

From Role-play to Virtual Reality: A Review of Simulation in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Globalization, digitalization, and the post-pandemic shift toward online and blended education have reshaped the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). These changes highlight the need for approaches that not only develop linguistic competence but also foster communication, collaboration, and intercultural skills. Simulation has attracted growing attention in this context because it offers authentic, experiential learning environments that align with communicative and experiential learning theories. Recent studies have shown that simulation can improve learners' speaking, listening, motivation, and critical thinking, while also supporting teachers in adopting more innovative pedagogies. However, the research landscape remains uneven. Existing studies are largely small-scale and short-term, focusing mainly on immediate language gains. Critical areas remain underexplored, including learner differences, cross-cultural adaptability, integration with assessment, and the potential of emerging technologies such as virtual and augmented reality. These gaps limit both the generalizability of findings and the theoretical development of simulation-based TESOL. This review draws on studies indexed in the Web of Science to synthesize current evidence, identify limitations, and highlight emerging directions. Unlike earlier reviews, it situates simulation within wider educational and societal trends, offering a clearer rationale for its relevance and providing a roadmap for sustainable and innovative practices in TESOL.

Keywords: Simulation, TESOL, Virtual Reality, Communicative Competence, English

Introduction

With the intensification of globalization, English has increasingly been positioned as a global lingua franca, essential for international collaboration in education, research, business, and intercultural exchange (Hooda, 2022). This global demand has accelerated the development and reform of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), prompting a shift from traditional structural approaches to more communication-oriented pedagogy (Zhang, 2024). However, traditional classroom practices often prioritize grammatical knowledge and vocabulary memorization at the expense of communicative competence, resulting in the

widespread phenomenon of learners who “know the rules but cannot use the language” (Yassin et al., 2024). Moreover, classroom activities frequently lack authenticity and contextual richness, offering limited opportunities for meaningful interaction in low-risk environments, which in turn increases language anxiety and inhibits learner participation (Sharma, 2024).

Beyond these classroom-level concerns, TESOL is also shaped by broader educational and social transformations. The digitalization of learning, the post-pandemic expansion of online and blended education, and the growing emphasis on 21st-century competencies such as collaboration, problem-solving, and intercultural communication have collectively created new demands for innovative pedagogy. These trends underscore the urgency of adopting experiential, learner-centered methods that can bridge the gap between language knowledge and communicative performance.

In this context, simulation has gained the attention of both scholars and teachers. Simulation is a technique rather than a technology: a guided reconstruction of consequential real-world conditions that allows rehearsal of target performances under safe, controllable constraints, with feedback and opportunities for iteration; this conception spans low-fidelity classroom scenarios and technology-enhanced environments, including AR/VR/MR (Gaba, 2004). As a method that highlights “recreating situations,” simulation can place learners in realistic contexts through role-play and situational dialogue. It can also make use of new technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence to build immersive environments for language use (Wong & Li, 2021). Compared with traditional classrooms, simulation offers a “low-risk” practice space where learners can produce language in settings close to real communication. This not only raises motivation but also reduces communication anxiety (Wang, 2024).

Research has demonstrated that simulation-based instruction can improve oral fluency, pragmatic competence, critical thinking, and learner engagement (Angelini, 2023; W. Wu, 2024). Nevertheless, the research landscape remains fragmented. Existing studies are often small-scale or short-term, focusing narrowly on classroom activities or immediate improvements in oral skills and motivation, while offering little theoretical integration. At the same time, emerging areas have not received sufficient attention. For instance, the expansion of simulation into digital domains such as VR/AR has outpaced systematic investigation, with limited work on its models of application, alignment with assessment, or cultural adaptability (Sánchez-Caballé et al., 2019). Furthermore, the absence of large samples, longitudinal data, and cross-cultural comparisons constrains the generalizability of findings and limits the development of sustainable pedagogical frameworks.

This review aims to address these gaps by providing a systematic, theoretically informed synthesis of research on simulation in TESOL. It examines the conceptual foundations, implementation models, learner and teacher outcomes, and research limitations. Unlike earlier reviews, it situates simulation within wider educational and societal trends, highlighting both the achievements and the neglected areas of study. The goal is to offer theoretical insight for researchers and practical guidance for educators, contributing to more innovative, equitable, and sustainable applications of simulation in global English language education.

Research Method

To review the research status of simulation in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), this study used both bibliometric and visual analysis. First, a systematic search was conducted in the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. The Boolean search query was constructed as: “simulation” and “English teaching” or “TESL” or “TESOL” or “English education.” A total of 173 papers were found, covering the years 2000–2025. After removing conference abstracts, non-English papers, and studies with low relevance, 111 papers were retained for full-text analysis. These papers were mainly in the fields of education, linguistics, and applied linguistics. This result provided the basis for the later review.

Second, this study carried out a network analysis of the selected papers to show the main authors, key works, and research fronts in the field. Figure 1 presents the network of simulation and TESOL studies. The figure shows two main clusters: Classical theory and early application cluster (blue nodes): Core works include Gee (2007), Peterson (2010, 2012), and Thome (2009). This cluster focuses on the links between simulation, game-based learning, sociocultural theory, and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Emerging digital and practical application cluster (green nodes): Key authors include Shang (2022), Wu (2021), and Xie (2023). This cluster focuses on VR/AR, complexity theory, and immersive language learning, showing the trend of simulation expanding in TESOL practice in recent years.

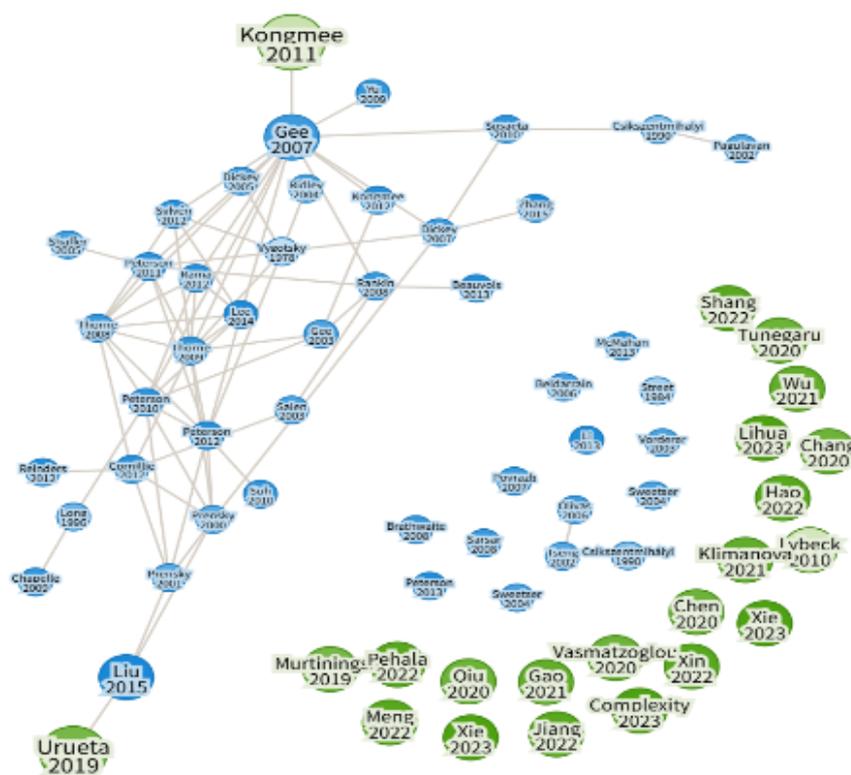


Figure 1. Network of simulation and TESOL studies based on bibliometric visualization tools

Through the systematic search in WoS, this study not only ensured the coverage and reliability of the review, but also showed the research trends and the development path in this field. This provides a solid basis for the later theoretical review and practical discussion.

Results

The Educational Meaning and Development of Simulation

Simulation was first widely used in military and medical training. It was mainly used to practice high-risk tasks in a low-risk setting (Santalucia et al., 2015; Bacik et al., 2024). The strength of this method is that it creates an immersive experience under controlled conditions. Later, it was brought into business, law, management, and also language education (Farrukh, 2022; Kostsova & Denyakina, 2024).

In language education, researchers have suggested different forms of simulation. Mat et al. (2020) divided it into classroom role-play and classroom simulation. With the growth of technology, new forms such as digital simulation and VR/AR simulation appeared (Ulutaş et al., 2024). These forms have been shown in studies to improve authenticity and interaction in learning. For example, Anggrawati et al. (2021) found that role-play helps reduce learners' communication anxiety, and Reséndez (2024) noted that simulated tasks can raise learners' motivation and oral fluency.

However, there are still limits. Some scholars say that traditional classroom simulation is often "performance-like" and not close enough to real communication (Perez & Poole, 2019). Also, even though digital and VR simulations provide strong immersion, they are still hard to spread because of high cost and teachers' lack of digital skills (De Villiers Bosman et al., 2024).

In short, current studies show that simulation has strong potential in language education. But there is still a gap between "acting in a classroom" and "using language in real life." This suggests that future work needs to design tasks that are both authentic and practical.

The Development and Challenges of TESOL

The growth of TESOL shows the change of ideas in language education. Early studies often used the grammar-translation method and structuralist approaches. These focused on grammar rules and word memory (Slater & Li, 2025). But many studies point out that this way ignores communication. As a result, learners may know the rules but cannot use them in real talks (Febriani et al., 2024). To fix this, TESOL since the late 20th century has made two big shifts: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). CLT sees communication skills as the main goal (Canale & Swain, 1980). TBLT focuses on doing real or simulated tasks to help language learning (Shahi, 2022).

Many studies support this change. L. Li (2023) found that TBLT can improve the complexity of learners' language output. Xie (2023) showed that CLT helps learners build meaning in interaction. Also, Mudinillah et al. (2024) noted that task-driven classrooms give learners more chances to use language in real situations. But some scholars also doubt the real effect of these methods. For example, Mudinillah et al. (2024b) said that TBLT is hard to use in East Asian classrooms because teachers lack training and learners depend on traditional styles. In the same way, Qasserras (2023) argued that while CLT talks about communication, in practice it often becomes a formality without real communication.

Overall, TESOL still faces three main problems in practice. First, lack of context: the gap between classroom and real talk limits language transfer (Y. Wang, 2024). Second, emotional barriers: learners often feel language anxiety and lack of motivation, and studies show these hurt learning results (Hajiyeva, 2024; M. Liu & Huang, 2011). Third, weak teacher development: many teachers still use traditional ways in task design, class control, and use of technology, so they cannot make full use of new ideas (Farrell, 2024).

In short, TESOL has moved from “knowledge-centered” to “communication-centered,” and it has made progress in theory and practice. But it still has problems such as weak context, emotional barriers, and lack of teacher growth. These challenges show the need for new teaching methods. Simulation, as a method with authenticity, immersion, and control, gives a new path to solve these issues.

Simulation and TESOL

The use of simulation in TESOL has gained much attention. Many scholars think it is not only a new teaching method, but also a way that connects second language theories with classroom practice (Choi et al., 2022). Simulation makes the learning environment move from “textbook and classroom” to “real and situational.” It gives learners a low-risk but high-immersion space to practice language (Z. Wang, 2024b). This part will discuss five areas: role-play and classroom simulation, task-based simulation and its link with TBLT, digital and VR simulation, learner outcomes (language and emotion), and teacher training and development.

Teaching Practice

The earliest form of simulation in TESOL was role-play and classroom simulation. Teachers design daily life scenes or cross-cultural tasks. Learners take a first-person role and join in the talk. In this way, language knowledge can move to real communication skills (Perez & Poole, 2019b). For example, Khasanova (2024) found that role-play raised learners’ oral fluency and pragmatic skills. Learners also said they felt “more engaged” than in normal speaking classes and had less anxiety when facing real tasks.

Classroom simulation is also common in intercultural education. Luo (2024) noted that by simulating meetings in global companies or international conferences, learners not only practiced language but also built intercultural awareness and teamwork skills. This “double gain” makes role-play one of the most useful simulation tools in TESOL.

But some studies point out its limits. Because class time is short, many role-play tasks stay at the “acting level.” Learners may focus on finishing the task rather than improving language (Papin, 2021). For this reason, role-play should be followed by reflection and discussion, so that learners can turn practice into real knowledge.

Learning Outcomes

Studies on simulation in TESOL often look at three areas: language skills, learner emotions, and teacher growth. Most studies show positive results, but some note that effects depend on learner differences and teaching context.

(1) Language skills

Many studies show that simulation improves listening, speaking, and communication. In simulated talks, negotiations, or group tasks, learners practice fluency and accuracy in a safe space (Zadilská et al., 2024). N. Zhu (2024) found that role-play raised learners' pronunciation and pragmatic skills, especially in intercultural settings. Task-based simulation also helps critical thinking and problem solving, since learners must negotiate, solve conflicts, and reach agreement in limited time (Angelini, 2024). This is very different from grammar-focused classes and shows simulation's advantage in both language and thinking.

(2) Learner emotions

Simulation also helps learners' emotions. Many studies say it lowers language anxiety and gives a safe space to try language (Somerville et al., 2023; Fawaid et al., 2024). For example, Carlisle et al. (2024) found that in VR TESOL classes, learners showed more willingness to talk and felt less nervous. Simulation is also interactive, which raises motivation and engagement (Thrasher, 2022; Huang, 2024). Learners get instant feedback when finishing tasks or role-play, and this "success experience" supports long-term learning. But some scholars note that learner traits matter. For example, introverted students may still feel nervous in big role-play tasks (Morgan, 2000).

(3) Teacher development

Simulation is also useful for teachers. It gives new teachers a safe "trial space" to test teaching strategies and grow confidence (Garland & Garland, 2020; Cowin et al., 2024). By simulating student talks or sudden classroom events, teachers can improve classroom control and reflection (Kaufman & Ireland, 2019). Digital platforms also bring new chances. Walker et al. (2021) showed that virtual simulation helps teachers understand student needs and build flexible teaching styles. But Kaufman and Ireland (2019b) warned that too much use of simulation may make teachers less aware of the real complexity of classrooms. So simulation should be used with real practice.

Problems and Limits

Although simulation has clear advantages in TESOL, studies also show many limits. These problems focus on task design, learner differences, teacher skills, and technology.

First, in task design, many simulations stay at the "surface level" and lack real-world depth. He (2019) said some tasks focus too much on simple role-play and ignore pragmatic skills and intercultural awareness. This weakens the link to real use of language.

Second, learner differences also matter. Mustoip et al. (2024) found that anxiety and personality affect how learners perform in simulation. Shy or culturally conservative students may take less part in role-play. Hoter et al. (2024) noted that some learners "act too much" and forget language goals.

Third, teacher skills are a key issue. Perez and Poole (2019c) said many teachers still use traditional methods and lack the ability to use simulation well. Without training, simulation may stay as a formality and fail to meet goals. Sánchez-Caballé et al. (2019c) also warned that too much use may lower teachers' sense of real classroom needs.

Last, technology also brings challenges. VR and AR are growing in TESOL, but cost, access, and teacher skills are still problems (Mills, 2022). Some scholars also note that too much digital use may reduce real face-to-face practice (Ozgun & Sadik, 2023).

In short, simulation in TESOL has strong potential, but its use is still limited by task design, learner traits, teacher training, and technology. Future studies need to find a balance between real and practical tasks, and to meet both teacher and learner needs, so that simulation in TESOL can grow in a sustainable way.

Research Gaps

Insufficient Breadth and Depth of Empirical Studies

Most existing studies focus on classroom cases and small-scale experiments, lacking large-sample and cross-institutional systematic comparative research (Ledger et al., 2024). Moreover, longitudinal studies are extremely limited, leaving the long-term impact of simulation-based teaching on learners' language proficiency and affective factors unclear (Khany & Valizadeh, 2023).

Limited Research Methods

A large body of studies relies mainly on questionnaires and interviews, which, while helpful in uncovering learners' and teachers' perceptions, lack empirical validation through multi-dimensional methods such as eye-tracking, learning analytics, or large-scale corpus analysis (Schulz & Carstens, 2020). This methodological limitation restricts the generalizability and verifiability of the findings.

Lack of Cross-Cultural and Multi-Context Applicability

Existing studies are mostly concentrated in TESOL contexts in East Asia and Western countries, with little attention paid to other cultural or educational systems. For instance, in multilingual societies or resource-limited contexts, the applicability and implementation of simulation may differ significantly, yet this remains underexplored.

Insufficient Research on Learner Individual Differences

Although some literature mentions that learners' personalities and cultural backgrounds affect simulation outcomes, systematic research is scarce. How factors such as learning styles, cognitive differences, and motivation types interact with simulation has not yet been clearly addressed.

Gaps in Teacher Development and Training

Research has shown that teachers are the key to the success of simulation-based teaching (Christensen et al., 2011). However, systematic studies on how teachers effectively integrate simulation into their professional development remain limited. Especially in digital simulation environments, teacher training, support mechanisms, and evaluation systems are still underdeveloped (Lindberg & Jönsson, 2023).

In sum, research on simulation in TESOL is still in its infancy, lacking systematic exploration across cultures, disciplines, and methodologies. Future work needs to expand in terms of research scale, methodological diversity, cultural applicability, learner individual differences, and teacher training, in order to build a stronger theoretical and empirical foundation for its broader application.

Future Research Directions

Drawing on the above research gaps, future studies on simulation in TESOL may focus on the following areas:

Expanding Large-Scale and Longitudinal Empirical Research

Future research should move beyond small-sample, short-term experiments and adopt large-scale, multi-site, and longitudinal designs. For example, collaborative studies across schools and regions could test the generalizability and sustainability of simulation in diverse educational contexts. Longitudinal tracking would further reveal its long-term effects on language retention, affective development, and intercultural competence.

Promoting Multi-Method Research Integration

Neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches alone can fully capture the complex effects of simulation. Future studies should integrate experimental design, learning analytics, eye-tracking, and corpus-based analysis to build multi-dimensional evidence chains, examining simulation's effectiveness from the perspectives of language production, learning behavior, and cognitive mechanisms.

Exploring Cross-Cultural and Multi-Context Applicability

Research should pay more attention to how simulation is applied in diverse cultural and resource-differentiated environments. Key questions include how to implement low-cost simulations in resource-limited areas, and how to address intercultural variation in multilingual societies. This would not only enrich theoretical models but also promote fairness in TESOL pedagogy.

Investigating Learner Individual Differences

Future work may further explore how learners with different learning styles, cognitive levels, motivational orientations, and personality traits perform in simulation-based environments. By incorporating personalized learning analytics and adaptive simulation systems, researchers could examine how simulation can better meet learners' individual needs.

Strengthening Teacher Training and Teacher Education Research

Given teachers' central role in simulation-based teaching, future studies should explore how to design systematic training programs that help teachers effectively integrate simulation into their classrooms. Research should also investigate how teachers construct pedagogical beliefs, reflect on practice, and sustain professional growth through long-term engagement with simulation.

Expanding Technological Integration and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

With the rise of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and mixed reality technologies, simulation in TESOL will face new opportunities. Future research should adopt interdisciplinary perspectives, combining educational psychology, cognitive science, and human-computer interaction, to explore how simulation environments affect motivation, emotion regulation, and communicative competence at deeper levels.

In sum, advancing research in scale, methodological innovation, cross-cultural applicability, learner differences, teacher education, and technological integration is essential. Only then

can simulation play a broader and more lasting role in TESOL, offering solid theoretical support and practical guidance for global language education.

Conclusion

This study systematically reviewed the current state and developmental trends of simulation in TESOL. Overall, simulation has increasingly become a vital innovation in English language teaching. It not only enhances learners' speaking, listening, pragmatic competence, and critical thinking, but also reduces foreign language anxiety and boosts motivation. Moreover, simulation contributes to teacher education and professional development, offering a safe yet authentic space for practice. These findings suggest that simulation has evolved beyond a mere classroom technique, establishing itself as a learning ecology characterized by authenticity, interactivity, and safety. It provides TESOL with new pedagogical pathways while shifting language education research from a "classroom-centered" to a "communication-centered" and "context-centered" paradigm.

However, notable gaps remain. Most empirical studies are small-scale and short-term, limiting insights into the long-term and cross-cultural impacts of simulation. Research on learner individual differences, teacher professional support, and resource allocation also remains insufficient. These shortcomings, though challenging, present critical opportunities for future inquiry.

In conclusion, simulation holds great potential for advancing TESOL. By deepening empirical research, addressing cross-cultural contexts and individual differences, and strengthening teacher training and technological integration, simulation can further enhance both the quality and equity of language education. In today's globalized world, simulation is not only an innovative pedagogical approach but also a bridge linking classrooms with real-world communication.

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