Global Research Trends of Role-play Method in English Language Teaching: A Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines global research trends, thematic development, and prospective directions of the role-play method in English Language Teaching (ELT) from 2000 to 2025 via an extensive bibliometric analysis. A total of 81 Scopus-indexed journal articles were selected using a systematic search strategy with Boolean operators and screened via PRISMA-based criteria. Data were exported from Scopus in CSV and RIS formats and analyzed using VOSviewer and Biblioshiny (RStudio). The analysis employed descriptive statistics, co-occurrence mapping, author collaboration networks, thematic evolution tracking, and country-wise collaboration visualization. The results indicate a thematic shift in role-play from an auxiliary technique to a fundamental educational strategy associated with 21st-century skills. Furthermore, international collaboration networks and theme clusters underscore the method's versatility across educational and cultural settings. This study presents theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions, offering significant insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers in the dynamic English Language Teaching (ELT) field.

Keywords: *Bibliometric analysis, Role-play method, English Language Teaching, Global trends, Scopus*

Introduction

The increasing demand for learner-centered, technology-integrated pedagogies in English Language Teaching (ELT) underscores the growing relevance of experiential strategies such as role-play, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift toward hybrid and online learning ecosystems. This transformation necessitates more dynamic, interactive, and technology-driven methodologies that can adeptly meet the learning requirements of the 21st century. Among the diverse array of pedagogical strategies, the role-play method has persistently showcased its significance and flexibility as an experiential learning approach that proficiently enhances students' communicative competence (Gil & Dueñas, 2023; Klimova, 2021; Li et al., 2021). Its ability to simulate authentic communication in socially rich contexts has rendered it an enduring strategy for teaching speaking skills and intercultural competence in ELT. In the contemporary landscape of digital and hybrid learning, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to amalgamate this approach with digital evaluation systems to guarantee both the efficacy and sustainability of the learning process (Donthu, N., Kumar, S., Mukherjee, D., Pandey, N., & Lim, 2021). Recent studies underscore the value of

role-play in promoting intercultural communicative competence (Biynazarova, N., Abdimomunova, A., Dzhilkibaeva, N., Takenova, Z., & Asanova, 2024; Liu, 2025), advancing confidence and fluency(Moosa et al., 2025), and supporting technology-enhanced learning (Thomson, 2024). These contributions—drawn from high-impact, peer-reviewed journals—highlight how role-play increasingly intersects with critical trends in educational technology and global learning equity.

Within this framework, bibliometric analysis presents itself as a pivotal instrument for scrutinizing the evolution and trajectory of international research concerning role-play in English Language Teaching (Aria, M., & Cuccurullo, 2017; Khasawneh, 2024). By employing visual mapping to illustrate thematic evolution, collaboration networks, and the interplay with digital assessment methods, bibliometrics offers an in-depth perspective on the architecture and trajectory of knowledge within a specific domain. The worldwide interest in educational methodologies that prioritize the learner, grounded in competencies relevant to the 21st century and the effective use of technology (OECD, 2020) makes this study increasingly relevant both practically and theoretically.

Despite the increasing body of work on role-play in ELT, most studies are confined to localized classroom interventions or qualitative case studies. There remains a critical gap in understanding the global landscape of role-play methodology through a bibliometric lens—particularly regarding its integration with digital tools and assessment practices across cultural contexts. To date, no comprehensive synthesis has mapped the scholarly trends, thematic development, and collaboration networks that underpin the field, which limits our ability to understand its evolution and inform cross-contextual pedagogical strategies.

Accordingly, this study aims to systematically map global publication trends and author productivity related to the role-play method in English Language Teaching. It further investigates the thematic clusters and conceptual frameworks that have emerged over time, visualizes international collaboration networks among scholars and institutions, and explores how role-play pedagogy intersects with digital assessment and the cultivation of 21st-century competencies. Through this multi-dimensional inquiry, the study intends to fill the existing research gap and provide practical insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers seeking to enhance ELT practices in diverse and technology-enhanced learning environments.

Method

This research utilized a bibliometric analysis methodology, a quantitative technique that leverages publication metadata-such as keywords, authors, affiliations, journals, citations, and collaboration networks scrutinize scientific literature (Donthu, N., Kumar, S., Mukherjee, D., Pandey, N., & Lim, 2021). Bibliometric analysis was selected because it enables a comprehensive synthesis of structural and temporal trends across a large corpus of research, offering not only descriptive insights but also evidence of thematic and collaborative patterns. Compared to traditional systematic reviews or meta-analyses, this method allows for network-based exploration of academic influence, keyword clusters, and research evolution.

Scopus was chosen as the data source due to its wide coverage of peer-reviewed journals, structured metadata, and compatibility with bibliometric software tools such as VOSviewer and Biblioshiny. The inclusion of articles published between 2000 and 2025 reflects an intent to capture long-term trends and recent post-pandemic shifts in educational technology and pedagogy. The starting point (2000) aligns with the early adoption of experiential learning theory in ELT literature, while the endpoint (2025) includes indexed early-access papers reflecting current directions.

The final dataset consisted of 81 peer-reviewed articles representing academic publications centred on the role-play method in English language education situations. These papers offer thorough temporal coverage for trend analysis because they were written by scholars from different institutions worldwide and published in international journals indexed in Scopus between 2000 and 2025. These articles were selected through a systematic multi-phase process, guided by PRISMA-based screening criteria to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The sample size was determined through saturation logic, where thematic and temporal redundancy was observed beyond 80 documents, indicating adequate coverage for bibliometric mapping (Zupic, I., & Čater, 2015).

A systematic search strategy was developed using advanced search syntax in the Scopus database. The search query combined relevant terms using Boolean operators to ensure comprehensive coverage while maintaining specificity: ("role-play" OR "role-playing" OR "role-playing method") AND ("English language teaching" OR "ELT" OR "EFL" OR "ESL" OR "English language education") AND (education OR pedagogy OR instruction) AND (assessment OR "digital assessment" OR "authentic assessment" OR evaluation)

The document selection followed a systematic four-phase approach based on PRISMA guidelines adapted for bibliometric studies:

Phase 1: Initial Search
The search strategy yielded 417 documents from the Scopus database, representing the initial pool of potentially relevant publications.

Phase 2: Screening and Filtering
Predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to screen the documents: (1) Peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025; (2) a clear emphasis on the role-playing method in educational settings; (3) relevance to teaching English or learning a second language; (4) the availability of comprehensive bibliographic metadata; and (5) English-language publications were all included in the inclusion criteria. Exclusion criteria included: (1) conference abstracts without full papers; (2) book chapters, books, and dissertations; (3) documents without clear methodological focus on role-play; and (4) publications with incomplete metadata.

Phase 3: Eligibility Assessment

Following preliminary screening, documents were subjected to a thorough eligibility evaluation based on keyword and abstract analysis to make sure they aligned with the goals of the study. 81 papers were chosen for further examination as a consequence of this procedure.

Phase 4: Data Export and Quality Assurance

To guarantee compatibility with analytical software, a selection of papers were exported from Scopus in both CSV and RIS formats. Duplicate items were found and eliminated after quality checks were performed on all exported data to ensure accuracy and completeness.

Two primary software tools were utilized for comprehensive bibliometric analysis: Bibliometric networks were created and visualized using VOSviewer, which was created by Van Eck and Waltman at Leiden University. This software offers sophisticated features for creating a variety of maps, such as bibliographic coupling visualizations, citation networks, and co-occurrence networks. In particular, VOSviewer was utilized for temporal overlay visualizations, author cooperation mapping, and keyword co-occurrence analysis.

Bibliometrix was used for thorough statistical analysis and information synthesis, deployed through its intuitive Biblioshiny interface in the R Studio environment. This application offers strong capabilities for examining publication patterns, author productivity, institutional partnerships, regional dispersion, and subject development across time. The program complements VOSviewer outputs by enabling descriptive statistical and sophisticated network analyses.

Reliability and validity were ensured through methodological triangulation: visual data (VOSviewer) were cross-verified with statistical outputs (Biblioshiny), and mapping parameters (such as minimum occurrence thresholds and clustering algorithms) followed established bibliometric standards (Aria, M., & Cuccurullo, 2017). Furthermore, thematic evolution maps and overlay visualizations were used to track the consistency and emergence of key concepts over time, strengthening internal validity.

The bibliometric analysis was conducted through multiple complementary analytical approaches to ensure a comprehensive examination of the research domain: Biblioshiny was used to create detailed descriptive statistics that looked at publication trends, such as (1) The most referenced documents and influential works; (2) institutional and regional distributions; (3) source publication analysis and journal impact; (4) annual publication trends and growth rates; and (5) author productivity and citation patterns. To find growth patterns and new trends during the 25-year study period, a time-series analysis was done.

The bibliometric analysis was conducted through multiple complementary methods using VOSviewer, and several network studies were carried out to uncover structural links within the study area. The frequency and strength of links between author-provided keywords and index terms were examined using keyword co-occurrence analysis to find theme clusters and study domains. This study made it possible to identify important research themes and their relationships within the literature on role-play methodology. Following that, author cooperation networks were mapped to uncover knowledge communities and research partnerships, offering insights into the social structure of this field's research production. The methodology was expanded to include mapping institutional collaborations, which identified centres of expertise in role-play research and exposed inter-organizational research tendencies. A country collaboration study was conducted to find global knowledge networks and investigate trends in international research cooperation. In order to track intellectual lineage and identify foundational works that have influenced the evolution of the role-play approach in English language instruction, citation network analysis was utilized to discover knowledge flows and influential publications.

Temporal mapping techniques were employed to examine the chronological evolution of research themes: (1) overlay visualizations showing theme development over time; (2) thematic mapping based on centrality and density measures; (3) identification of emerging, motor, basic, and declining themes; and (4) trend analysis to predict future research directions. The results of several analytical techniques were triangulated to offer thorough insights into the research subject. Research themes were categorised using strategic diagrams, and thematic development was tracked using evolution maps, identifying research gaps and potential for the future. All analyses adhered to accepted bibliometric procedures to guarantee reproducibility and scientific rigour. Combining several analytical techniques and tools strengthened the confirmation of results and improved the dependability of conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This discussion revisits the research objectives by interpreting how the results address the evolving position of role-play methodology in ELT, its thematic development, collaborative

networks, and its intersection with digital education and assessment.

Annual Publication Trends and Research Evolution

A fascinating story of how role-play methodology evolved from a supplementary teaching method to a key pedagogical approach in English language instruction is revealed by the bibliometric study.

Figure 1. Annual Publication Trends and Research Evolution
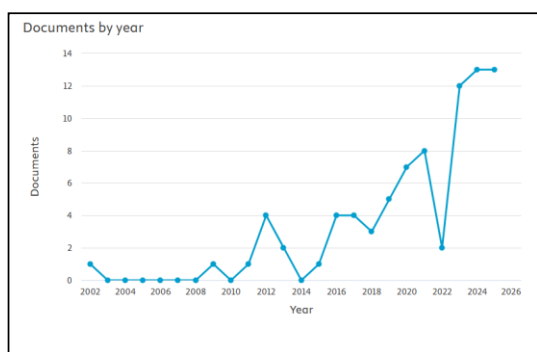
Three separate evolutionary phases are depicted in the temporal visualization, which reflects greater shifts in educational philosophy and technology capability. The original and experimental attempts to investigate role-play themes in ELT contexts were characterised by periods of oscillation after periods of stagnation. Despite its low research output, this foundational phase laid the theoretical platform for later expansion (Jackson, 2002; Little, 2005). The sharp rise in recent years suggests a fundamental change in teaching strategies, most likely brought about by the necessity for post-pandemic pedagogical innovation and the development of digital education.

This transformation aligns with findings from (Kebritchi et al., 2010), who showed that contemporary teaching strategies that demand student participation are highly successful; their research received 446 citations, demonstrating the long-term influence of interactive teaching techniques. The post-pandemic acceleration aligns with the pressing need for dynamic, captivating teaching strategies that work well in conventional and online learning settings. (Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021). Contemporary evidence from (Moosa et al., 2025) shows that role-play is still relevant in meeting today's educational concerns in their research on "Boosting Fluency and Confidence: The Impact of Role-Play Activities on Speaking Skills of ESL Learners," which supports this trend.

As one of the key focal points in the worldwide ELT discourse, the phenomena show that role-play methodology has grown more pertinent in of authentic and interactive assessment-based learning. When considered in the context of the worldwide education revolution, where the paradigm shift towards competency development rather than content transmission mirrors broader trends in education, this evolution is especially noteworthy (Seltzer, 2019). The steady increase in recent publication numbers indicates a lasting scholarly engagement rather than a fleeting trend. This suggest that role-play has firmly established itself as an enduring element in language education research.

These findings directly respond to the first research aim: to understand how publication patterns evolved over time and reflect shifting pedagogical priorities post-pandemic.

Author Productivity and Distributed Expertise Patterns

The examination of author contributions uncovers a notable trend: Most researchers produce individual publications, whereas a select few authors exhibit a preponderance of multiple works.

Figure 2. *Author Productivity and Distributed Expertise Patterns*
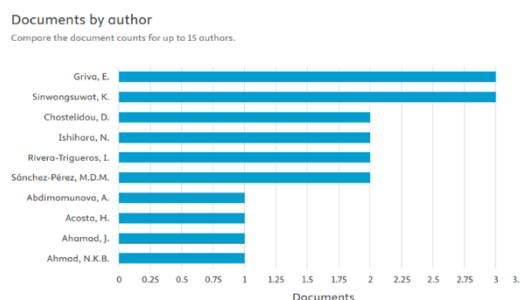
This distribution reveals that research in role-play garners attention from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, indicating a widespread acknowledgement of its educational significance across multiple academic fields. Nonetheless, this pattern also uncovers overlooked possibilities for the ongoing advancement of research programmes and the methodical construction of knowledge within the discipline. (Alam et al., 2023).

The decentralized character of knowledge is illustrated by the distinct contributions of individual scholars investigating particular applications. For instance, (Pinzl, 2024) exhibits developing proficiency through "Non-scripted role-playing with heritage speakers and second language learners in the medical interpreting classroom," while (Morales et al., 2015) made significant contributions to professional contexts through their extensively referenced research (56 citations) on "National Survey of Medical Spanish Curriculum in U.S. Medical Schools." The variety present enhances the discipline by introducing

distinct cultural and methodological viewpoints, as evidenced by (Busse & Krause, 2016), who conducted an examination of intercultural learning methodologies and garnered 31 citations for their comparative analysis.

The absence of specialized knowledge hubs signifies a dual aspect of challenge and potential for advancement within the field. The presence of distributed interest fosters a variety of viewpoints and applications; however, the lack of specialized research groups constrains the ability to conduct extensive, longitudinal studies that could yield conclusive evidence about the effectiveness of role-play in various contexts (Hiver, 2013). This discovery indicates potential avenues for institutional collaboration and the formation of research consortia, wherein universities might create specialized research centers that integrate knowledge from language education, educational technology, and assessment science.

The decentralized authorship structure supports the second objective of this study—mapping scholarly contributions and collaboration. This also highlights the opportunity to build sustained interdisciplinary research hubs for role-play innovation.

Geographic Distribution and International Collaboration Networks

The geographic examination indicates that research contributions are relatively well-distributed among countries in Asia, Europe, and America rather than being centralised in a singular region.

Figure 3. Geographic Distribution and International Collaboration Networks

This pattern illustrates that role-play methodologies in English language instruction have garnered global interest and are applied in diverse educational settings, signifying a universal pedagogical significance that surpasses cultural and educational system limitations (Tsareva et al., 2020). The global dimension indicates significant opportunities for cooperative enquiry and the exchange of insights among nations facing diverse educational environments and obstacles.

The contributions from Asia reveal notable efficacy in EFL contexts, as illustrated by the successful implementations recorded by scholars such as (Phoeun & Sengsri, 2021) in Thai educational settings and (Namanyane & Shaoan, 2025), who address policy integration challenges in Chinese educational reforms. Similarly, (Choi & Sinwongsuwat, 2024) exemplifies the integration of technology within Asian innovation by delving into vlogging as a contemporary alternative to conventional role-play techniques. The contributions illustrate the significant applicability of role-play methodology in environments where English is utilised as a foreign language.

European research contributions focus primarily on theoretical framework development and intercultural competence, as demonstrated by (Busse & Krause, 2016) and (Tsareva et al., 2020), who contributed valuable insights into developing intercultural competence through professional-oriented English courses (14 citations). North American research emphasizes specialized professional applications and technological innovation, exemplified by (Morales et al., 2015) and (Marion et al., 2008), who developed comprehensive curricula for healthcare professional training (27 citations). This geographic distribution highlights a synergy of expertise that could be harnessed through improved international collaboration to tackle common educational challenges.

Thematic Evolution and Conceptual Framework Development

An analysis of the co-occurrence of 38 keywords uncovers five principal thematic clusters, each embodying distinct conceptual frameworks for the application of role-play in the context of English language acquisition.

Figure 4. Thematic Evolution and Conceptual Framework Development

The initial cluster includes associations with clinical studies, learner perception, and problem-based learning strategies, suggesting that role-play serves as a means to examine the

psychological and cognitive effects of language learning processes (Hamad, 2013; Jackson, 2002). This foundation is exemplified by contemporary research from (Biynazarova et al., 2024), who validate role-play's capacity for developing linguistic creativity and motivation through interactive techniques.

The second cluster emphasizes the cultivation of vital competencies for the 21st century, underscoring the importance of critical thinking, communication skills, and cross-cultural interaction. It illustrates how role-play has adeptly evolved to align with modern educational imperatives while preserving its foundational strengths in experiential learning (Seltzer, 2019). This evolution is underpinned by research indicating that role-play methodology transcends mere language skill training, facilitating the development of intricate competencies. This is substantiated by studies that have garnered considerable citation impact for their contributions to culturally responsive pedagogy and the advancement of sociolinguistic literacy.

The third cluster substantiates the intricate connection between role-play and communicative methodologies in language acquisition, as evidenced by the introduction of concepts such as communicative competence, communicative language teaching, and conversation analysis, all of which signify a notable efficacy in fostering genuine interaction within the classroom setting (Hiver, 2013). The emergence of online learning terminology signifies a noteworthy evolution in the implementation of role-play within digital contexts, gaining heightened importance in the wake of the post-pandemic shift towards digital learning environments. This adaptation is supported by (Thomson, 2024), who investigated technology-mediated feedback systems and showcased the effective amalgamation of conventional approaches with digital augmentation. The fourth and fifth clusters concentrate on the dimensions of practical implementation and technological innovation, highlighting the integration of educational technology and game-based methodologies (Thomson, 2024; Williyan et al., 2024). The clusters underscore the pragmatic aspects of role-play implementation and acknowledge that effective instruction necessitates specialized teacher preparation. They also reflect the field's progression towards technology-enhanced experiences, particularly through the applications of virtual reality and artificial intelligence.

These thematic clusters fulfill the third objective of the study, which is to identify dominant and emerging concepts in role-play research. The integration with technology, assessment, and intercultural skills reflects a structural progression beyond basic communicative training.

Future Research Directions and Emerging Technological Integration

Figure 5. Future Research Directions

The overlay visualisation illustrates the evolution of research from 2018 to 2024, highlighting the temporal transitions in emphasis from traditional concerns to innovative learning methodologies and technologies. Initial investigations underscored the biological and perceptual aspects, concentrating on the efficacy of role-play through cognitive and individual lenses, as demonstrated by seminal research (Little, 2005). Recent investigations are progressively delving into the amalgamation of innovative and digitally-oriented educational methodologies, suggesting successful addressing of fundamental efficacy enquiries and a shift towards research focused on optimisation.

Recent advancements indicate a movement towards enhancing competencies essential for the 21st century, with concepts such as analytical reasoning, effective communication, and experiential learning becoming increasingly significant (Liu, 2025). This suggests that role-play has progressed from merely serving as a communication aid to being woven into curriculum design, highlighting the importance of intricate and cooperative skills. The advent of technology integration themes signifies a potentially profound avenue for future research exploration, with studies like (Tsai & Piamsai, 2025) demonstrating contemporary assessment innovation through peer evaluation and non-scripted activities.

Contemporary research trajectories highlight the significance of communicative approaches, focussing on the development of communicative competence, the dynamics of online learning, and the intricacies of conversation analysis as pivotal areas of inquiry (Rodis & Locsin, 2019). The emergence of online learning

within keyword networks illustrates the substantial adaptation of role-play methods for digital contexts, especially in the wake of the pandemic-induced transition to online educational environments. Recent research increasingly investigates the integration of role-play with innovative methodologies, encompassing artificial intelligence, game-based learning, and educational technology, as demonstrated by emerging studies on AI collaboration in content development (Williyan et al., 2024).

The visual mapping illustrates that role-play methodology is an evolving language learning strategy that adapts to modern requirements, acting as a conduit between conventional language instruction and the competency-based education models necessary for 21st-century learning contexts. Future research endeavors should concentrate on a methodical examination of optimal technology integration strategies, the formulation of extensive assessment frameworks for intricate competencies, and the inquiry into cross-cultural adaptation necessities for varied educational settings. The domain seems poised for sophisticated applications that highlight the integration of artificial intelligence, the implementation of virtual reality, and the longitudinal evaluation of role-play experiences on the development of professional competencies.

These observations directly address the study's final objective, which was to explore the prospective directions of role-play methodology in ELT. The identification of emerging themes such as AI collaboration, peer assessment, and virtual reality integration demonstrates that role-play research is increasingly responsive to the demands of digitally-enhanced, competency-based education.

Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis of the role-play method in English Language Teaching uncovers a noteworthy evolution from a marginal instructional technique to a fundamental pedagogical strategy, grounded in a systematic review of 81 Scopus-indexed documents spanning from 2000 to 2025. The results reveal three distinct evolutionary stages, marked by a remarkable growth of 224% in publication output from 2019 to 2025, suggesting that role-play methodology has reached a significant level of prominence within the global research landscape.

Thematic evolution reveals five principal conceptual clusters advancing from foundational pedagogical validation to the intricate integration of role-play with 21st-century competencies,

technological enhancement, and innovative assessment strategies. Geographic analysis indicates widespread global acknowledgement across Asia, Europe, and America, demonstrating the method's adaptability and interdisciplinary potential.

This study enhances the global landscape of English Language Teaching research by presenting the first comprehensive bibliometric mapping of trends in role-play pedagogy. The results offer evidence-based insights for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, highlighting the structural and thematic transformation of role-play over time and across contexts. These findings suggest that role-play pedagogy is not only relevant in classroom language instruction, but also strategically valuable in the design of professional training, intercultural education, and curriculum innovation across global contexts. Educators can leverage these insights to develop context-responsive, participatory language learning environments, while policymakers may consider the integration of role-play strategies into national ELT frameworks to enhance communication-based competencies.

Future studies should explore the intersection of role-play with immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and adaptive AI feedback systems. Longitudinal studies could further investigate how role-play activities shape learner identity, motivation, and intercultural competence across varied educational systems and age groups. In addition, mixed-methods approaches combining bibliometric analysis with classroom-based inquiry could yield deeper insights into the practical application of emerging trends. The convergence of digital innovation, experiential learning, and global collaboration points to a vibrant future for role-play pedagogy as a transformative tool in ELT. As education systems continue to evolve, role-play remains poised to meet the complex communicative, technological, and cultural demands of the 21st century.

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