

Recommendations and Discussions on the Use of Role Play in Online Social Studies Teaching for Elementary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Online teaching is increasingly being utilized in elementary education. However, elementary school students' learning performance in digital environments can be affected by online distractions and a lack of interactivity. Role play offers a highly interactive and immersive learning experience that can help students adapt to the online environment. To better achieve the teaching goals of the core competencies – “thinking” and “teamwork” – outlined in Taiwan's Curriculum Guidelines of 12-Year Basic Education for Social Studies, this study explores the integration of role play into Social Studies teaching. To understand the learning challenges students face in Social Studies and provide recommendations for designing role play courses, this study interviewed three Social Studies education experts. The findings reveal that the extensive and complex historical knowledge in Social Studies can make learning difficult for students. The study suggests incorporating “pre-class preparation,” “thought-tracking,” “peer assessment,” and “reflection and discussion” into role play activities. These results offer valuable materials and suggestions for designing online role play courses in Social Studies, aiming to enhance students' learning performance in online classes.

Keywords: Role play, Online learning, Elementary school students

INTRODUCTION/OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

The emergence of online learning platforms has made teaching more flexible and is being gradually applied in elementary education (Alfarimba et al., 2021). However, literature indicates that compared to offline physical environments, elementary students in online settings may experience difficulties such as decreased learning motivation and needing parental accompaniment to complete learning objectives, due to the online environment's lack of interactivity and numerous internet distractions (Alfarimba et al., 2021). Online role-play can effectively enhance students' self-planning, self-monitoring, self-regulation, and self-assessment abilities, thereby increasing the efficiency of learning resource utilization (Sun et al., 2022). Role-play can also help students understand and memorize complex concepts (Lana et al., 2016). According to the core competencies of “systems thinking and problem solving” and “interpersonal relationships and

teamwork” in social studies outlined in Ministry of Education (2018), the immersive learning experience of role-play can help better achieve teaching objectives. However, there is currently a lack of specific teaching strategies and implementation plans for applying role-play to elementary students in online environments. Based on the above research background, this study aims to explore how to use role-play teaching methods to help students improve learning performance and fully leverage the advantages of role-play in an online setting. The purposes of this study are twofold: (1) understand students’ current difficulties in social studies and commonly used teaching methods in the subject; (2) based on interview results, provide teaching recommendations for online role-play lessons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role Play

Role play teaching is a method that simulates real-life scenarios, allowing students to play different roles to solve problems and integrate theory with practice. This method helps students experience and apply learned knowledge in simulated situations, thereby improving learning outcomes (Mamaghani, 2021). Research shows that role play teaching methods can better help kinesthetic learners understand learning content and stimulate their interest in learning (Lana et al., 2016). In recent years, with the advancement of technology, role play has gradually been applied in online courses, significantly enhancing students’ autonomous learning outcomes and resource utilization, as well as their self-planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment abilities (Sun et al., 2022). Different scholars have various suggestions for designing role play courses to meet different teaching objectives. This study compiles relevant suggestions from different scholars in Table 1.

Table 1. Suggestions and methods for role play courses.

Suggestion/ Method	Description	Source
Freeze Frame	Asking the audience about the current mental activity of the performer during the role play	(Liao, 2010)
Thought-Tracking	Asking the performer about their current mental activity during the role play	(Liao, 2010)
Peer Assessment	After the role play, peers rate the performance they just watched	(Liao, 2010; Chen, 2007; Song, 2020)
Re-Role Play	After the role play, discussion with teachers and peers to consolidate knowledge, followed by a second role play	(Zeng, 2005)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Suggestion/ Method	Description	Source
Reflection and Discussion	Summarizing what students have learned in class to help prepare for the next role play course	(Liao, 2010; Kodotchigova, 2002; Bawa, 2022; Chen, 2007)
Performance Form	No unified form for student performances	(Song, 2020)
Preparation Time	Online role play has certain limitations compared to offline environments, so students should be given ample preparation time	(Song, 2020; Zhang et al., 2016)
Virtual Scenarios	Creating performance atmosphere using multimedia (e.g., videos, pictures, sounds)	(Chen, 2007)
Choosing Themes	Teachers should select suitable and interesting themes based on course content and difficulty level	(Doğantan, 2020)

Social Studies in Taiwan's Elementary Schools

The purpose of social studies in Taiwan's elementary schools is to enhance the ability to explore and understand knowledge in history, geography, civics and social science subjects and fields. The main educational functions of the social domain are to transmit culture and systems, and cultivate attitudes and abilities for exploration, participation, practice, reflection and innovation. Its concept is to nurture civic literacy in the new generation, so that when faced with various challenges, citizens can make choices for the "common good" and have the power for social practice (Ministry of Education, 2018).

Role-play teaching simulates real-life scenarios, allowing students to play different roles to solve problems and integrate theory with practice, thereby improving learning effectiveness. Research shows that role-play can help kinesthetic learners understand learning content and stimulate their interest (Lana et al., 2016). Furthermore, with technological advancements, online role-play significantly improves students' self-directed learning effectiveness and resource utilization, while enhancing their self-planning, self-monitoring, and self-assessment abilities. Different scholars have proposed various recommendations for role-play lesson design based on different teaching objectives. This study will explore the "role-play factors" aspect with elementary education experts in the expert interviews. Social studies aims to enhance students' abilities to explore and understand knowledge in history, geography, civics and social sciences (Ministry of Education, 2018). To achieve the learning objectives and competencies defined for social studies in the 108 Curriculum Guidelines, this study will explore recommendations and discussions on applying role-play to social studies teaching.

METHODS

To understand current elementary students' difficulties in learning social studies and the feasibility of role-play strategies, this study recruited three elementary social studies education experts with five or more years of teaching experience for expert interviews in May 2024. Expert (A) is a social studies teacher with over ten years of teaching experience, while Experts (B) and (C) are both senior grade homeroom teachers with five and over ten years of teaching experience respectively. The interview outline serves five purposes:

- (1) Understand the educational experts' backgrounds.
- (2) Understand students' current learning difficulties in social studies.
- (3) Understand the most commonly used/effective teaching methods in current social studies teaching
- (4) Understand the usage of "role-play" in social studies teaching and factors influencing role-play
- (5) Understand the assessment of social studies learning effectiveness and recommendations for learning materials

Based on the above purposes, this study proposes the following interview outline. After the interviews, verbatim transcripts were analyzed. The interview question items can be divided into three major blocks according to the research purposes: "social studies education background and methods", "role-play strategies and procedures", and "assessment and recommendations". These can be further subdivided into "background", "subject difficulties", "teaching methods", "role-play factors", "learning effectiveness", and "lesson recommendations". The specific question items are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Interview questions and categories.

Category		Question
Social studies education background and methods	Background	What is your main teaching subject? How many years have you been teaching social studies?
	Learning difficulties	What do you think are the learning difficulties in social studies for students? What do you think are the reasons for these difficulties (e.g., teaching materials, teaching methods)?
	Teaching methods	What are the common teaching methods used in social studies? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these methods?

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued

Category		Question
Role play strategies and processes	Role play factors	What do you think are the difficulties in implementing role play strategies? What should be considered when transitioning from offline to online role play? What suggestions do you have for the steps in role play courses?
Evaluation and suggestions	Learning outcomes evaluation	How do you evaluate students' learning outcomes?
	Course materials suggestions	What are your suggestions for using role play in online courses in terms of learning materials?

RESULTS

Based on the results of the expert interviews conducted in May 2024 as organized in Table 1, the research findings can be divided into the following three aspects: “social studies education background and methods”, “role-play strategies and procedures”, and “assessment and improvement recommendations”. These are further subdivided into eight dimensions: “social studies difficulties”, “basic teaching methods”, “teaching methods and advantages/disadvantages”, “role-play strategies”, “elements from offline to online role-play”, “role-play procedures”, “teaching assessment”, and “lesson recommendations”. Detailed explanations are provided below.

Social Studies Education Background and Methods

- (1) **Social Studies Difficulties:** According to the descriptions of Experts (A), (B), and (C), they unanimously believe that the content in “history” is more difficult for students in social studies teaching. The reason may be that “history” is relatively distant from the present, making it hard for students to fully immerse in and understand the events that occurred at that historical moment. Moreover, due to curriculum progress requirements, the time spans between historical events are quite large, and the content that needs to be memorized is extensive, thus causing students' learning difficulties in social studies.
- (2) **Basic Teaching Methods:** In the interviews, Experts (A) and (C) pointed out that lecturing (teachers lecturing knowledge points to students) is the most common teaching method in social studies. Because the knowledge points are relatively scattered and numerous, and the teaching of knowledge content needs to be completed within a designated time, lecturing is the most basic and indispensable teaching method in social studies.
- (3) **Teaching Methods and their Advantages/Disadvantages:** The experts mentioned in the interviews that “flipped classroom”, “question-and-answer interaction”, and “classroom discussion” are the more

frequently used teaching methods. Among them, “question-and-answer interaction” was unanimously chosen by all three experts, because it allows for immediate feedback from students and is currently the most commonly used teaching method in offline classrooms. The advantages of the above three teaching methods are that they can guide students to think in class, increase their understanding of knowledge, and thereby enhance classroom participation. However, a common disadvantage is the inability to simultaneously attend to all students in the class. Classroom discussions may cause some students’ opinions to be influenced by peers and prevent them from expressing their own thoughts. Interaction time can also be difficult to control, leading to overly long discussions and distractions.

Role-Play Strategies and Procedures

- (1) **Role-Play Strategies:** Expert (A) pointed out that extroverted students have higher participation in role-play compared to introverted students. Experts (B) and (C) believe the difficulty in role-play lies in how to guide students to immerse in the roles and how to present the external aspects of the roles, because students have limited life experience. To better guide students in immersing into roles, Expert (A) indicated that students should pre-study before the role-play to increase their learning motivation for the lesson.
- (2) **Elements from Offline to Online Role-Play:** Experts (A), (B), and (C) all unanimously agree that the key to role-play is how to guide students to better immerse in the roles. Therefore, students should collect relevant information about the roles they will play before the role-play, and be guided to think, in order to immerse in and understand the roles.
- (3) **Role-Play Procedures:** Experts (A), (B), and (C) all agree that the step of “thought-tracking” should be added to the role-play lesson to understand the students’ psychological activities at that moment while playing the roles, helping them better understand the knowledge.

Assessment and Recommendations for Role-Play

- (1) **Learning Effectiveness Assessment:** Experts (A), (B), and (C) all expressed that they assess student learning effectiveness through exams and tests. This indicates the continued importance of traditional assessment methods in teaching.
- (2) **Lesson Materials:** Experts (A) and (C) pointed out that “stories of indigenous peoples” and “stories from the Hexi era” are themes they have implemented in previous role-play lessons with relatively good results. Expert (B) suggested that lesson content can be designed based on civics knowledge, because civics is closer to students’ lives. Senior grade students are considered more suitable research subjects for role-play because their physical and mental development is more mature than lower and middle grade students, and they have richer life experiences.
- (3) **Other Recommendations:** Experts (A), (B), and (C) all believe that in terms of performance, the role-play procedures should be simplified as much as possible, and the burden on students regarding costuming for

the roles should be reduced. The reason is that the focus of role-play teaching is on understanding the roles to absorb knowledge. The specific question items and analysis results from Experts (A), (B), and (C) are tabulated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Expert interview analysis.

Question	Expert A	Expert B	Expert C
Basic information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social studies teacher • Over ten years of teaching experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior grade homeroom teacher • Five years of teaching experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior grade homeroom teacher • Over ten years of teaching experience
Social studies difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High difficulty of historical content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of social experiences in lower grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of social experiences in lower grades
Basic Teaching Methods	Lecture method	-	Lecture method
Teaching methods and their advantages and disadvantages	Flipped classroom, interactive Q&A <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance participation • Cannot address all students 	Interactive Q&A, classroom discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot address all students • Enhance thinking • Peers influence each other 	Interactive Q&A, classroom discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance interaction and understanding • Interaction time difficult to control, may cause distraction
Role play strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extroverted students more active • Pre-class learning to increase motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to guide students in immersion • Students have limited life experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to present external aspects of roles • Students should present the roles themselves or their understanding of the roles
Elements of transitioning from offline to online role play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-class information collection • Do not limit performance format 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-class information collection • Let students immerse in and understand roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let students understand roles • Guide students to understand the character
Role play processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thought-tracking • reflection and discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thought-tracking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thought-tracking • Frozen moment • peer assessment
Learning outcomes evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exams • Classroom notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exams
Course materials suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Indigenous stories” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on senior students • Design materials around civics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Stories from the Hexi period”
Other suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplify role play process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplify role play process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplify role play process

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through expert interviews and analysis of the interview results, this study identified students' difficulties in social studies, common teaching methods used by teachers in social studies, role-play related strategies and recommendations, and lesson material recommendations. After analyzing the eight dimensions of "social studies difficulties", "basic teaching methods", "teaching methods and advantages/disadvantages", "role-play strategies", "elements from offline to online role-play", "role-play procedures", "teaching assessment", and "lesson recommendations", the following conclusions were reached:

- (1) In elementary social studies, students may experience learning difficulties due to the complexity of content in history subjects.
- (2) The most basic teaching method in class is lecturing.
- (3) The most commonly used methods are classroom discussion and question-and-answer interaction, but they have the disadvantage of being unable to focus on all students.
- (4) In role-play teaching, students should be required to collect information about their roles before the role-play. The purpose is to deepen the students' understanding of the roles to achieve the objectives of role-play.
- (5) Experts (A), (B), and (C) all pointed out the importance of "thought-tracking" for role-play in the interviews. Literature indicates that peer assessment can enhance classroom interaction and fun (Song, 2020), while reflection and discussion can help students summarize the knowledge learned in class and assist in preparing for the next role-play lesson (Bawa, 2022). Experts (A) and (C) also mentioned its help and effectiveness for lessons in the interviews. Based on the results of cross-referencing expert interviews with literature, this study believes that online role-play lesson content should include: pre-study, thought-tracking, peer assessment, and reflection and discussion.

Furthermore, this study found that in the "elements from offline to online role-play" dimension of the interviews, the relevant recommendations provided by Experts (A), (B), and (C) are all applicable to both offline and online environments, but they did not provide recommendations specific to the online teaching environment. This study speculates that the reason is that role-play lessons have fewer opportunities to be implemented in elementary online teaching, so teachers have less relevant experience with online role-play.

The above research results can serve as teaching recommendations for future social studies research. Based on the research purposes and findings, the following two suggestions are proposed:

- (1) The first purpose of this study was to understand students' difficulties in social studies. The results found that the complexity and numerous memory points in the "history" content led to students' learning difficulties. Therefore, this study recommends that for future social studies role-play lesson design, the themes can focus on the "history"

- aspect, leveraging the advantages of role-play to alleviate students' difficulties in this area.
- (2) The second purpose of this study was to derive relevant teaching recommendations for role-play lessons. The results discovered that Experts (A), (B), and (C) all chose "thought-tracking" as a necessary step in lesson role-play. However, according to the role-play lesson methods compiled in the literature review of this study, some methods were not selected by the teachers. Therefore, it is recommended that future research can investigate the effectiveness of different methods in online role-play based on lesson objectives, role-play themes, teaching material content, etc.

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