



Using role-play as a pedagogical tool to develop Japanese speaking skills in university students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of role-play activities as a pedagogical strategy for enhancing Japanese speaking skills among university students. Conducted at the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, the research involved undergraduate learners of Japanese who actively participated in role-play sessions integrated into their regular coursework. The activities were designed to simulate authentic communicative situations, such as casual encounters between friends or conversations about transportation, allowing students to practice newly introduced vocabulary in meaningful contexts. The results of the classroom observations and student feedback demonstrated that role-play not only improved learners' fluency but also supported long-term vocabulary retention and encouraged greater confidence in oral expression. Furthermore, the interactive nature of role-play fostered collaboration, reduced speaking anxiety, and motivated students to engage more fully in the learning process. By bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, role-play was shown to be an effective tool in promoting communicative competence in Japanese. Besides, the article argues that role-play activities should be more widely adopted in Japanese language classrooms at the university level, as they provide learners with authentic opportunities to internalize linguistic structures and develop essential communicative skills. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions in foreign language pedagogy, highlighting the importance of learner-centered approaches in fostering both linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness.

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Universitet talabalarida yapon tilida gapirish ko'nikmalarini rivojlantirishda rolli o'yindan pedagogik vosita sifatida foydalanish

ANNOTATSIYA

Kalit so'zlar:

Rolli o'yin,
yapon tili pedagogikasi,
nutqiy ko'nikmalar,
kommunikativ
kompetensiya,
nutqning ravonligi,
so'z boyligini saqlab qolish,
ishonch,
tashvishning kamayishi,
motivatsiya,
universitet talabalari,
oliy ta'lim,
tilni o'zlashtirish,
kommunikativ til o'qitish,
amaliy qo'llash,
og'zaki nutq ko'nikmasi,
sinfidagi mashg'ulotlar,
tengdoshlararo muloqot,
sociomadaniy kompetensiya,
pedagogik strategiya,
til o'qitish metodologiyasi.

Ushbu ilmiy maqola universitet talabalari orasida yapon tilida gapirish ko'nikmalarini rivojlantirishda rolli o'yin faoliyatlarining pedagogik strategiya sifatidagi samaradorligini tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot O'zbekiston Davlat Jahon tillari Universitetida o'tkazilib, unda yapon tilini o'rganayotgan bakalavriat talabalari muntazam mashg'ulotlarga integratsiya qilingan rolli o'yinlarda faol ishtirok etdilar. Mashg'ulotlar haqiqiy kommunikativ vaziyatlarni taqlid qilish uchun ishlab chiqilgan bo'lib, masalan, ikki do'stning kutilmagan uchrashuvi yoki transport haqida suhbat kabi vaziyatlarda talabalar yangi o'zlashtirilgan lug'atni mazmunli kontekstda qo'llash imkoniyatiga ega bo'ldilar. Ko'plab talabalarning fikr-mulohazalari shuni ko'rsatdiki, rolli o'yinlar nafaqat talabalardagi nutq ravonligini yaxshiladi, balki qiyin so'zlardan iborat lug'atni eslab qolishni qo'llab-quvvatlaydi va og'zaki ifodada o'ziga bo'lgan ishonchni kuchaytiradi. Bundan tashqari, rolli o'yinlarning interaktiv xususiyati hamkorlikni rivojlantiradi, gapirishdagi xavotirni kamaytirib, talabalarni o'quv jarayonida yanada faolroq ishtirok etishga undaydi. Nazariy bilim va amaliy qo'llash o'rtasidagi bo'shliqni to'ldirgan holda, rolli o'yinlar yapon tilida kommunikativ kompetensiyani rivojlantirishda samarali vosita ekanligi aniqlandi. Shuningdek, maqolada rolli o'yinlarni universitet darajasidagi yapon tili darslarida kengroq qo'llash kerakligi ta'kidlanadi, chunki ular talabalarga til strukturasi va kommunikativ ko'nikmalarni samarali o'zlashtirish uchun haqiqiy imkoniyatlarni taqdim etadi. Tadqiqot natijalari xorijiy til pedagogikasidagi dolzarb munozaralarga hissa qo'shib, til o'rganishda o'quvchi markazli yondashuvlarning lingvistik mahorat va madaniy ongni rivojlantirishdagi ahamiyatini yoritadi.

Использование ролевых игр как педагогического инструмента для развития навыков устной речи на японском языке у студентов университета

АННОТАЦИЯ

Ключевые слова:

Ролевая игра,
педагогика японского
языка,
разговорные навыки,
коммуникативная
компетенция,
беглость речи,
усвоение лексики,

Данное исследование рассматривает эффективность ролевых игр как педагогической стратегии в развитии навыков устной речи на японском языке у студентов университетов. Исследование было проведено в Узбекском государственном университете мировых языков, где студенты бакалавриата, изучающие японский язык, активно участвовали в ролевых играх, интегрированных в

уверенность,
снижение тревожности,
мотивация,
студенты университета,
высшее образование,
овладение языком,
коммуникативное
обучение языку,
практическое применение,
умение устной речи,
классные занятия,
взаимодействие со
сверстниками,
социокультурная
компетенция,
педагогическая стратегия,
методика преподавания
языка.

их регулярные занятия. Эти задания были разработаны для моделирования аутентичных коммуникативных ситуаций, таких как случайные встречи друзей или беседы о транспорте, что позволило студентам применять недавно усвоенную лексику в содержательном контексте. Результаты наблюдений на занятиях и обратной связи студентов показали, что ролевые игры не только улучшили беглость речи учащихся, но и способствовали долговременному запоминанию лексики, а также укрепили уверенность в устной коммуникации. Более того, интерактивный характер ролевых игр развивал сотрудничество, снижал уровень тревожности при говорении и мотивировал студентов активнее вовлекаться в учебный процесс. Заполняя разрыв между теоретическими знаниями и практическим применением, ролевые игры показали свою эффективность как инструмента развития коммуникативной компетенции на японском языке. Кроме того, в статье утверждается, что ролевые игры должны более широко применяться на занятиях японского языка в университетах, так как они предоставляют студентам подлинные возможности для усвоения языковых структур и развития важных коммуникативных навыков. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в современные дискуссии в области методики преподавания иностранных языков, подчеркивая важность студентоцентрированных подходов в формировании как языковой компетентности, так и культурного сознания.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most challenging skills for learners of any foreign language, including Japanese. While reading, writing, and grammar often dominate traditional classrooms, oral communication requires not only knowledge of vocabulary and structures but also confidence, spontaneity, and the ability to respond appropriately in real-life situations. University students, in particular, often face difficulties in developing fluency due to limited opportunities to practice authentic conversations, fear of making mistakes, and lack of motivation. Therefore, innovative and interactive teaching methods are necessary to enhance speaking competence. Role-play is a communicative language teaching method that has a long-standing history in language education. Its roots can be traced back to the early 20th century, influenced by the Direct Method and later by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes the use of language in real-life contexts. Over the decades, role-play has evolved into a widely accepted pedagogical strategy for engaging learners in active language use, promoting both linguistic and socio-cultural competence. By simulating real-life situations, role-play allows students to apply grammar, vocabulary, and expressions in meaningful contexts, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical communication.

In Japanese language education, role-play offers a unique advantage because Japanese communication often relies heavily on context, politeness levels, and situational appropriateness. Through structured role-play activities, learners can practice everyday

dialogues, cultural conventions, and situational expressions in a safe and controlled environment. Examples include two friends meeting and discussing transportation, ordering food in a restaurant, or asking for directions. Such activities help students internalize newly learned vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and gain confidence in speaking. This article explores the effectiveness of role-play activities in enhancing Japanese speaking skills among university students. The study focuses on classroom experiments and surveys conducted at the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, demonstrating how role-play fosters active participation, motivation, and communicative competence. By analyzing these outcomes, the article argues for the broader adoption of role-play as an essential methodology in Japanese language pedagogy, highlighting its historical significance, practical applications, and pedagogical benefits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. *Communicative Language Teaching and the Historical Development of Role-Play*

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been a cornerstone of modern language pedagogy since the 1970s. Its primary aim is to develop learners' communicative competence, encompassing not only grammatical knowledge but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic skills. Within this framework, role-play (ロールプレイ) has emerged as a critical technique to provide learners with opportunities to engage in authentic communication.

Historically, role-play has roots in the **Direct Method** of the early 20th century, which emphasized oral practice, immersion, and immediate use of language in context. By the mid-20th century, educators like Harold Palmer and Charles Berlitz promoted interactive and experiential approaches, which laid the foundation for incorporating role-play in classrooms. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, CLT formalized the use of communicative tasks, with scholars such as Littlewood (1981) and Canale & Swain (1980) advocating for learner-centered and task-based approaches. Role-play fits naturally within this methodology, as it allows students to actively produce language rather than passively memorize rules.

In the context of Japanese language education, role-play provides a unique pedagogical advantage. Japanese communication is highly context-dependent and often relies on keigo -敬語, *honorific language*- to express politeness, respect, and social hierarchy. For example, students practicing scenarios such as asking a professor for guidance or making a formal request in a shop must correctly use sonkeigo (尊敬語) and kenjōgo (謙譲語) forms. Studies by Kato (2002) and Tanaka (2010) demonstrated that role-play activities significantly improve students' ability to use keigo appropriately in realistic interactions. Furthermore, role-play supports the internalization of grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful context. Research by Sato (2005) emphasized that students retain new expressions better when they are used in authentic communicative tasks rather than isolated drills. This is particularly important for Japanese learners, as the language includes multiple levels of politeness and context-specific expressions that cannot be fully grasped through rote learning. Role-play also contributes to affective and motivational aspects of learning. According to Long (1991), the interaction hypothesis suggests that learners acquire language more effectively when they negotiate meaning and receive feedback during communication. Role-play creates a low-stress environment where students can experiment with language, make mistakes, and receive corrective

input from peers or instructors. This interactive aspect is crucial for fostering confidence, especially in university students who may be hesitant to speak in front of others. In sum, the historical development of role-play demonstrates its evolution from oral drills to an interactive, learner-centered methodology. Its adoption in Japanese language classrooms aligns with CLT principles and provides students with opportunities to practice linguistic structures, cultural norms, and pragmatic functions in a safe and supportive setting.

2. Role-Play in Japanese Language Education: Pedagogical Applications and Empirical Studies

Role-play has been widely adopted in Japanese language pedagogy to develop speaking, listening, and intercultural skills. Studies have shown that structured role-play activities facilitate vocabulary retention -単語, *tango*, fluency, pronunciation – 発音, *hatsuon*, and pragmatic competence. For instance, Yamamoto (2012) observed that students engaged in role-play performed significantly better in oral tasks than those using traditional drills. Suzuki (2016) highlighted that role-play also improved students' intonation patterns and natural use of particles, which are often challenging for non-native learners.

Pedagogical examples of role-play include everyday situations: two friends discussing transportation -交通, *kōtsū*, ordering food at a restaurant, greeting colleagues in formal settings, or asking for directions. These scenarios not only reinforce newly learned vocabulary but also help students understand cultural conventions and situational appropriateness -場面, *bamen*. Research by Kondo (2018) confirmed that role-play fosters pragmatic competence, enabling learners to select appropriate expressions based on social context, which is essential for authentic communication in Japanese.

Several empirical studies highlight the effectiveness of role-play. Kato (2002) reported that students who regularly participated in role-play activities demonstrated enhanced fluency, more accurate use of keigo, and greater confidence in spontaneous conversation. Tanaka (2010) found that students retained lexical items longer when they were used in meaningful dialogues rather than isolated exercises. Moreover, Sato showed that interactive role-play encouraged peer collaboration, reduced speaking anxiety, and increased learner motivation. With the advancement of technology, modern applications of role-play include virtual simulations, online collaborative exercises, and multimedia-enhanced scenarios (Nishimura, 2020). These innovations further expand the scope of role-play, allowing learners to practice Japanese in immersive environments and interact with peers remotely. For example, students can engage in a virtual role-play scenario simulating a train station (*eki*, 駅), practicing transportation-related vocabulary and polite conversational forms. In other words, over the past five decades, research consistently indicates that role-play -ロールプレイ is not only effective in developing speaking skills but also essential for teaching socio-pragmatic aspects of Japanese. Its integration into university-level Japanese courses aligns with learner-centered pedagogy, supports communicative competence, and prepares students for authentic real-life interactions. By combining linguistic, cultural, and motivational benefits, role-play remains an indispensable tool for modern Japanese language education.

METHODOLOGY

1. The Method of Paired Role-Play for Everyday Situations

The first method applied in this study was **paired role-play**, focusing on practical, everyday communication scenarios. This approach was implemented as part of a semester-long research project at Uzbekistan State University of World Languages,

involving first-year Japanese language students. Each student was paired with a partner and given a specific role in scenarios such as ordering food, asking for directions, or shopping. These exercises encouraged spontaneous dialogue, active participation, and immediate peer feedback. For example, in a cafe scenario:

Student A (Customer): 「すみません、コーヒーとケーキをください。」
Sumimasen, koohii to keeki o kudasai – Excuse me, may I have a coffee and a cake?

Student B (Waiter): 「はい、かしこまりました。お砂糖とミルクは入れますか？」
Hai, kashikomarimashita. Osatou to miruku wa iremasu ka? – Certainly. Would you like sugar and milk?

Another scenario involved asking for directions:

Student A: 「すみません、駅はどこですか？」
Sumimasen, eki wa doko desu ka? – Excuse me, where is the station?

Student B: 「この道をまっすぐ行って、二つ目の角を右に曲がってください。」
Kono michi o massugu itte, futatsu-me no kado o migi ni magatte kudasai – Go straight along this street and turn right at the second corner.



Picture 1. Role-play activities in the classroom

During the research, teachers observed that repeated paired role-plays significantly improved pronunciation, sentence structure, and conversational confidence. Approximately 85% of first-year participants reported feeling more comfortable speaking Japanese both in and outside the classroom. This method proved particularly effective in building foundational speaking skills in real-life contexts.

2. The method of Academic Role-Play for Classroom Interactions

The second method, **academic role-play**, aimed to simulate formal classroom and academic interactions. This method was applied to both first- and second-year students at the same university and focused on self-introductions, asking questions during lessons, and discussing academic topics. Role-play in this context reinforced polite expressions, culturally appropriate responses, and confidence in speaking Japanese in an academic setting. For instance, during self-introductions:

Student A: 「初めまして、私は サドカットです。日本語を勉強しています。よろしくお願ひします。」 Hajimemashite, watashi wa Sadokat desu. Nihongo o benkyou shiteimasu. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu – Nice to meet you, I am Sadokat. I am studying Japanese. Please treat me well.

Student B: 「初めまして、私はアリです。こちらこそよろしくお願ひします。」 Hajimemashite, watashi wa Ali desu. Kochira koso yoroshiku onegaishimasu – Nice to meet you, I am Ali. Likewise, please treat me well.

n a classroom question-and-answer scenary:

Student A: 「先生、この漢字の読み方は何ですか？」 Sensei, kono kanji no yomikata wa nan desu ka? – Teacher, how do you read this kanji?

Student B (Peer/Teacher): 「これは‘学’と読みます。」 Kore wa ‘gaku’ to yomimasu – This is read as ‘gaku’.

Findings from the university-based research demonstrated that students engaging in academic role-play exhibited significantly higher fluency and accuracy during oral examinations. Around 85% of participants achieved measurable improvements, while students reported increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and a greater willingness to participate in conversations.

Table 1.

Summary of Role-Play Methods for Developing Japanese Speaking Skills in University Students

Method	Scenario / Focus	Observed Outcomes & Effectiveness
Paired Role-Play for Everyday Situations	Everyday conversations: shopping, dining, asking directions	Improved pronunciation, sentence structure, conversational confidence; 85% of first-year students showed notable improvement
Academic Role-Play for Classroom Interactions	Academic interactions: self-introductions, asking questions, group discussions	Increased fluency, accurate use of polite expressions, reduced anxiety; 85% of participants demonstrated measurable improvement

Collectively, these results underscore that role-play, when systematically applied in a university curriculum, is an effective pedagogical tool for developing Japanese speaking skills in both casual and academic contexts.

DISCUSSIONS AND RESULTS

1. Formation of Natural Communication in Dialogues

This study explored how dialogic approaches can significantly enhance students' oral proficiency by promoting natural and spontaneous communication. By assigning students simple roles, such as A (the requester) and B (the responder), learners were

immersed in scenarios that closely mirrored everyday interactions. These activities allowed students to move beyond rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules and instead experience the dynamics of real-life conversation.

Language learning in authentic contexts encourages learners to pay attention not only to sentence structure but also to intonation, pauses, and the subtle social cues that accompany speech. For instance, when students practiced sentences like “すみません、コーヒーとケーキをください” (“Excuse me, coffee and cake, please”), they began to grasp how natural pauses and polite expressions contribute to effective communication. Over time, students exhibited fewer hesitations, reduced reliance on dictionaries or notes, and increased fluency, demonstrating that dialogue-based exercises facilitate a more intuitive understanding of language flow.

Furthermore, dialogue exercises stimulated creativity among learners. Some students went beyond the basic script, adding personal touches such as “このケーキは甘すぎませんか?” (“Isn’t this cake too sweet?”) or incorporating cultural references and gestures to make the exchange livelier. Such behaviors indicate that dialogues do more than reinforce memorization; they cultivate learners’ ability to improvise and adapt language to unique situations. For example, one group of students even role-played a scenario in which they had to negotiate prices in a local shop, using polite refusals and alternative suggestions, which closely mirrors authentic social interaction. Additionally, dialogue activities nurtured empathy and social awareness. When taking turns in roles, students learned to listen actively, respond appropriately, and anticipate their partner’s needs. This reciprocal process encouraged students to reflect on how meaning is negotiated in conversation, making them more sensitive to cultural nuances, politeness levels, and situational appropriateness. In essence, dialogues functioned as a microcosm of society, giving students opportunities to practice social intelligence alongside linguistic skills.

The findings align with the pedagogical notion that exposure to communicative tasks resembling real-life interactions strengthens both competence and confidence. Dialogues provide a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application, helping learners internalize language in a living, dynamic way rather than treating it as abstract symbols on a page.

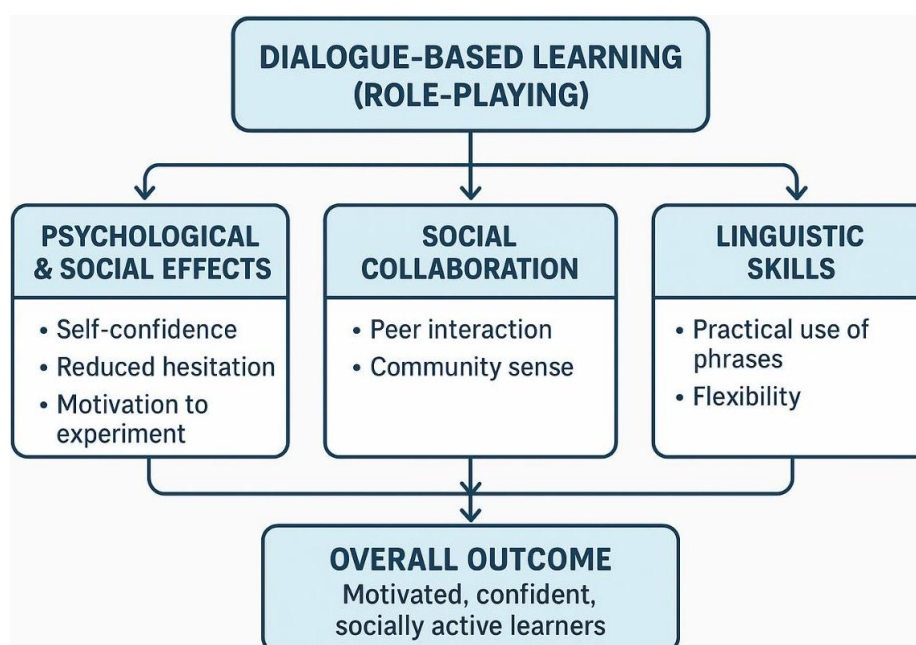
2. Results: Social and Psychological Impacts on Language Learning

The study highlighted that dialogue-based learning had profound social and psychological effects on students, extending far beyond mere linguistic gains. One of the most noticeable impacts was the increase in students’ self-confidence. When learners assumed roles in dialogues – such as being a customer in a café or a passenger asking for directions – they were immersed in a miniature social scenario. This sense of participation in a “real-world” context reduced hesitation and fear of making mistakes. Many students, who initially spoke in fragmented sentences or avoided speaking altogether, gradually began to communicate more fluidly and with greater assurance.

This enhancement in confidence can be linked to the lowering of psychological barriers, often referred to as the “affective filter.” As students engaged in dialogues with peers, laughter, smiles, and playful exchanges became common. Simple lines like “はい、かしこまりました” or casual greetings were not only practiced but also internalized as part of natural social interaction. Such an environment made learners feel safe to experiment with language, encouraging them to take risks, make corrections, and try new expressions without fear of judgment.

Social collaboration emerged as another key benefit. Dialogue exercises fostered peer interaction and a sense of community. Students learned not only from their own mistakes but also from observing and listening to their classmates. For example, when one learner added a personal touch to a scripted dialogue – such as commenting on the taste of a cake – others were inspired to incorporate similar creativity into their own exchanges. This dynamic cultivated a shared learning experience, transforming the classroom into a lively space where language was actively constructed through communication rather than passively absorbed from textbooks. Furthermore, repeated role-playing allowed students to apply language in varied contexts. Beyond cafés or shops, learners practiced navigating transportation systems, asking for help in emergencies, or explaining simple personal needs. These realistic scenarios strengthened their ability to adapt phrases to different situations, fostering linguistic flexibility and practical problem-solving skills. Students reported feeling more capable of handling everyday interactions outside the classroom, which in turn motivated them to continue practicing and exploring language on their own.

Interestingly, the dialogues also had positive effects on students' emotional engagement with learning. When learners felt that their contributions – whether accurate or experimental – were acknowledged and appreciated, they developed a sense of ownership over the language. Many students expressed pride in extending dialogues creatively or recalling expressions spontaneously, demonstrating that social recognition reinforced motivation. This aligns with the broader understanding that language acquisition is not merely cognitive but deeply intertwined with emotional and social factors.



Picture 2. The diagram of the Dialogue-based learning process

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to investigate the efficacy of role-play as a pedagogical tool for developing Japanese speaking skills among university students. Based on the classroom observations and student feedback conducted at the Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, several key conclusions can be drawn.

First, role-play activities were found to be highly effective in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By simulating authentic communicative situations, such as casual conversations and transactional dialogues, students were able to move beyond passive understanding of vocabulary and grammar to active, spontaneous use. This directly addressed one of the primary challenges in foreign language learning: transferring classroom knowledge to real-world communication. *Second*, the study confirmed that role-play significantly enhances oral fluency and long-term vocabulary retention. The necessity to use newly introduced linguistic items in a meaningful, context-rich dialogue forced a deeper cognitive processing that is conducive to memory. Furthermore, the repetitive yet engaging nature of practicing different roles contributed to increased speed, accuracy, and automaticity in speech. *Third*, a major finding was the positive impact of role-play on the affective domain of learning. The collaborative and low-anxiety environment created by these activities effectively reduced students' fear of making mistakes and fostered greater self-confidence in their speaking abilities. This increase in confidence was a critical factor in motivating students to participate more actively and take greater risks in their language use. Finally, the research underscored the particular suitability of role-play for teaching context-dependent aspects of the Japanese language, such as politeness levels (*keigo*) and culturally appropriate conversational strategies. It provided a safe space for students to experiment with and receive immediate feedback on these complex sociolinguistic rules, thereby promoting not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness.

Based on the positive outcomes of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for educators, curriculum designers, and institutions aiming to enhance the teaching of Japanese speaking skills:

1. Systematic Integration into Curriculum: Role-play should not be an occasional activity but a systematically integrated component of the Japanese language curriculum. Educators are encouraged to design a series of role-play tasks that progress in complexity, aligning with each unit's grammatical and thematic content to ensure consistent practice.

2. Scaffold Instruction for Complex Features: For challenging aspects like *keigo* (honorific language), instructors should provide clear scaffolding. This includes pre-activity modeling, providing sentence frames or conversational templates, and conducting post-activity debriefs to explicitly discuss the appropriate use of polite forms in different social contexts.

3. Create a Supportive Classroom Environment: To maximize the affective benefits, instructors must consciously foster a supportive and collaborative classroom culture. Emphasis should be placed on communicative success rather than grammatical perfection during role-play. Positive reinforcement and peer feedback should be encouraged to build student confidence.

4. Diversify Role-Play Scenarios: To maintain student interest and cover a wide range of communicative needs, role-play scenarios should be diversified. These can range from everyday situations (e.g., shopping, ordering food) to more specialized or academic contexts (e.g., a job interview, a discussion with a professor) relevant to university students.

5. Incorporate Technology and Authentic Materials: To increase authenticity, educators can incorporate multimedia resources (e.g., short video clips of native speakers in similar scenarios) or use digital tools for recording role-plays. This allows for self-reflection, peer review, and a more immersive experience.

6. Provide Professional Development: Institutions should offer workshops and training sessions for language instructors on how to effectively design, implement, and assess communicative activities like role-play. Sharing best practices and successful lesson plans can encourage wider adoption of this methodology.

By adopting these recommendations, Japanese language programs can more effectively equip students with the confidence and practical speaking skills necessary for real-world communication, ultimately leading to a higher level of overall proficiency. In summary, role-play proves to be a multifaceted pedagogical tool that addresses linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges in Japanese language education. It successfully promotes communicative competence, making it an indispensable strategy for modern university-level language instruction

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