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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ROLE PLAYING AS A STRATEGY TO SUPPORT VOCABULARY LEARNING IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Mauriel Sifa[1]*, Asrori[2]
[1,2]Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia
Author (s) Email: [1]*mauriel.22020084041@student.unesa.ac.id*,
[2]*asrori@unesa.ac.id*

*Corresponding Author Email: *mauriel.22020084041@student.unesa.ac.id*

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Abstract

Vocabulary is fundamental to English language learning, yet many junior high school students struggle with traditional vocabulary teaching methods. This study investigates how 32 eighth-grade students perceive role-playing as a vocabulary learning strategy. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire with ten questions, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's framework and guided by Douglas Brown's perception theory. Five major themes emerged: students' opinions, motivation, perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions. Findings revealed that students generally held positive perceptions toward role-playing for vocabulary learning. They perceived it as an enjoyable, interactive, and engaging activity that increased motivation and confidence in using English. Students reported that role-playing helped them understand, remember, and use vocabulary more effectively through meaningful communication and direct practice. Despite facing challenges such as pronunciation difficulties, nervousness, and limited vocabulary knowledge, students continued to value role-playing as beneficial. Students suggested implementing role-playing more frequently with adequate vocabulary preparation, extended practice time, and engaging topics. In conclusion, role-playing is positively perceived by junior high school students and serves as an effective strategy for supporting vocabulary learning, enhancing motivation, and promoting active participation in English learning.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is essential for English language learning as it provides the foundation for communication and supports the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. However, many junior high school students encounter difficulties in learning and retaining vocabulary through conventional methods. Teachers increasingly adopt interactive strategies such as role-playing to make vocabulary learning more engaging and meaningful. Role-playing allows students to practice language in simulated real-life situations, providing opportunities for meaningful communication and repeated vocabulary use in context. While previous research has examined role-playing for speaking skills

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

and vocabulary achievement, few studies have explored students' perceptions of role-playing specifically as a vocabulary learning strategy. Understanding student perspectives is crucial for determining the effectiveness and appropriateness of instructional approaches. This study addresses this gap by investigating how junior high school students perceive role-playing as a strategy to support their vocabulary learning. The findings offer insights that can help educators design more effective and student-centered vocabulary instruction.

Vocabulary knowledge is not limited to memorizing the meanings of individual words but also involves understanding how words are used appropriately in different situations. Nation (2013) emphasizes that vocabulary learning involves knowledge of word forms, meanings, and use. Therefore, students need opportunities to encounter vocabulary in meaningful contexts rather than simply memorizing word lists. When students are able to use vocabulary in communication, they can develop a better understanding of how words function in real-life situations. This is particularly important for junior high school students who are still developing their basic English communication skills.

One strategy that can provide such opportunities is role-playing. Through role-playing activities, students are encouraged to participate in simulated conversations by taking on different characters or situations. For example, students may act as customers and shopkeepers, teachers and students, or visitors and local residents. These activities allow students to practice vocabulary related to particular topics while interacting with their classmates. Harmer (2007) explains that communicative activities provide learners with opportunities to use language for meaningful purposes. In this regard, role-playing can create a learning environment in which vocabulary is practiced through communication rather than learned only through theoretical explanations.

Furthermore, students' perceptions are an important aspect of evaluating the implementation of teaching strategies. Students who perceive learning activities as enjoyable and meaningful may demonstrate greater motivation and willingness to participate. Brown (2007) explains that learners' attitudes and individual differences are important factors influencing the language learning

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

process. Therefore, understanding students' opinions, feelings, and experiences can provide valuable information about how a particular teaching strategy is received in the classroom.

Previous research has also highlighted the potential of role-playing in language learning. Xie (2022) examined the effectiveness of role-playing activities in improving EFL learners' communicative skills. This suggests that role-playing can provide opportunities for learners to practice language in interactive situations. However, vocabulary learning also requires attention to how students understand, remember, and apply words in appropriate contexts. Schmitt (2019) emphasizes the importance of understanding vocabulary acquisition, instruction, and assessment as interconnected aspects of language learning. Thus, exploring students' perceptions can provide additional insights into the role of interactive activities in supporting vocabulary development.

Based on these considerations, the present study focuses on five aspects of students' perceptions: their opinions about role-playing, motivation to participate, perceived benefits for vocabulary learning, challenges encountered during the activities, and suggestions for improving its implementation. By exploring these aspects, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences when learning vocabulary through role-playing activities. Specifically, this study aims to investigate how eighth-grade students perceive role-playing as a strategy to support their vocabulary learning in junior high school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary in Language Learning

Vocabulary knowledge encompasses not only understanding word meanings but also knowledge of word forms and appropriate use in various contexts. Vocabulary is learned more effectively when learners encounter and use words repeatedly in meaningful communicative situations (Nation, 2013). Sufficient vocabulary knowledge is essential for learners to develop the four language skills effectively. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods such as memorization and

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

drilling tend to be monotonous and less engaging, potentially reducing student motivation and participation.

Role-Playing as a Teaching Strategy

Role-playing is a communicative approach that encourages students to practice language through simulating real-life experiences. In role-playing activities, students assume particular roles and interact with each other meaningfully. This approach motivates active language use, promotes self-confidence, and decreases communication apprehension. Although role-playing is commonly associated with speaking practice, it can effectively support vocabulary learning by providing opportunities for students to practice new words in contextual situations and meaningful communication (Harmer, 2007). Interactive activities such as role-playing facilitate vocabulary retention by allowing learners to encounter and use words repeatedly in communicative contexts.

Students' Perception in Learning

Perception refers to the process through which individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences. Students' perceptions are shaped by their classroom experiences, interactions with teachers and peers, and emotional responses to learning activities. Positive perceptions developed through meaningful and interactive learning experiences increase students' motivation, engagement, and willingness to participate in classroom activities. Understanding student perceptions toward learning strategies provides valuable insights into whether approaches are meaningful and helpful from the learners' perspective.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore and describe students' perceptions of role-playing for vocabulary learning. The study was conducted at a junior high school in Surabaya with 32 eighth-grade students who had experienced learning English through role-playing activities. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire consisting of ten questions distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire was designed to gather

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

information about students' opinions, motivation, perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions regarding role-playing activities. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which involved six stages: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis was guided by Douglas Brown's theory of perception while remaining open to meaningful patterns emerging from students' responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Five major themes emerged from the analysis: students' opinions, motivation, perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions. Almost all students held positive opinions toward role-playing, describing it as fun, interesting, interactive, and not boring compared to traditional methods. Students appreciated the active participation and peer interaction that role-playing enabled. Role-playing significantly increased students' motivation to learn vocabulary as it provided engaging and meaningful learning experiences. Students reported feeling more confident in using English and more willing to participate actively in class. Regarding perceived benefits, students recognized that role-playing helped them understand and remember vocabulary more effectively by providing meaningful contexts and opportunities for repeated practice. They learned not just word meanings but also appropriate usage in conversations.

Despite positive perceptions, students faced several challenges including insufficient vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation difficulties, nervousness when performing, and anxiety about making mistakes. However, these challenges did not prevent students from recognizing the overall value of role-playing. Students provided constructive suggestions for improvement, including more frequent implementation of role-playing activities, vocabulary preparation before performances, adequate practice time, and selection of engaging topics. These findings align with theoretical perspectives emphasizing that meaningful, interactive learning experiences lead to positive student perceptions and increased engagement (Schmitt, 2019). The results confirm that role-playing provides

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

valuable opportunities for vocabulary learning through contextual practice and communicative interaction.

Students' Opinions toward Role-Playing

The findings indicate that students generally expressed positive opinions about the implementation of role-playing in English vocabulary learning. Their descriptions of role-playing as fun, interesting, interactive, and not boring suggest that they appreciated the learning atmosphere created through these activities. Compared to conventional vocabulary instruction, which may emphasize memorization and written exercises, role-playing provides students with opportunities to participate directly in classroom activities.

This finding is consistent with Harmer (2007), who emphasizes the importance of communicative activities in encouraging learners to use language in meaningful situations. Through role-playing, students are not only exposed to new vocabulary but also encouraged to apply words in conversations related to particular situations. As a result, vocabulary learning becomes more connected to practical language use.

Furthermore, positive student opinions indicate that the learning process is influenced not only by the materials presented but also by the activities used in the classroom. When students consider an activity enjoyable and meaningful, they may become more willing to participate. Therefore, the positive perceptions identified in this study suggest that role-playing can create a more engaging classroom environment for vocabulary learning.

Students' Motivation in Learning Vocabulary through Role-Playing

Another important finding concerns students' motivation to participate in vocabulary learning activities. The students reported that role-playing made English lessons more engaging and encouraged them to participate actively. The opportunity to interact with classmates and perform different roles created a learning experience that was different from conventional classroom activities.

Motivation is an important factor in language learning because it influences students' willingness to participate, practice, and develop their language abilities. Brown (2007) explains that individual factors, including learners' attitudes and

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

motivation, play an important role in the language learning process. In this study, students' positive responses suggest that role-playing provided an activity that encouraged their involvement in learning English.

In addition, role-playing gives students opportunities to use vocabulary for specific communicative purposes. Rather than simply remembering words, students are encouraged to select and use appropriate expressions when performing their assigned roles. This experience can make vocabulary learning more purposeful because students understand how words can be applied in communication.

These findings indicate that role-playing can support students' motivation by combining language practice, classroom interaction, and active participation. Consequently, the activity provides an alternative way to create a more enjoyable and motivating English learning environment.

Perceived Benefits of Role-Playing for Vocabulary Learning

The findings also reveal that students perceived several benefits of role-playing, particularly in understanding, remembering, and using English vocabulary. Students recognized that learning vocabulary through simulated situations helped them understand how words were used in conversations. This suggests that role-playing provides contextual learning experiences that go beyond memorizing individual word meanings.

Nation (2013) explains that vocabulary knowledge includes understanding word forms, meanings, and appropriate use. From this perspective, vocabulary learning requires more than knowing the translation of a word. Learners also need to understand how words function in particular contexts. Role-playing supports this process by allowing students to encounter and use vocabulary during simulated communication.

Repeated vocabulary practice during role-playing activities may also help students become more familiar with the words they have learned. When students use particular expressions in different conversational situations, they have opportunities to strengthen their understanding and recall of vocabulary. Schmitt (2019) highlights the importance of vocabulary acquisition and instruction in

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

developing learners' lexical knowledge.

Furthermore, students' reported improvements in confidence suggest that role-playing provides opportunities to practice English in a supportive classroom environment. By interacting with classmates, students can gradually become more comfortable using unfamiliar vocabulary. This indicates that the benefits of role-playing are not limited to vocabulary knowledge but also relate to students' willingness to communicate in English.

Challenges Encountered during Role-Playing Activities

Although students generally expressed positive perceptions, the findings also identified several challenges experienced during role-playing activities. These included insufficient vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation difficulties, nervousness when performing, and anxiety about making mistakes. These challenges indicate that students may still experience linguistic and psychological barriers when using English in front of their classmates.

Limited vocabulary knowledge can make it difficult for students to construct sentences and express their intended meanings during role-playing activities. When students do not know the appropriate words, they may experience difficulties maintaining conversations or completing their assigned roles. This demonstrates that vocabulary preparation is an important part of implementing role-playing effectively.

Pronunciation difficulties also represent a challenge because students need to pronounce words clearly to communicate their messages. In addition, nervousness and fear of making mistakes may reduce students' confidence when performing in front of others. Brown (2007) highlights the relevance of individual differences and affective factors in language learning. These factors can influence how learners respond to classroom activities and participate in communication.

However, the presence of these challenges does not necessarily mean that role-playing is unsuitable for vocabulary learning. Instead, the findings suggest that students need appropriate guidance and preparation before participating in the activities. Teachers can introduce relevant vocabulary, provide pronunciation examples, and allow students to practice their dialogues before performing. Such

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

preparation may help reduce students' anxiety and make classroom participation more comfortable.

Students' Suggestions for Improving Role-Playing Activities

The final theme concerns students' suggestions for improving the implementation of role-playing in English vocabulary learning. Students recommended conducting role-playing activities more frequently, providing vocabulary preparation before performances, allocating sufficient practice time, and selecting interesting topics. These suggestions reflect students' awareness of the aspects that can make the activities more effective and enjoyable.

The suggestion to implement role-playing more frequently indicates that students appreciate opportunities to practice English through interactive activities. Regular participation may provide repeated exposure to vocabulary and opportunities to use previously learned expressions in different situations. This is consistent with Nation's (2013) perspective that vocabulary learning requires repeated encounters with words and opportunities for meaningful use.

Furthermore, vocabulary preparation before performances is important because students need sufficient linguistic resources to participate in conversations. Providing vocabulary lists, relevant expressions, and examples of sentences can help students prepare for their roles. Adequate practice time is also necessary to allow students to understand their assigned roles, organize their conversations, and become more confident before performing.

The selection of engaging topics is another important consideration. Topics related to students' daily experiences, such as shopping, school activities, family, and friendship, may help them understand the situations more easily and use relevant vocabulary. Harmer (2007) emphasizes the importance of meaningful communicative activities in language teaching. Therefore, selecting familiar and relevant topics can make role-playing more accessible and meaningful for students.

Overall, these suggestions demonstrate that students do not simply evaluate role-playing as a learning activity but also provide ideas for improving its classroom implementation. Their responses highlight the importance of

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

preparation, practice opportunities, and relevant learning materials in supporting successful vocabulary learning through role-playing.

Taken together, the five themes demonstrate that students generally perceive role-playing positively as a strategy for supporting vocabulary learning. The findings show that students appreciate the enjoyable and interactive nature of the activities, recognize their benefits for understanding and remembering vocabulary, and become more motivated to participate in English learning. At the same time, the challenges identified by students indicate the need for appropriate preparation and teacher support.

These findings are consistent with the principles of vocabulary learning proposed by Nation (2013), particularly the importance of understanding and using vocabulary in meaningful contexts. They also support Harmer's (2007) perspective on communicative language activities, which encourage learners to use language through interaction. Furthermore, the findings are related to Xie's (2022) discussion of role-playing as an approach to developing EFL learners' communicative skills.

An important contribution of this study is its focus on students' perceptions rather than solely measuring vocabulary achievement. By examining students' opinions, motivation, perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions, the study provides insights into how learners experience role-playing as a vocabulary learning strategy. These findings suggest that the successful implementation of role-playing should consider not only the learning activities themselves but also students' readiness, confidence, and learning needs.

Therefore, role-playing can be considered a promising instructional strategy for supporting vocabulary learning in junior high schools. Its implementation should be accompanied by adequate vocabulary preparation, sufficient practice time, appropriate topic selection, and opportunities for repeated participation. These considerations may help teachers create more meaningful, interactive, and student-centered vocabulary learning experiences.

November 2026. Vol.8, No,2
e-ISSN: 2721-205X
pp.63-74

CONCLUSION

This study investigated junior high school students' perceptions of role-playing as a vocabulary learning strategy. The findings demonstrate that students generally had positive perceptions toward role-playing. Students valued it as an enjoyable, interactive, and engaging activity that enhanced their motivation, confidence, and active participation in English learning. Role-playing provided meaningful contexts for vocabulary learning, helping students understand, remember, and appropriately use vocabulary through communicative interaction. While students encountered challenges such as pronunciation difficulties and nervousness, these did not diminish their recognition of role-playing's benefits. Students suggested implementing role-playing more frequently with adequate preparation and practice opportunities. In conclusion, role-playing is an effective and positively perceived strategy for supporting vocabulary learning in junior high schools. Educators should consider implementing role-playing activities with proper preparation and sufficient practice time to maximize student engagement and vocabulary acquisition. Future research could examine vocabulary achievement through role-playing and explore the strategy in different educational contexts.

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