



The effectiveness of asynchronous online role-play on ESL learners' willingness to communicate

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of asynchronous online role-play as a learning technique to improve ESL learners' willingness to communicate. This study proposes two research objectives; to investigate the significant difference in ESL learners' willingness to communicate before and after performing asynchronous role-play and to identify factors that impact the ESL learners' willingness to communicate. A mixed-methods approach is used to understand the impact of the intervention. A set of questionnaires, reflective journal entries and a semi-structured interview were administered to tertiary level ESL students. Results from this study revealed that willingness to communicate among the participants in the treatment group significantly increased with the aid of asynchronous online role-play. Other findings identified factors such as self-confidence, teamwork, linguistic and non-linguistic factors as well as technical skills that show the feasibility of the asynchronous online role-play. The practical implications of this study would allow further exploration of learning techniques in the post-pandemic phenomenon of English language teaching and learning.

Keywords: Asynchronous, Language learning environment, Learning technique, Online role-play, Post-pandemic, Willingness to communicate.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study contributes to the existing literature on alternative learning environments that may be suitable as a post-pandemic learning technique. The use of asynchronous online role-play can become a learning technique that enhances ESL learners' willingness to communicate.

1. Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world, the education sector has been forced to make major changes in pedagogical implementation. Due to this pandemic, face-to-face learning is not ideal for being conducted in physical classroom settings. A new norm in teaching and learning needs to be devised to ensure the teaching and learning process becomes effective in terms of strategy, delivery, implementation and assessment. Educators are encouraged to apply various teaching and learning strategies to help students learn in an alternative pedagogical environment (online learning). With the advent of rapid technologies, online learning is no longer seen as a foreign mode of instruction for many educators. It encourages creativity and innovation among educators to construct meaningful learning that not only engages students but also achieves the learning objectives. Technology supported learning also encourages interaction between students which later improves their socialization and cooperation online (Raspopovic, Cvetanovic, Medan, & Ljubojevic, 2017).

Language learning classrooms are not unfamiliar with this alternative learning environment. Learners in tertiary education are being exposed to online learning through several platforms. Most institutions prepare learners with their own LMS system while others make use of readily available online applications such as Google Classroom, Schoology etc. In language learning, particularly speaking skills, an alternative learning technique that adopts online technology is online role-play. Role-play is a carefully simulated situation in which learners play specific role profiles of character representations (Wills, Leigh, & Ip, 2011). Wills et al. (2011) state that role-play is designed to build first-person experience in a safe and less threatening setting and requires learners to articulate viewpoints that are not their own. The benefit of role-play is that learners are able to find personal aspects more engaging compared to the more formal debating activity. There are two conditions for role-play: synchronous and asynchronous settings. Asynchronous role-play refers to the performance of certain scenarios whereby students are given specific roles to play. The role-play is conducted asynchronously unlike conventional role-play where students typically perform in front of a live audience. In asynchronous settings, learners record their performance of the designated roles individually, combine all their roles together into a story and the performance is uploaded on an online video sharing platform. In synchronous role-play, learners are expected to respond immediately while maintaining their roles. This can cause them much apprehension and anxiety. Asynchronous online role-play could potentially help learners by providing a safe and non-threatening language learning environment where they can take time to consider their responses and concurrently increase their willingness to communicate using the target language. There is growing interest in studies relevant to communication willingness especially among second language learning researchers. A persistent concern observed by language instructors in their language classrooms is the apprehension expressed by their students about their communicative ability and use of the English language. In fact, students showed an unwillingness to communicate using the English language (Fadilah, 2018; Fukuta, 2017; Kalyar, Pathan, Channa, Lohar, & Khan, 2019). The present study seeks to explore the use of asynchronous online role-play as an alternative language learning technique to enhance ESL students' willingness to communicate. The use of feedback in asynchronous online role-play allows students to carefully reflect and consider their responses to the feedback at their own pace. This helps them become less apprehensive in their communication and encourages more willingness to communicate about aspects of their performance. On the other hand, the traditional role-play performance does not give students sufficient time to fully structure their responses to immediate feedback. This could lead to more apprehension when communicating their thoughts in the target language. Another benefit of asynchronous online role-play is the independence and reflective learning experience given to students by the performance. These aspects can provide students with the opportunity to brainstorm together, decide and negotiate roles and conduct meaningful reflective practice. Through all these actions, their willingness to communicate could potentially increase. On the other hand, the traditional role-play performance does not allow ample time for reflective learning experiences. The present study aims to provide solutions to the following issues: the lack of willingness of ESL learners to communicate using the target language; the limited alternative language learning techniques that could cater to non-face-to-face learning environments.

Several studies have investigated the use of role-play in English teaching (Krebt, 2017; Krisdiana, Irawati, & Kadarisman, 2018; Neupane, 2019). There were also past studies that explored the influence of role-play on learners' motivation. The present study aims to address this issue through the following objectives:

- a) To investigate the significant difference in ESL learners' willingness to communicate before and after performing asynchronous online role-play.
- b) To identify other factors that impact the ESL learners' willingness to communicate through the performance of asynchronous online role-play.

This study also attempts to answer the following research questions:

- a) Is there a significant difference in ESL learners' willingness to communicate before and after performing asynchronous online role-play?
- b) What are the factors that impact the ESL learners' willingness to communicate through the performance of asynchronous role-play?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

When learning a second language, willingness to engage in the spoken discourse is the biggest challenge for many learners regardless of their level of proficiency. Sometimes those who are less proficient speak the language without hesitation (Zulkepli, Madzlan, Kesevan, Tajuddin, & Zulkepli, 2020). MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) hypothesize that the most important factor in a second language learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) is "the probability of engaging in communication (i.e. speaking) when free to choose to do so" (p. 546).

Learners with high WTC will search for and take the opportunities to engage in a spoken discourse both in and out-of-class contexts (Kang, 2014; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003; MacIntyre et al., 1998) as cited in Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi (2018). This positive attitude will enable them to acquire the target language more successfully (Goh, 2014; Long, 2015; Swain, 2000).

2.2. Role-Play

Van Ments (1999) defined the concept of role-play as the representation of the appearances and behaviours of particular people that are assumed to be appropriate in a given context. This technique is useful especially in the context of language acquisition and learning. Several aspects of role-playing are included in a language classroom. It does not only involve the performance of the character rather the linguistic aspect of communication during the playing of the role should be emphasised in the activity. The subskills of speaking such as turn-taking, fluency, accuracy and appropriacy (Masuram & Sripada, 2020) are some of the abilities that need to be highlighted to the language learners when conducting the role-play. Littlewood (1975) describes role-play as adopting both verbal and non-verbal elements of the language. This study makes use of role-play to further explore how these ESL learners discover their communication abilities and their willingness to do so within the activity itself as well as in real-life settings.

2.3. Computer-Mediated Communication

McQuail (2005) defines Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) as the communicative process that happens through the medium of a computer. CMC can be applied in two major modes: synchronous and asynchronous modes. Through the use of CMC, it is believed that ESL learners can improve their communicative skills by engaging actively in activities using the English language. In order to become fully immersed in natural communicative settings, ESL learners may not necessarily experience this setting in the formal classroom. The constant repairs, corrections and expectations of the language teachers may result in students' apprehension about making use of their communicative skills in their language class. This present work attempts to address this issue by promoting an alternative learning environment that makes the students more comfortable practicing their language skills and more willing to communicate through the use of asynchronous online role-play.

2.4. Asynchronous Role-Play in Online Settings

Asynchronous role-play can be viewed as a learning technique classified under Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (ACMC). Wills (2012) viewed role-play in online learning environments as situated and authentic. The implementation of roles in the role-play provides multiple perspectives through which learners assume a role while undertaking authentic learning activities. Wills (2012) elaborated that asynchronous technologies mean that users do not have to be virtually present at the same time. Messages are stored and received at the receiver's convenience. Similarly, replies are stored and read when the user is able to be online. This is opposed to the conventional face-to-face human communication that occurs in real-time. Similarly, Levine (2013) conducted asynchronous role-play to explore group work in an online setting. Students were given autonomy to set the roles and discuss the processes with their peers on online forum while the instructor monitored their online discussion. Apart from being a silent observer, the instructor also assumes the role of facilitator and engages actively with the students. Based on the study, Levine (2013) identified key benefits for online role-play such as the students' increased awareness of their behaviour and increased support from group processes. Gibson, Ward, Comer, and Rossi (2018) conducted a study on students' experiential learning of soft skills for managers in a management course. They conducted online discussion and group role-play to understand organizational behaviour and leadership concepts. Based on the past studies described, students explored online role play for experiential and autonomous learning in managerial courses and group work but not so much on language and communicative improvement.

2.5. Theoretical Underpinning

The study applies the main theory of Kolb (1984) experiential learning theory. According to this theory, Kolb (1984) believes that learning consists of firstly abstract ideas that are acquired by the learner and secondly the application of these concepts through new experiences. The researchers believe that role-play activities are potentially to be conducted to allow language learners to experience using the language in given real life settings.

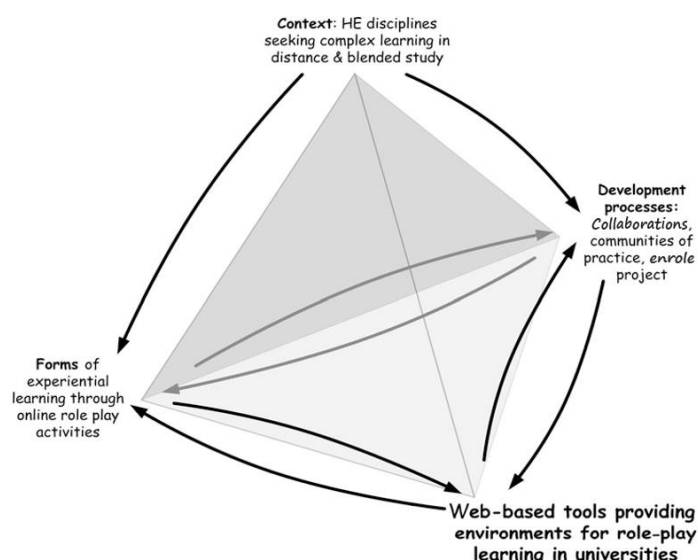


Figure 1. Online role-play and experiential learning.

Source: Russell and Shepherd (2010).

Russell and Shepherd (2010) mention online role-play and its relevance to Kolb (1984) experiential learning theory. Experiential learning through online role-play environments encourages learners to assume a role assigned to them, perform authentic tasks in an authentic context that involves human interactions such as collaboration and negotiation. Through this experience, reflection and observation take place and this becomes a learning process that turns into active experimentation. Figure 1 shows the framework of online role-play and experiential learning.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2007). For the research procedure conducted in this study, a form of intervention; the asynchronous online role-play is introduced to the participants. A form of pre-measure was given to the participants which was adapted set of questionnaires pertaining to the participants' willingness to communicate developed by Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2016). The questionnaire was administered to 103 first year ESL students undergoing their tertiary level of education. Following the completion of the intervention, the same set of questionnaire was distributed as a post-measure to the participants. Results from both pre and post measures were then compared to determine whether there was an improvement in the level of willingness to communicate among the participants involved. Findings from this survey attempt to draw conclusion to the first research objective of this study; to investigate the significant difference in ESL learners' willingness to communicate before and after performing asynchronous online role-play.

In the research procedure, the intervention was conducted through the performance of asynchronous online role-play. A total of 45 ESL learners were selected to be included in the treatment group. The selection criteria for the participants in the treatment group were based on the students' responses to the survey conducted during the pre-measure phase where they showed limited willingness to communicate in English. The duration of the intervention was eight weeks, with four cycles of role-play performances once every two weeks. Prior to performing the role-play, students were provided with relevant guidelines and instructions to perform as required. In conducting this intervention, the study employed several phases that include planning, preparing for the performance, conducting the performance and employing reflective experiences. As a form of guidance for the role-play, topics were given for each cycle of the intervention by referring to topics in the listening and speaking workbook by Oxford Press (Earle-Carlin, Snow, Zwier, & Zimmerman, 2011). Participants undergoing intervention needed to record their experiences performing the role-play in a reflective journal. This triangulation of data was necessary to draw conclusive results on the effectiveness of asynchronous online role-play.

After the intervention, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants who were involved with the performance of asynchronous online role-play. Through this interview, researchers would be able to identify several foreseeable factors such as overall willingness to communicate, improvement in linguistic and non-linguistic abilities, level of confidence, teamwork and technical aspects of producing role-play videos. The duration of each interview session was 30 minutes per person during which 10 questions were asked followed by several prompt questions depending on the responses given by each participant. Results from the interview session were then transcribed and analysed qualitatively as an attempt to address the second research objective; to identify other factors that impact the ESL learners' willingness to communicate through the performance of asynchronous online role-play.

4. Findings and Discussion

Findings for the quantitative analysis of this study are presented in this section. In order to determine the ESL learners' increased level of willingness to communicate through the use of asynchronous online role-play, a hypothesis testing procedure was administered.

Null Hypothesis (H0): there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the control and treatment groups in their willingness to communicate prior to and after the asynchronous online role-play performance.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the control and treatment groups in their willingness to communicate prior to and after the asynchronous online role-play performance.

The hypothesis testing procedure has been established and descriptive statistics were calculated using IBM SPSS version 28. The mean scores for both the control group and treatment groups in the pre and post measures are displayed in Table 1. The standard deviation for both groups in the pre and post measure is also shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Descriptive analysis for pre and post measures.

Group	Pre measure		Post measure	
	M	SD	M	SD
Control	3.05	0.48	3.04	0.49
Treatment	3.00	0.45	3.32	0.40

In order to address the hypothesis testing procedure, an inferential statistical analysis was further conducted. Prior to analysing quantitative data using statistical methods, a normality test was conducted to determine whether parametric or non-parametric testing was appropriate. Results from the normality test return a normally distributed set of data. Therefore, a parametric test was conducted in the form of a t-test. In order to make comparisons between the participants' willingness to communicate in both the control and treatment groups, an independent t-test was conducted prior to conducting the asynchronous online role-play. Results from the t-test indicated that there was no significant difference in the willingness to communicate between the control group (M=3.05, SD=0.48) and the treatment group (M=3.00, SD=0.45) prior to the intervention. Table 2 shows the results of the independent t-test that indicated $[t(101)=0.53, p=0.60]$. The p-value $[p=0.60]$ entails a larger value than the significance level $[p=0.005]$, which shows that there is no significant difference between the two groups in their willingness to communicate.

Table 2. Results of the independent samples t-test in the pre-measure.

		Levene's test for equality of variances				t-test for equality of means				
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre measure	Equal variances assumed	0.12	0.73	0.53	101	0.60	0.05	0.09	-0.14	0.24
	Equal variances not assumed			0.53	97.48	0.60	0.05	0.09	-0.13	0.23

After conducting asynchronous online role-play as a form of intervention, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare both the control and treatment groups' willingness to communicate. Findings from the test suggest that there is a significant difference between the control group and the treatment group's willingness to communicate [$t(101)=-3.05, p=0.003$]. This result shows that the ESL learners in the treatment group [$M=3.00, SD=0.45$] were more willing to communicate in comparison to the ESL learners in the control group [$M=3.05, SD=0.48$] after performing the intervention which is the asynchronous online role-play. Table 3 displays the results of the independent t-test for the post-measure:

Table 3. Results of the Independent samples t-test in the post-measure.

		Levene's test for equality of variances				t-test for equality of means				
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post measure	Equal variances assumed	1.90	0.17	-3.05	101	0.003	-0.27	0.09	-0.45	-0.10
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.13	101	0.002	-0.27	0.09	-0.45	-0.10

Results from the independent t-test in Tables 2 and 3 displayed the results of significance in the ESL learners in the control and treatment groups' willingness to communicate prior to and after the asynchronous online role-play performance. Findings indicate that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the control and treatment groups in their willingness to communicate prior to and after intervention. Due to the p-value [$p=0.003$] entailing a lesser value than the significance level [$p=0.005$], the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Hence, the findings provide a positive answer to the first research question of the study: Is there a significant difference in ESL learners' willingness to communicate before and after performing asynchronous online role-play?

To answer the second research question: What are the factors that impact the ESL learners' willingness to communicate through the performance of asynchronous role-play? A qualitative data analysis was conducted. Data was obtained by analysing transcripts from the reflective journal and a semi-structured interview conducted with the ESL learners involved in the study. Based on the analysis, there are several factors that influence the ESL learners' willingness to communicate through the performance of asynchronous online role-play. The first factor identified is self-confidence. Responses are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Intervention increases self-confidence.

Participant	Reflection
S1	It helped me be more confident when communicating with people around me.
S4	It brings out confidence in me as it requires bringing out diverse emotions to play the role.
S7	After I recorded myself for the role-play task, I felt confident communicating especially in front of the camera. When I do my role-play, I don't have to talk with people directly which makes me feel confident about recording myself.
S9	By being willing to communicate, I can improve my speaking skills and become more confident.
S25	I feel more confident at the beginning of a conversation with someone.
S30	I am willing to communicate confidently and put my points of view into words.

Table 4 displays the responses of participants in relation to their increase in self-confidence after conducting asynchronous online role-play. An interesting insight from S7 on her perspective of confidence is on communicating in front of the camera.

This is different from other participants' views where they mentioned that they felt more confident communicating with other people (see responses from S1, S9 and S25). Due to the nature of asynchronous online role-play where learners perform individually in front of the camera, S7 believes that one should need self-confidence to talk alone in front of the camera. This is an intriguing perspective as one would assume confidence when communication is influenced by the audience. A speaker, particularly non-native speakers of English would feel intimidated and less confident when speaking in front of people in face-to-face scenarios (Dansieh, Owusu, & Seidu, 2021).

Apart from self-confidence, another factor that influences the use of asynchronous online role-play is teamwork. Table 5 displays responses related to teamwork as a factor in participants' increasing willingness to communicate:

Table 5. Intervention improves teamwork.

Participant	Response
S23	This enhanced teamwork and the communication aspect of the students.
S28	It was nice to hold this activity as we could engage teamwork and social interaction among the members and foster a sense of community where we could brainstorm, exchange ideas and express opinions with each other.
S15	This asynchronous role-play experience has increased our teamwork and communication skills as every group member participated well in the making of this role-play.

Table 5 shows the responses of participants in terms of teamwork that increased their willingness to communicate through the performance of asynchronous online role-play. S28 shared that asynchronous online role-play enables them to discuss, share views and brainstorm ideas as a team to complete the task. Since the nature of the asynchronous online role-play requires participants to conduct a group performance, teamwork is required to achieve the objective of the task given. According to [Lacerenza, Marlow, Tannenbaum, and Salas \(2018\)](#) and [Hayes, Power, Davidson, Daly, and Jackson \(2019\)](#), role-playing is an effective method to increase teamwork through the practice of playing different roles in groups where group members communicate, collaborate and receive feedback from their peers. Meanwhile, another factor identified from this interview is how asynchronous online role-play enhances students' linguistic skills both verbally and non-verbally. Table 6 indicates the responses of participants in this linguistic aspect:

Table 6. Intervention improves linguistic skills (verbal and non-verbal).

Participant	Response
S39	It helped me acquire speaking skills which also helped boost my confidence level and practice English in a controlled situation.
S20	This role-play helped me adapt to the moods and vocal expressions of the given situation.
S2	It gives me an opportunity to show my creativity because the scene, language, emotion, expression and body language are different.
S11	I could learn the usage of the intonation and the body language in communication.

In reference to Table 6, it is seen that the asynchronous online role-play helped the participants with their linguistic skills. S39 expressed how this intervention has helped her increase her oral fluency of English and practice the language in a controlled situation. Fluency during speaking in the asynchronous online role-play is crucial as the script needs to be read out loud and re-enacted in a spontaneous manner. When it comes to spontaneity of speech, fluency is described as a pertinent characteristic of second language speech ([Cucchiaroni, Strik, & Boves, 2002](#)). This shows that the practice of asynchronous online role-play could potentially assist ESL students with their fluency in speech.

Another highlight from S39's feedback is "controlled situations". This can possibly entail the nature of role-play which is a structured performance and re-enactment of selected situations and scenes. Therefore, S39 believes that this is a good platform for her to practice her English skills.

Interestingly, asynchronous online role-play manages to improve not only the linguistic aspect of the participants (S39, S20 and S2), but also the non-linguistic aspect of their performance. Non-verbal aspects such as emotion, mood, body language and intonation are some of the aspects mentioned by S2, S11 and S20 as they perform asynchronous online role-play. As you get into character, the performance must be embodied by the mood of the character, their emotional expressions, the tone of their voice and their body language. All of these non-verbal elements may signal a more wholesome conveyance of information ([Madzlan & Kesevan, 2018](#)) which in this case, is the effective delivery and representation of the character.

The next factor identified from the qualitative finding is the impact of digital and technical skills in developing asynchronous online role-play. Feedback from the respondents are outlined in Table 7.

Table 7. Intervention gives exposure to digital and technical skills.

Participant	Response
S16	I enjoy doing the technical part such as the recording and editing as it is not something new to me.
S26	Asynchronous role-play gives me an advantage where I can enhance my technical skills. In this modern world, technical skills are mandatory.
S23	Some of the members were having a bad internet connection problem and this took us a very long time to compile our recording. Some of them were buffering and had to use their data but it was still giving trouble.
S5	People who struggle with video editing due to equipment limitations are examples of technical issues. Everybody has not a laptop or computer appropriate for that type of work.
S31	There are some technical aspects that we cannot avoid such as the line during the day of the shooting was making a scene and also when we had finished recording our first zoom call scene, suddenly the video disappeared but although all of this happened, we still managed to cope with it and work together as a team.
S34	I can edit but I always keep it simple and sometimes it will be unattractive to others. I am quite weak in technical aspects too as I am not very sure about the applications and features that exist in the editing and technical worlds.
S40	I prefer synchronous role-play because it is free from technical issues such as unclear video and bad sound quality because the role-play is conducted in real-time and not recorded.

The uniqueness of asynchronous online role-play is in its technical aspects of producing the performance in an online environment with the aid of technology. Responses from Table 7 reveal feedback in terms of the technical aspect of producing the role-play. Responses from S16 and S26 give positive insight into the technical aspect of asynchronous online role-play. In the era of digital natives, some students may possess advanced digital and technical skills. However, some may not obtain technical skills as quickly as others and struggle with grasping the

concept of technology. As mentioned by S34, she found the editing and producing parts of asynchronous online role-play quite challenging as she is weak in the aspect of getting familiar with features and applications that could help with the production of a top quality video.

Another technical aspect of asynchronous online role-play is the use of many technical equipment to produce the video. For example, S5 mentioned that some students were not equipped with appropriate devices such as laptops and computers to help them in the production of the asynchronous role-play. S40 also mentioned how bad sound quality and unclear videos (this possibly implies the use of unsuitable microphones and video cameras) affected the end-product of their role-play video.

Besides, reliance on a stable internet connection is another technical issue faced by some participants. S23 mentioned that the internet connection became a great challenge for them to compile the shots as the recording was still in buffer mode. S31 also faced a similar connectivity issue when some scenes disappeared because of the slow internet line. The use of asynchronous online role-play does not come without challenges. Despite the positive outcomes, improper equipment and unstable connectivity can affect the end result of its effective use.

5. Conclusion

Asynchronous online role-play has great potential to become an alternative learning platform to improve ESL students' willingness to communicate. Quantitative findings objectively indicated that the willingness to communicate among the participants in the treatment group significantly increased with the aid of asynchronous online role-play as compared to participants in the control group who did not undergo this intervention. Based on the qualitative findings, there are some factors that show the feasibility of the asynchronous online role-play being used. Factors such as self-confidence, teamwork, linguistic and non-linguistic factors as well as technical skills were identified. Although most of the factors are perceived as positive, technical skills proved a great challenge for the participants in producing a high-quality role-play video. With respect to both quantitative and qualitative findings, it is concluded that asynchronous online role-play plays a significant role in enhancing ESL learners' willingness to communicate in and outside of the language classroom.

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