Enhancing Purposive Communication Students' Interpersonal Communication Skills through Role-Playing in the Classroom

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Abstract

This qualitative action research explored the use of role-playing as a pedagogical tool to strengthen interpersonal communication skills among Purposive Communication students across four sections at La Salle University–Ozamiz. Observations indicated that students often experienced anxiety, limited participation, and difficulty expressing empathy in interpersonal interactions. Over several weeks, structured role-playing activities were implemented, combining online discussions in Canvas Breakout Rooms and live classroom performances, to provide experiential opportunities for practicing verbal expression, active listening, empathetic responses, and confidence in communication. Data were collected through classroom observations, student reflective journals, focus group discussions, and the teacher-researcher's reflective notes. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: increased communication confidence, enhanced empathy and perspective-taking, improved listening behaviors, and heightened classroom engagement. Findings suggest that role-playing is an effective experiential strategy for developing interpersonal competence in higher education contexts. Implications for practice include integrating role-playing in communication curricula to foster reflective, confident, and collaborative learners.

Keywords: Role-Playing, Interpersonal Communication, Experiential Learning, Qualitative Action Research, Higher Education, Purposive Communication

1. Introduction

Interpersonal communication is central to the curriculum of Purposive Communication courses. Students are expected to articulate ideas clearly, engage in active listening, respond appropriately, and demonstrate empathy in various contexts. Despite structured classroom discussions and oral presentations, many students exhibit anxiety, hesitation, and difficulty engaging meaningfully in peer interactions.

Role-playing, an experiential learning strategy, allows students to practice communication behaviors in realistic, yet safe, scenarios. By assuming roles, students simulate real-life interactions, reflect on their performance, and develop interpersonal skills. This study investigated how role-playing could strengthen

interpersonal communication among Purposive Communication students, addressing both affective and behavioral aspects of competence.

The Problem

To guide this study and focus on students' experiences, the following research questions were formulated. These questions aim to examine the effects of role-playing on interpersonal communication, the specific skills that are enhanced, and students' perceptions of this learning strategy: In this light, these questions were taken into consideration: 1) How does role-playing influence students' interpersonal communication in the classroom?; 2) What specific interpersonal communication skills are improved through role-playing activities?; 3)How do students perceive role-playing as a learning strategy for communication development?; 4)What themes emerge from students' reflections regarding their communication experiences?

The Literature

Interpersonal communication involves the exchange of meaning through verbal and nonverbal channels. Competence in this domain is developed through both practice and reflection (Rost, 2013). Experiential strategies such as role-playing provide opportunities for learners to enact real-life situations, enhancing confidence, empathy, listening, and engagement (Gardner & Korth, 2019; Huang, 2021).

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory underpins this study, positing that learning occurs through concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and experimentation. Previous studies indicate that role-playing promotes psychological safety, motivation, and metacognitive reflection (Li & Walsh, 2019; Moon, 2013). Empirical evidence supports the integration of role-playing in higher education communication curricula to foster relational competence, emotional intelligence, and authentic engagement (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2018; Fletcher, 2018).

The Method

This study employed qualitative action research, following a cyclical model of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The teacher-researcher implemented role-playing activities to address observed communication challenges and systematically documented student experiences.

Participants were students enrolled in **four sections of Purposive Communication** at La Salle University–Ozamiz. Participation was voluntary, and ethical guidelines were strictly observed.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Students were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research before the implementation of role-playing activities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that their participation would not affect their course grades. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms in all reports, reflective journals, and focus group discussion excerpts. The teacher-researcher ensured that all data were used solely for academic and research purposes in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Multiple qualitative data sources ensured triangulation: **Classroom Observations:** Teacher-researcher documented students' verbal expression, active listening, empathy, responsiveness, and confidence. **Student Reflective Journals:** Students responded to prompts after each role-playing activity,

reflecting on challenges, successes, and personal growth. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Selected students participated in guided conversations about their experiences and **Teacher Reflective Journal:** Documented instructional insights, student engagement, and observed behavioral changes.

The role-playing activities implemented in this study were derived from **Module 6 of the Purposive Communication course**, which focuses on communication aids and strategies in presentations. The learning process followed a **blended instructional approach** that combined **online collaboration in Canvas Breakout Rooms (BR)** and **onsite live performance**.

Initial discussions and preparation were conducted through breakout rooms, where students worked in small groups to analyze assigned topics, plan their scenarios, and prepare role-playing scripts. The breakout room topics included:

• **BR1 – Communication Aids and Strategies**

• **BR2 – Preparing Multimedia Presentations**

• **BR3 – Avoiding the Worst PowerPoint Presentation**

• **BR4 – How Technology Affects Communication**

• **BR5 – Ways Technology Changed Communication**

• **BR6 – Summary of the Entire Presentation**

After completing online preparations, students performed their **live role-playing presentations during onsite class sessions**. Each session followed four stages: **orientation, preparation in breakout rooms, live performance in class, and guided reflection**, allowing students to practice interpersonal communication skills, receive feedback, and reflect on their learning.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): transcription, coding, categorization, theme identification, and interpretation in relation to research questions. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility (triangulation), dependability (systematic documentation), confirmability (verbatim excerpts), and transferability (rich contextual descriptions).

Themes that emerged include Theme 1: Increased Communication Confidence because students reported feeling more confident in expressing ideas:

"Before role-playing, I was afraid to speak because I thought I might say something wrong. After the activities, I started sharing my ideas confidently." – Student A

Theme 2: Enhanced Empathy and Perspective-Taking Students described understanding others' perspectives more effectively:

"Playing the role of a customer in the conflict scenario helped me understand how others feel when ignored. I now listen more carefully." – Student C

Theme 3: Improved Listening Behaviors

Students reflected on enhanced listening skills:

"During the scenarios, I had to pay close attention to my partner to respond correctly. I learned that listening is as important as speaking." – Student F

Theme 4: Heightened Classroom Engagement

Students became more active and collaborative:

"I look forward to class now because we practice real-life scenarios. It makes learning communication exciting." – Student H

The findings align with international literature emphasizing experiential strategies in communication education. Increased confidence mirrors studies highlighting the importance of psychological safety and practice (Fletcher, 2018; Li & Walsh, 2019). Enhanced empathy resonates with research on emotional intelligence and perspective-taking through role enactment (Gardner & Korth, 2019; Sato & Ballinger, 2019). Improvements in listening behaviors correspond with findings by Rost (2013) and Vandergrift & Goh (2012), while heightened engagement supports active learning literature (Prince, 2004; Huang & Liang, 2022).

As to Pedagogical Implications, the study presents that structured role-playing can be integrated as a core instructional strategy, reflection should accompany enactment for metacognitive development, classrooms should maintain psychological safety to encourage risk-taking and structured role-play scenarios should model authentic real-world communication contexts.

2. Conclusion

Role-playing effectively strengthened interpersonal communication skills among Purposive Communication students across four sections. The study demonstrates that qualitative action research can provide rich, actionable insights into instructional strategies. By fostering confidence, empathy, listening, and engagement, role-playing serves as a practical and theoretically grounded approach for higher education communication curricula.

This study was conducted with four sections of Purposive Communication students, which improves the diversity of perspectives but may still limit generalizability beyond this institution. Data collection relied primarily on qualitative methods such as classroom observations, reflective journals, and focus group discussions, which could be influenced by participant subjectivity. Additionally, the role-playing intervention was limited to topics in Module 6 and implemented within a single semester. Future studies could include students from multiple courses, institutions, or longer intervention periods to strengthen the evidence of role-playing effectiveness.

3. Recommendations for Practice / Future Research

Based on the findings, educators are encouraged to integrate structured role-playing activities across communication curricula to enhance students' interpersonal competence. Reflection and guided feedback may accompany each activity to deepen learning. Future research may explore the effects of role-playing on other communication skills, incorporate quantitative measures, or examine its impact in different disciplines and institutional settings to further validate and expand upon these results.

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