponnam, 2018).

Role playing is also advantageous in teaching business ethics (Souser & Sims, 2018). It aids students in comprehending the emotions, values, attitudes and non-verbal cues that inform a business scenario. This becomes crucial in business education as role playing fosters cross-sectoral integration and familiarizes students with the

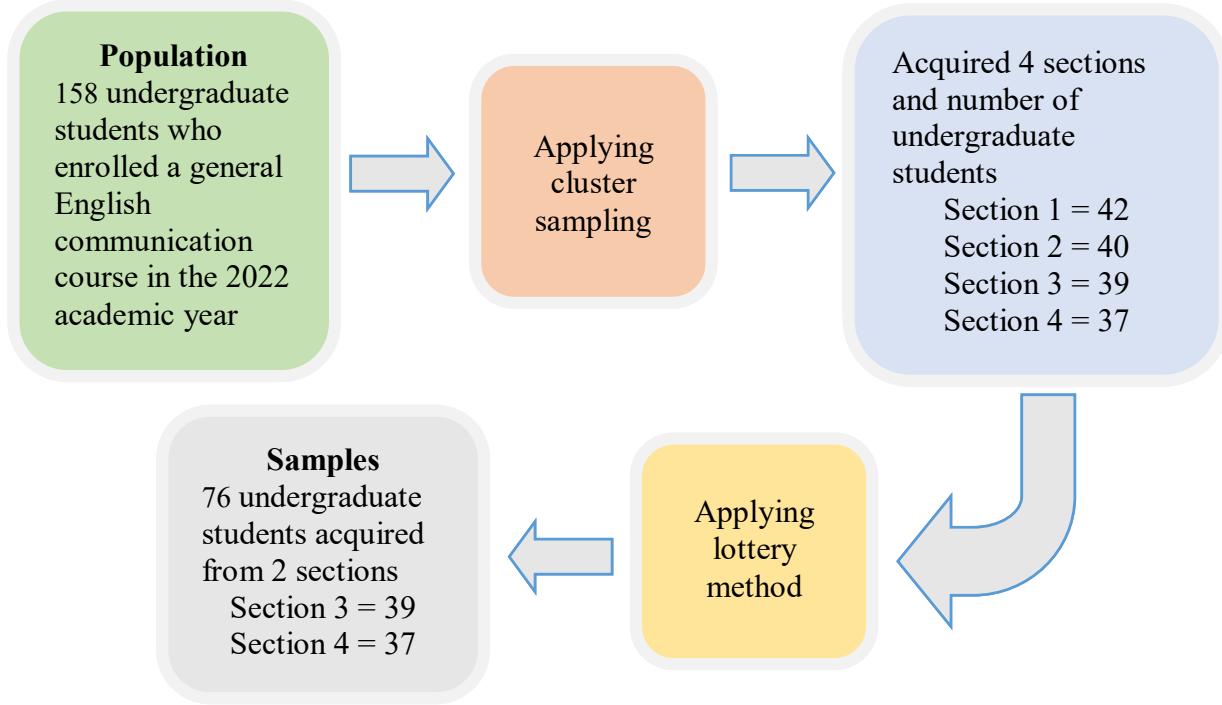
intricacies of decision-making (Ferrero et al., 2018). According to Alkin & Christie (2002), role playing is an effective teaching tool for conflict resolution, equipping students with essential skills for successful conflict management. Based on these studies, role playing not only increases intellectual skills, i.e. language skills, but also induces social skills and collaborative work to students. Students acquire these skills when working in team and then learn how to adapt themselves to facilitate all learning activities with satisfactory learning environment. Role playing induces positive effects in multidimensional perspectives, so a recommendation for applying role playing in speaking class is emphasized. This study highlighted on only intellectual skills in respect of speaking skill which the outcome acquired was a reflection of success of the general English communication course.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **1. Population and Samples**

The population of this study comprised of 158 undergraduate students who enrolled a general English communication course in the second semester of the 2022 academic year at Udon Thani Rajabhat University. These populations were in different college years and majors. Utilizing the cluster sampling, the population was divided into four sections and each section had different number of undergraduate students. sequence of the undergraduate students enrolling the course, the first 42 undergraduate students were placed in Section 1 whereas Section 2 was fulfilled with 40 undergraduate students. Section 3 was found to involve with 39 undergraduate students while the last group, Section 4 included 37 undergraduate students.

To acquire the samples, the lottery method was employed. Under this method, the last two groups, Section 3 with 39 undergraduate students and Section 4 with 37 undergraduate students, were selected as samples of this study. According to this, the total number of samples was 76. Summarized details regarding selection of population and samples are demonstrated in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1** Stages of Selecting Population and Samples

## 2. A Research Instrument

This study contained an online questionnaire as an only research instrument. Designed by based on the Google Forms, the online questionnaire included 10 close-ended questions inspecting undergraduate students' satisfaction with role-play. These questions were derived from the five point Likert scale with interpretation of the five point Likert interval as follows: 5 = strongly agree (4.21-5.00), 4 = agree (3.41-4.20), 3 = neutral (2.61-3.40), 2 = disagree (1.81-2.60), and 1 = strongly disagree (1.00-1.80), respectively. The online questionnaire was qualified through pilot study with eleven undergraduate students. Then, it was validated to find reliability. According to Cronbach's alpha coefficient, it showed 0.84, meaning that the online questionnaire was appropriate to apply with the samples.

## 3. Data Collection

Collecting data of this study was completed according to the following five stages. The first stage was discussion of all teachers of the general English communication course, purposing to develop the course. The discussion came to an end that previous achievement of the undergraduate students who had studied in the course was still unsatisfactory, particularly with English speaking. Due to this, all the teachers agreed to add on an active learning activity for stimulating and strengthening the undergraduate students' English speaking. Among various speaking activities, role playing was determined, as its vital benefit highlights on elevating the undergraduate students as an active learner. This agreement led to the second stage, i.e. searching related data, document and literature from several sources. All the data then were assembled for designing a research as the next stage. Based on the research objective, this study was designed as a quantitative research which an online questionnaire was included as the research instrument.

The flawless questionnaire was applied with the samples. Finally, the data acquired was analyzed and reported as quantitative data. Conclusion of the data collection is simply seen in Figure 2.

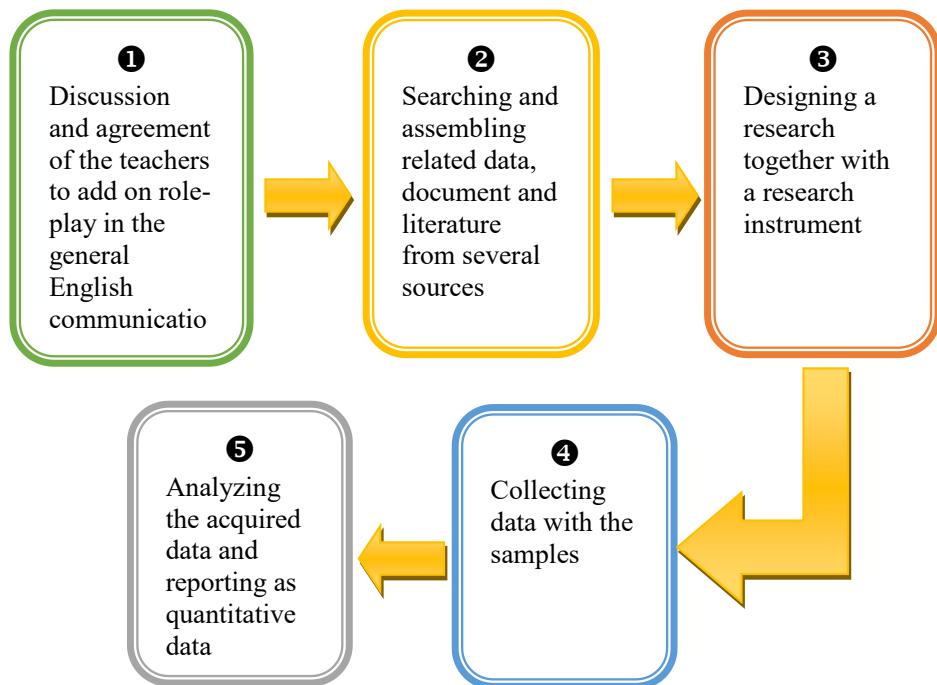


Fig. 2 Stages of Data Collection

#### 4. Data analysis

Since this study was designed as a quantitative research, completion of the data analysis was based on descriptive statistics like mean and standard deviation. Besides, the analysis results were reported as quantitative data.

#### Research Results

Role-play as an active learning activity could stimulate undergraduate students to speak English. With reference to the online questionnaire's results, all the samples, i.e. 76 undergraduate students gave responses to the online questionnaire. The results showed that the role-play affected to the overall satisfaction of the undergraduate students at the high level ( $4.18 \pm 0.44$ ). In regard to the questionnaire's 10 close-ended questions, they were all satisfied at the high level too. Among these questions, the first three items most satisfied by the undergraduate students were: (1) the role-play helped the undergraduate students speak English more naturally ( $4.20 \pm 0.64$ ) (2) the role-play promoted the undergraduate students to achieve better articulation ( $4.20 \pm 0.81$ ) and (3) the role-play gave the undergraduate students more comprehension on English speaking ( $4.19 \pm 0.19$ ) respectively.

Other seven items were also revealed. These items were respectively reported as follows: (1) the role-play reduced English speaking mistakes of the undergraduate students ( $4.19 \pm 0.23$ ); (2) the role-play enabled the undergraduate students to answer any questions in English ( $4.19 \pm 0.78$ ); (3) the role-play made the undergraduate students able to construct various English questions

( $4.18 \pm 0.26$ ); (4) the role-play supported the undergraduate students to speak English more correctly ( $4.18 \pm 0.31$ ); (5) the role-play improved the undergraduate students' overall speaking skills ( $4.17 \pm 0.21$ ); (6) the undergraduate students could apply conversations from the role-play to use in everyday life ( $4.17 \pm 0.49$ ); and (7) the role-play enabled the undergraduate students to speak English with foreigners ( $4.17 \pm 0.52$ ). Details of the results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Undergraduate Students' Satisfaction with Role-play

Content	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpretation
1. The role-play helped the undergraduate students speak English more naturally.	4.20	0.64	High
2. The role-play promoted the undergraduate students to achieve better articulation.	4.20	0.81	High
3. The role-play gave the undergraduate students more comprehension on English speaking.	4.19	0.19	High
4. The role-play reduced English speaking mistakes of the undergraduate students.	4.19	0.23	High
5. The role-play enabled the undergraduate students to answer any questions in English.	4.19	0.78	High
6. The role-play made the undergraduate students able to construct various English questions.	4.18	0.26	High
7. The role-play supported the undergraduate students to speak English more correctly.	4.18	0.31	High
8. The role-play improved the undergraduate students' overall speaking skills.	4.17	0.21	High
9. The undergraduate students could apply conversations from the role-play to use in everyday life.	4.17	0.49	High
10. The role-play enabled the undergraduate students to speak English with foreigners.	4.17	0.52	High
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.18</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>High</b>

Some pictures of the undergraduate students who had performed through the role-play were also displayed. These pictures represented four groups of the undergraduate students performing four performances. The first group performed a twisted and comedic story named Romance of Sakai or Ngo Pa in Thai language (Figure 3) while the second group presented a performance called The Star; a story of a girl group who tried to chase their dream as a pop star (Figure 4). The third group performed a story of The Golden Goby Fish known as Pla Boo Thong in Thai language (Figure 5), and the last group showed a comedic story named Isan Life and the Idol; telling a story of a famous idol from a civilized country who must spend his lifetime among folkways of northeastern Thai people (Figure 6). All these pictures were respectively shown as the following.



**Fig. 3** shows reactions of the undergraduate students after performing the role-play called Romance of Sakai or Ngo Pa in Thai language.



**Fig. 4** presents a dancing scene, one of important scenes of the role-play named The Star.



Fig. 5 displays a fight between the hero and the villain on a rainy day, one scene of the role-play called The Golden Goby Fish known as Pla Boo Thong in Thai language.



Fig. 6 demonstrates a group of the undergraduate students taking a picture after performing the role-play named Isan Life and the Idol.

## Discussions

Role-play could be one of good active learning activities that helps stimulate English speaking of undergraduate students. It was evidenced by the undergraduate students' overall satisfaction indicated at the high level ( $4.18\pm0.44$ ). It signifies that the role-play provides the undergraduate students with satisfactory English speaking results. In this study, the satisfactory English speaking results are in terms of intellectual skills stimulation in such positive ways as speaking English more naturally, acquisition of better articulation, acquisition of more comprehension on English speaking, reducing English speaking mistakes, capability of answering English questions, ability to construct English questions, speaking English more correctly, improving the overall speaking skills, capacity to apply conversations from the role-play to use in daily life, and ability to speak English with foreigners. Improvement of these skills can generate continuation of English speaking and inspiration to further English speaking knowledge to accomplish the oriented goal. This finding is consistent with Roengrit et al. (2023) who improved the English speaking ability of sixth grade Thai students using the role-play technique. The study showed positive results as the achievement test score of the students' English speaking were found higher after learning through the role-play. Furthermore, the role-play engaged the students with more fluency in English public speaking. Accordingly, the role-play is an alternative means for teaching in English speaking class in which the students acquire English speaking towards hands-on experience.

Role-play induces improvement of intellectual skills in multidimensional ways as mentioned earlier; however, only the first three intellectual skills most satisfied by the undergraduate students were discussed individually and respectively. These details were shown as follows. Role-play stimulates the undergraduate students to speak English more naturally, affirmed by the undergraduate students' satisfaction at the high level ( $4.20\pm0.64$ ). Speaking English more naturally in this study focuses on frequency of using English to speak which grammatical mistakes are not too emphasized. In this case, the undergraduate students feel relaxed, comfortable and carefree to produce the English language based on their own English background, leading to positive attitude about English learning. This is in line with Maftuna (2023) who employed the role-play to enhance students' English speaking, reporting that the role-play helped enhance the students' English speaking ability as they had better scores on posttest. Also, frequency of using English to speak with their friends in a class was found in an increasing rate due to positive learning environment. According to this, giving students English-speaking learning environment based on communication rather than grammatical accuracy should be flexible.

Role-play promotes the undergraduate students to achieve better articulation. According to the average score of this part specified at the high level ( $4.20\pm0.81$ ), it implies the undergraduate students agreed that their English pronunciation becomes better after learning through the role-play. A reason for this might be because the role-play of this study does not focus on accents but rather on word stress instead. Consequently, the undergraduate students

reduce worries about the accents and feel free to practice pronouncing English words based on their Thai accent but with accurate English word stress. Abdessallam et al. (2023) who studied about the importance of role-playing activities in developing students' speaking competence also pointed out that the role-playing activities are beneficial to students in English speaking. Despite the role-playing activities give the students more positive effects on English speaking when their English pronunciation becomes clear and comprehensible to listeners. Sometimes, some accuracy of English speaking like accents and grammatical structure should be flexible as these might block the students' capability.

Role-play gave the undergraduate students more comprehension on English speaking. This is reliable because the undergraduate students' satisfaction stated in this part was at the high level ( $4.19 \pm 0.19$ ). Acquisition of English speaking skills in all perspectives like word stress, accents, intonation, vocabulary and fluency makes the undergraduate students see important relationship between English speaking and role-play in which they are capable of integrating all these knowledges to produce the role-play. Lahbibi and Farhane (2023) studying the impact of role-play on enhancing EFL students' interaction in English also affirmed that giving necessary English speaking skills to EFL students before letting them construct the role-play is very important. Reactions of the EFL students whose English speaking knowledge has been fulfilled tend to have positive attitude with the role-play. This positive attitude is based from comprehension, so engaging the students with this regard is useful.

### **Knowledge from the Research**

Role-play helps stimulate English speaking of undergraduate students in such various ways as: speaking English more naturally, acquisition of better articulation, acquisition of more comprehension on English speaking, reducing English speaking mistakes, capability of answering English questions, ability to construct English questions, speaking English more correctly, improving the overall speaking skills, capacity to apply conversations from the role-play to use in daily life, and ability to speak English with foreigners. These skills present development of intellectual skills which engage the undergraduate students with active learning, so the role-play is an alternative means to bolster the undergraduate students' learning behavior as an active learner. Knowledge from the study is visualized in Figure 7.

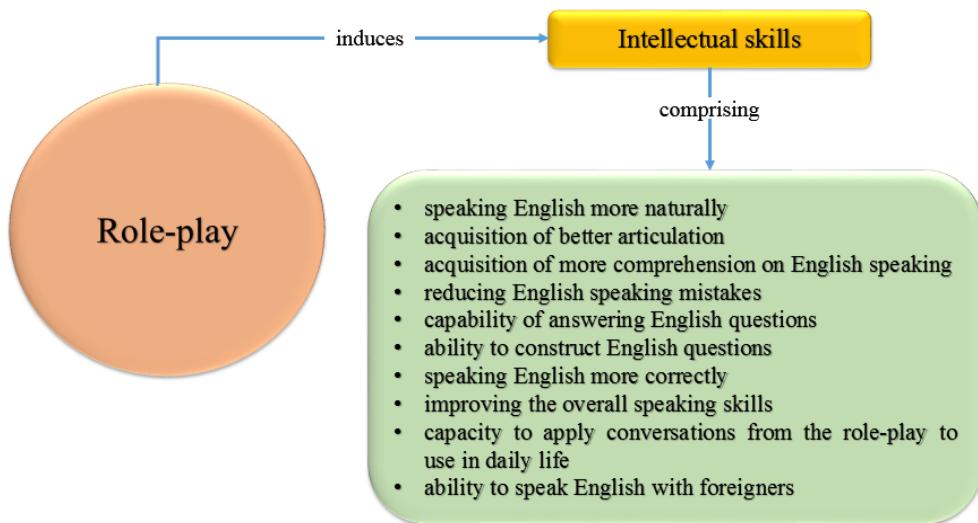


Fig. 7 Knowledge from the Study

### Conclusion

Role-play induces positive effects on stimulating English speaking of undergraduate students. Based on the online questionnaire's overall results, it revealed that the role-play affected the undergraduate students' satisfaction at the high level ( $4.18\pm0.44$ ). In terms of the 10 close-ended questions of the online questionnaire, it reported that: (1) the role-play helped the undergraduate students speak English more naturally ( $4.20\pm0.64$ ); (2) the role-play promoted the undergraduate students to achieve better articulation ( $4.20\pm0.81$ ); and (3) the role-play gave the undergraduate students more comprehension on English speaking ( $4.19\pm0.19$ ); (4) the role-play reduced English speaking mistakes of the undergraduate students ( $4.19\pm0.23$ ); (5) the role-play enabled the undergraduate students to answer any questions in English ( $4.19\pm0.78$ ); (6) the role-play made the undergraduate students able to construct various English questions ( $4.18\pm0.26$ ); (7) the role-play supported the undergraduate students to speak English more correctly ( $4.18\pm0.31$ ); (8) the role-play improved the undergraduate students' overall speaking skills ( $4.17\pm0.21$ ); (9) the undergraduate students could apply conversations from the role-play to use in everyday life ( $4.17\pm0.49$ ); and (10) the role-play enabled the undergraduate students to speak English with foreigners ( $4.17\pm0.52$ ), respectively. These results are intellectual skills which support the undergraduate students to accomplish the role-play through active learning. Due to this, it is interesting to apply the role-play as an active learning activity in speaking class.

## Suggestions

Although this study produces positive effects, some recommendations are presented for further study. They are: (1) role-play and development of emotional quotients should be examined; (2) gender of target population should be compared to find different results; and (3) open-ended questions and interview should be applied to acquire additional results.

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