Fostering pre-service EFL teachers' communicative competence through role-playing games

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Abstract

The quality of foreign language teaching (FLT) is inextricably linked with developing students' communicative competence (CC), a complex formation that is being comprehended by methodologists. The term "communicative competence" (CC) implies the speaker's production of grammatically correct language appropriate to various social settings while observing the linguistic and social rules of native speakers. Despite the complex structure of developing English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' CC, one of the conditions for its successful course is a systemic and technological approach to role-playing games (RPG) in teaching dialogue speech. The study aims to examine the development of EFL students' CC and the effects of RPG in teaching dialogue speech. To test the hypothesis that a systemic and technological approach to using RPG in teaching dialogue speech fosters the pre-service EFL teachers' CC, the research methodology employed a semi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design with pre-service EFL teachers. Participants (n=36) were divided into experimental (n=18) and control (n=18) groups. The results of the posttest experiment confirmed the effectiveness of systemic and technological approaches to the use of RPG in significantly increasing the pre-service EFL teachers' CC.

Keywords: Communicative competence, Dialogue speech, Pre-service teachers, Role-playing games, Teaching English as a foreign language.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature
This study experimentally tested the research hypothesis that a systemic and technological approach to role-playing games in teaching dialogue speech fosters the pre-service EFL teachers' communicative competence.

1. Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) indicates the relevance and demand for developing students' communicative competence (CC). According to a survey conducted by Oxford University Press among more than five hundred EFL teachers worldwide, the most serious problem EFL teachers have faced is forming students' communicative competence (Fedorova, Stepanova, & Novikova, 2017).

Each student is assigned a certain social role in establishing educational communication for which role-playing games (RPG) appear to be indispensable. RPG demonstrates the moral value of an effective approach, a gamification tool for teaching modeling and simulation (imitation) of conditional real life situations (Soboleva, Galimova, Maydangalieva, & Batchayeva, 2018). Using RPG in modern EFL practice remains primarily traditional which is comprehensible for non-linguistic university students. Language students must make deliberate use of both systemic and technological approaches to increase the effectiveness of using RPG in developing pre-service EFL teachers' CC.

In this regard, the study aims to examine the development of EFL students' communicative competence (CC) and the effects of RPG in teaching dialogue speech. Its goal is to respond to the following question:

RQ. How efficient is the use of RPG in fostering the communicative competence (CC) of pre-service EFL teachers?

The hypothesis is that a systemic and technological approach using RPG in teaching dialogue speech will significantly foster pre-service EFL teachers' communicative competence (CC).

2. Literature Review

Students' communicative competence (CC) has a complex structure consisting of many elements (Sazonova, 2019; Yingting, Nair, & Wider, 2022). Fostering pre-service EFL teachers' communicative competence (CC) includes the following structural components (general competencies): pragmatic competence (Eldarova & Murtazayeva, 2020; Zolotov, 2020), compensatory competence (Moskov & Likhacheva, 2018; Radiyonova & Samatova, 2017), cultural competence (Babiyeva & Ergeshova, 2021), strategic competence (Danko & Buteva, 2018; Samoylova, 2021), socio-cultural competence (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2022; Zavyalova, 2014) and linguistic competence (Korneeva, Zelenina, & Vosiyeva, 2020; Krasnoshchekova, 2018; Siregar, 2022; Thao, Yen, Khang, Khoi, & Quyen, 2022).

In addition to the general competencies, the development of pre-service EFL teachers' communicative competence (CC) includes many other additional special competencies: phonetic competence (Soklakova, 2017), translation competence (Zhuravleva, 2014), discursive competence (Makoedova, 2017), language competence (Baimenova, 2016), grammatical competence (Strakatova, 2020), genre competence (Kolesnikova, 2012), lexical competence (Shmakova, 2015) and linguistic and cultural competence (Mironova, 2014). As stated by Goncharova (2019), "foreign language communicative competence (CC) includes linguistic (rules of language), sociolinguistic (rules of dialect speech), discursive (rules for constructing a semantic statement) and strategic (rules for maintaining contact with the interlocutor) competences" (p. 147-148). Voronova and Mayevskaya (2015) stated that the CC structures have common and different components after studying various models of CC in foreign languages. Recent studies have confirmed that the foreign language CC has multiple components but there are significant differences in what those components are and how they interact with each other. All writers emphasize the importance of linguistic competence (knowledge of phonetics, grammar and vocabulary) in communication while others emphasize sociolinguistic and strategic (compensatory) competencies considering the socio-cultural specifics of communication and efficient communication strategies. Several writers state discursive (communicative use of language), pragmatic (achieving a communicative goal), social, educational and cognitive competencies" (Voronova & Mayevskaya, 2015). Thus, there is no unified structure of CC in EFL studies and researchers continue exploring and identifying invariant structural and variable components of foreign language CC. Kazanskaya (2021) stated that the structure and content of a linguistic personality's CC are significantly changing due to the digitalization processes. In partially distant learning, the socio-cultural context of communication is replaced by a virtual one.

A systemic approach implies that the structure of CC and its specific components identify external connections between CC and other competencies.

It can be difficult to balance the development of CC and other competencies as they do not develop simultaneously or quickly. Instead, attention is given to the development of linguistic competence while other competencies remain in the "didactic shadow". Thus, "the developed dissonance needs to be addressed and erased" (Olginskaya, 2014). CC in foreign languages is connected with intercultural competence (Annenkova, 2020; Khokhlenkova, 2016; Kolmakova, 2022; Nyshanbai, 2021).

At the beginning of the 1970s, second and foreign language teaching was influenced by the theory of CC (Hymes, 1972) and the psycholinguistic theory of natural second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982; Mori, 2002). These two theories highlighted the importance of authentic and real life citations in FLT (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) enables foreign language learners to use their knowledge (Richards & Renandya, 2002). One should distinguish between various grammatical rules and know how to use the rules effectively when communicating (Nunan, 1989). Three aspects of CLT were performance, authenticity and real-life outcomes (Fulcher, 2000) in which language was seen as a dynamic resource for creating meaning. Language in CLT was focused more on communication than on language elements. CLT gave rise to task-based language teaching (TBLT).

TBLT provided various instructional activities and guidance for the teacher (Cook, 2001). According to Nunan (1989), a task involves various elements such as input, activities, goals, roles and settings. A dialogue (a reading

passage) is an example of verbal input data while a picture is an example of non-verbal input data. Activities begin what the learners are to do with the input, goal and roles for teachers and learners. A setting refers to the classroom or any other place for learning. Role-playing is one of the most advised activities in TBLT which includes a variety of other activities (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010). RPG is an effective way to teach foreign languages to develop students' CC (Eichman, 2015; Gez, 2014; Maksimova, 2014; Panova & Kryukova, 2021). Game applications such as "memorise", " the phrasal verbs machine", "quizlet", " words", " sounds: pronunciation app" and " learn English with speaking pal" which are beneficial in enhancing communicative proficiency are actively being introduced in FLT along with RPG games (Osiyanova & Muratova, 2021). However, the need for parallel systemic and technological approaches to use RPG is a barrier to develop EFL learners' CC. The distinction between RPG and "modelling" is the veracity of the roles that students accept. In modelling, students play a natural role that occurs in real life such as shopping or ordering services (Zadvornova, 2009). In RPG, students take on roles that they would never take on in real life (president, director of a foreign company, well-known actress) which engages them in real-life problem-solving.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed a semi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design to measure participants' scores before and after an experiment concerning the same dependent variable. Thirty-six pre-service EFL teachers (first-year students of the " foreign language: two foreign languages" educational programme at the Baishev University of Aktobe, the Republic of Kazakhstan) participated in the study. The sample was randomized into the experimental group (EG) (n=18) and control group (CG) (n=18). Table 1 presents the participants' demographic information.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Groups		N	%
Experimental group	Foreign language 101	18	50
	Male	4	22.2
	Female	14	77.8
Control group	Foreign language 102	18	50
	Male	3	16.7
	Female	15	83.3
Total		36	100

Quantitative data were collected by assessing the pre-service EFL teachers' CC. We used the criteria to determine students' CC development level.

4. Experimental Process

Using RPG in teaching pre-service EFL teachers manipulated the systemic and technological approach. The cards with roles and the game were compiled for students. The roles and related texts were offered to students who did not have to memorize the text but possessed the basic information necessary for their role.

The criteria for assessing the CC of the pre-service EFL teachers were:
1) Realization of a communication plan.
2) The logical and structural integrity of the utterance.
3) Possession of the subject matter of the speech.
4) Compliance with the linguistic and cultural norms of the language.
5) Language accuracy in speech.

During the experiment, we adhered to the following levels of pre-service EFL teachers' CC:

High level: able to fully and competently cover the topic of conversational practice; verbally and non-verbally respond to oral statements in different areas of topics in the program. The story contains 20 grammatically correct sentences.

Medium level: able to cover the topic of conversational practice; the story contains at least 15-20 correct sentences; only isolated grammatical and lexical errors are allowed.

Low level: lexical and grammatical errors may be made in an oral topic; the story contains at least 10 sentences; questions may be asked; some mistakes in pronunciation are allowed.

The experimental process was carried out at the Baishev University (Aktobe, the Republic of Kazakhstan) in groups of first-year undergraduate students of the " foreign language: two foreign languages" educational program in the 2021-2022 academic year. The foreign language 101 group was selected as the EG and the foreign language 102 group was selected as the CG. In the EG, a technological and systemic approach to RPG was applied. In the CG, according to the model curriculum for a foreign language course, training was traditional. Classes in the EG and CG were conducted by the same teachers which ensured the unity of requirements for the experiment and allowed for effectively managing the educational process.

Teaching included various exercises that helped to determine the level of a student's knowledge on a given topic and introduced students to this topic. Students searched independently for information on the selected topics, conducted research and made presentations. The RPG was conducted using video materials and presentations. A list of topics and sub-topics in the social, socio-cultural, educational and professional spheres of communication and language material that ensures the achievement of communication goals was offered for RPG. A set of RPGs was introduced into the educational process considering the curriculum for students of the " foreign language: two foreign languages" educational program (see Table 2). During the experiment, various RPG on program topics were conducted to develop communication skills and students' ability to speak a foreign language in a foreign language class.

Table 2. The content of the discipline "Foreign language".

Seminars		Content of the discipline
"Social sphere of communication: Me and my house"		
1	Greeting	"Greeting, farewell, presentation of oneself in an official and informal setting, nationality, countries, languages, family, marital status, family composition, family ties, appearance, character, personal qualities, daily routine".
2	My family	
3	Daily routine	
"Social and cultural spheres of communication: Food"		
4	Food	"Food and drinks, products, types of snack bars, cafes, restaurants, fast food, salads, vegetables, fruits, desserts, sweets, purchase, prices, grocery store, shopping centre, discounts, design, size".
5	Purchase	
"Social sphere of communication: Human and his health"		
6	Human and his health	"Human, health, sports, nature and man, climate, weather, ecology, healthy eating, leisure, hobbies, sports, a healthy lifestyle, physical education, sports games".
7	Sport in a person's life	
8	Leisure	
"Social and cultural spheres of communication: Native countries"		
9	Native country	"Native country or countries of the language being studied, geographical location, climate, weather, capital, their attractions. Urban or rural living environment, housing, house, apartment, garden, furniture, furnishings, living conditions, appliances, equipment".
10	Journey	
11	Sights of the city	
12	My home!	
"Socio-cultural sphere of communication: Environment"		
13	Environmental protection	"Environmental protection, nature and environmental problems, healthy lifestyle, modern gadgets, applications, Internet, radioactive waves".
14	Nature and environmental problems	
15	Modern studies and gadgets	

We used the rules developed by Maslyko and Babinskaya (2001) to ensure the successful implementation of the RPG complex:

1) Student should put themselves in a situation that can occur in real life.

2) Students need to adjust to a particular function, either playing a role of themselves or taking on an imaginary role.

3) RPG participants must behave as if everything was happening in real life; their behavior must correlate to their role.

4) The game participants should focus on the communicative use of language and not on the usual practice of consolidating their speech.

Based on the RPG methodology, taking into account "stages, methods, principles, rules and recommendations for this type of game at the stage of assimilation" (Maslyko & Babinskaya, 2001). We used a controlled type of RPG in which the role plays had a reproductive nature. The activity was carried out using a sample. During consolidation, moderately controlled role plays were used in which the activity changed from reproductive to productive. At the final stage, free role plays were proposed that allowed students to apply their knowledge in dialogue speech.

In the process of RPG on the topic "My House" (Vasilyeva & Shaforostova, 2005), the students received roles and an advertisement for rental housing:

Advertisement:

"Small, third-floor flat on Maple Street is for rent. Suit a student. £80 a month. Phone Mrs. Holt, 475 386."

Role 1. "You see an advertisement in a newspaper. Phone up and find out more about the flat. Make a note of what you want to ask about before picking up the phone. Then, if the flat sounds suitable go round and see it."

Role 2. "You have a flat to rent. You put an advertisement in a newspaper. Someone calls up about the flat. Answer their questions. Think first about what they might ask. If the person is interested, arrange for them to come and have a look at it."

5. Research Results and Discussion

As a result of the analysis of pre-service EFL teachers' CC, the EG showed a slight difference compared to the CG. Table 3 presents the pretest results of pre-service EFL teachers' CC.

Table 3. Pretest results of pre-service EFL teachers' CC.

Group		Low level	Medium level	High level
Experimental	n	6	9	3
	%	33	50	17
Control	n	7	9	2
	%	39	50	11

The table shows that the high level of CC in the EG (17%) is higher than the CG (11%) by 6%. The average level of CC in the EG (50%) and the CG (50%) is the same. The low level of CC in the EG (33%) is lower than the CG (39%) by 6%.

The generalization of the results indicates that less than three students in the EG and CG (17% and 11%, respectively) demonstrate a high level of development of EFL students' foreign language CC. On the other hand, half students from the EG (50%) and CG (50%) show the average level of development of the students' foreign language CC. On the other hand, more than three students in each group EG (33%) and CG (39%) have an insufficient (low) level of development in their foreign language CC (see Figure 1).
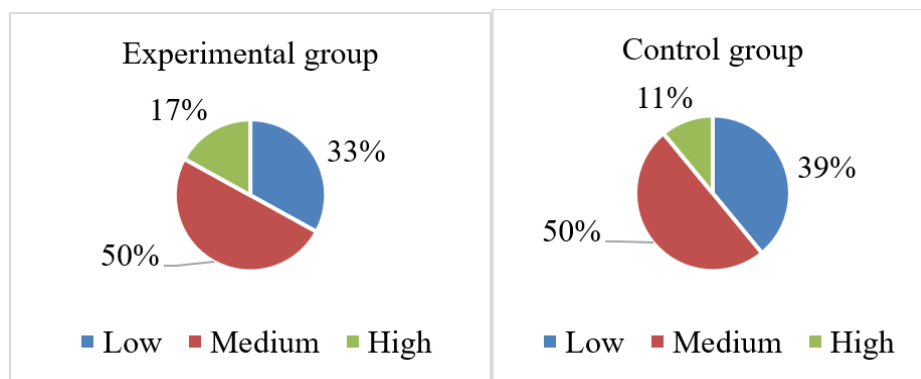
Figure 1. EG and CG pretest results.

Thus, the pretest results of pre-service EFL teachers' CC are at an insufficient level.

The posttest was conducted to determine the RPG's effectiveness in fostering pre-service EFL teachers' CC. The posttest results are demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Posttest results of pre-service EFL teachers' CC.

Group		Low level	Medium level	High level
Experimental	n	1	12	5
	%	6	66	25
Control	n	4	11	3
	%	22	61	17

The results of the EG are much higher than the results of the CG. The high level of students' CC in the EG (28%) is higher than that of the CG (17%) by 11%. The medium level of students' CC in the EG (66%) is higher than that in the CG (61%) by 5%, though the pretest in the EG and CG showed the same results (50%). The low level of students' CC in the EG (6%) is lower than the CG (22%) by 16% (see Figure 2).
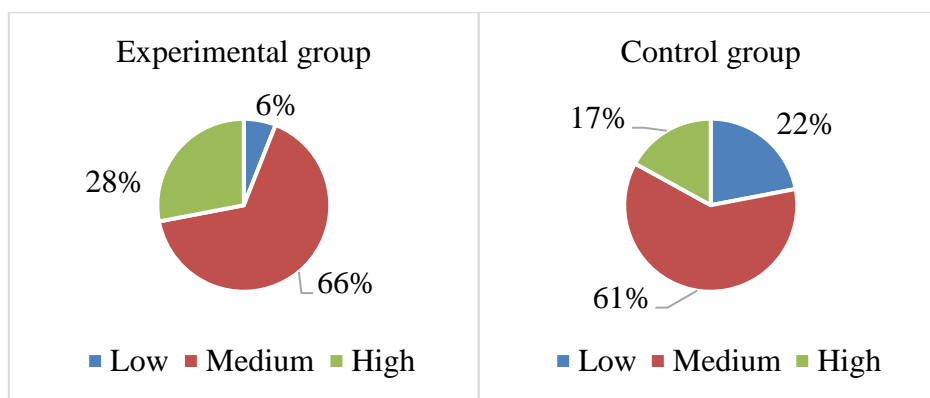

Figure 2. EG and CG posttest results.

Fostering students' CC through RPG based on teaching has acquired positive dynamics: (1) speaking skills development aimed at fostering students' dialogue speech has increased, (2) the number of mistakes made by students in speaking has decreased. The study results proved that using RPG in teaching positively influences the development of pre-service EFL teachers' CC. Figure 3 demonstrates comparative data on the EG pretest-posttest results.
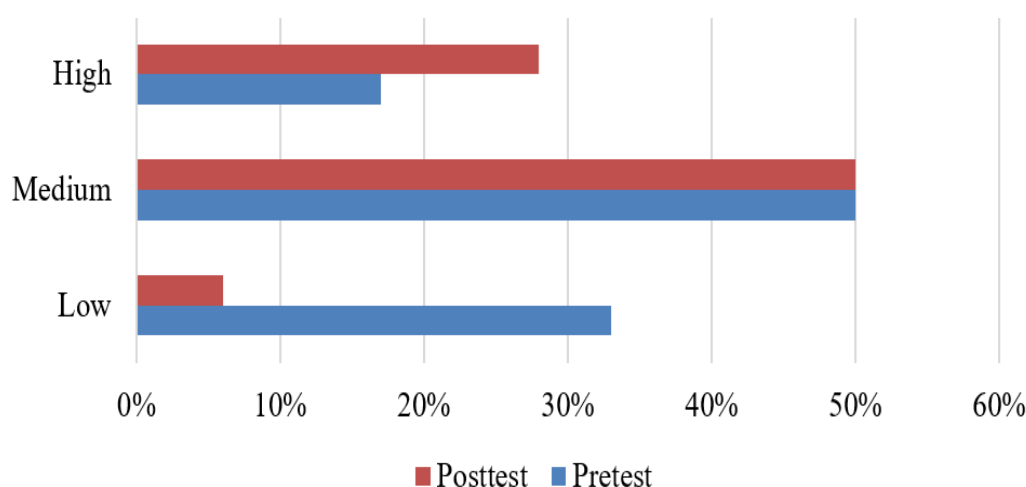

Figure 3. EG pretest-posttest results.

Compared to the pretest results indicating the pre-service EFL teachers' CC in teaching dialogue speech, the post-test results in the EG have qualitatively and quantitatively increased. The high level of students' CC increased from 17% to 28%. Thus, an increase of 11% was noted. The medium level of students' CC increased from 50% to 66% (an increase of 16%). The low level of students' CC decreased from 33% to 6% making a difference of 27%. The post-test results proved that using RPG in teaching dialogue speech through a systemic and technological approach contributed to the development of pre-service EFL teachers' CC.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the effects of RPG on pre-service EFL teachers' CC in teaching dialogue speech. During the experimental process, the RPG was carried out according to the stages, methods, principles, rules and recommendations for the approach. The use of RPG in the educational process contributes to educational cooperation, partnership and communication practice in EFL, thereby positively affecting students' speaking skills and CC. Furthermore, communicatively competent EFL students in teaching dialogue speech produce and create foreign-language expression in various socially defined situations taking into account the linguistic and social rules that native speakers observe.

The posttest results proved that using RPG in teaching dialogue speech through a systemic and technological approach contributed to the development of pre-service EFL teachers' CC. The high level of students' CC increased from 17% to 28%, thus an increase of 11% was noted. The medium level of students' CC increased from 50% to 66% (an increase of 16%). The low level of students' CC decreased from 33% to 6% making a difference of 27%. Thus, the results of the study confirmed our hypothesis that fostering pre-service EFL teachers' CC is positively influenced by using RPG in teaching dialogue speech if systemic and technological approaches are applied.

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