

Article

Implementing Role Play to Teach Speaking Skills for Secretarial Purposes: A Diploma III Case Study

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Abstract. This study explores the effectiveness of role play as a teaching method to enhance students' speaking skills in professional secretarial contexts, specifically in business telephone conversations, presentations, and negotiations. The research was conducted within the Diploma III Secretarial Program over one academic semester. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study involved classroom observations and student reflections gathered through feedback sessions. The objective was to assess how role play could contribute to the development of fluency, confidence, and contextual language use in English for specific professional purposes. The findings revealed that role play significantly improved students' speaking performance. Students showed greater confidence in expressing ideas, improved fluency, and a better understanding of appropriate vocabulary and expressions suited to professional environments. Furthermore, students expressed that the interactive and practical nature of role play made learning more enjoyable and less intimidating, allowing them to immerse themselves in real-life communication scenarios. These positive experiences encouraged active participation and increased motivation to learn English for professional use. The study also highlighted the value of reflective learning, as students were able to identify their own progress and areas for improvement. Through continuous engagement in simulated professional tasks, learners developed better adaptability in communication and exhibited more natural conversational flow during tasks that mirrored real workplace situations. In conclusion, the role play method proves to be a highly effective pedagogical tool for enhancing speaking skills in secretarial English. It not only helps build linguistic competence but also cultivates soft skills necessary for professional communication. Therefore, it is recommended that educators incorporate role play regularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula to maximize its benefits in developing productive speaking abilities among students.

Keywords: Language Fluency; Professional Communication; Role Play; Secretarial English; Speaking Skills.

1. Introduction

In the modern professional world, speaking skills have become a crucial component of effective workplace communication, especially in roles such as secretaries where verbal interaction is frequent and formal. Teaching speaking, therefore, requires more than vocabulary and grammar; it demands exposure to real-life communication situations. One effective method to achieve this is through role play, which allows learners to practice language use in simulated professional contexts (Ali & Ramli, 2018).

Role play has been widely recognized as a technique that enhances learner engagement and confidence. According to Marwan and Husna (2019), students who participate in role-play activities show increased willingness to speak and reduced language anxiety. Moreover, when the role-play scenarios are authentic and professionally relevant, students perceive the activity as meaningful, which boosts their motivation (Gilmore, 2016; Bora, 2021).

In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings—such as training future secretaries—role play offers a practical way to develop job-related communication, including business negotiations, meetings, and formal presentations (Zhang, 2020; Wang, 2017). These skills cannot be effectively taught through traditional lectures alone; instead, they require interactive, situational practice.

Received: June 30, 2025

Revised: July 14, 2025

Accepted: July 28, 2025

Published: July 30, 2025

Curr. Ver.: July 30, 2025



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Studies have also found that role-play tasks increase learner autonomy and reflection. Nguyen (2020) emphasizes the importance of combining role play with post-activity reflection to help students evaluate their performance and build self-awareness. Additionally, Kamal and Setyamardani (2020) argue that structured role play significantly improves students' fluency and accuracy in spoken English.

This study aims to examine the implementation of role play in teaching speaking for vocational students preparing for secretarial careers, focusing on three key communication domains: business negotiation, presentations, and formal meetings. The study also explores students' reflections and classroom observations to evaluate the impact of role play on their speaking development.

2. Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Secretarial Communication

This chapter provides a self-directed, needs-based curriculum to provide learners with the linguistic resources necessary to work in their field as professionals. Within the scope of secretarial training, ESP concentrates on communicative tasks such as negotiating, meeting, and presenting. Rojas & Villafuerte (2018) argue that ESP works best when instruction is grounded on tasks that are intrinsic elements to the future work context of learners. Among secretarial students, especially, the communicative functions they must exercise are such as involve linguistic competence as well as familiarity with professional etiquette and communication protocols.

Inclusion of English as part of vocational training, Nevertheless, many continue to have trouble using English effectively in their jobs. These problems consist of limited vocabulary, low confidence, and lack of exposure to real communicative situations (Indriani & Sakina, 2022). Thus instructional approaches that replicate workplace discourse are needed to narrow the divide between classroom-based practice and performance in the real world.

Role Play as an Effective Instructional Method in ESP

Role play is a popular pedagogic method which permits students to act out real-life scenarios and practice how language is used naturally. It is especially useful for ESP learners who need to learn content-related lexis as well as pragmatic knowledge. Stevens (2015) highlights the potential of role play for engaging students to think at a higher order, and to produce spontaneous language. Likewise, Bora (2021) with role play activities, learners enhancing their oral fluency and being able to negotiate meaning in professional conversations.

Role play helps simulate real-life professional settings and boosts learners' speaking confidence (Ali & Ramli, 2018). Role play allows learners to act out scenarios they might face in their future careers—such as business negotiations, meetings, or presentations. This provides a realistic context for using English, making learning more meaningful and practical.

Authentic role-play tasks are essential in ESP contexts because they create meaningful opportunities for learners to use language in ways that mirror real workplace demands. As Gilmore (2016) suggests, authenticity in role-play increases learner motivation and engagement. When students perceive the role-play tasks as realistic and relevant to their future professions, they are more likely to participate actively and take the activity seriously, which leads to deeper learning and stronger communicative performance.

Recent studies in Indonesia and other EFL situations have also corroborated the effectiveness of the practice of role play. For instance, Widya et al. (2023) reported that the inclusion of role play in speaking courses significantly increased participation and raised student speaking test scores. Kamal & Setyamardani (2020) found that role play improved creativity, fluency and confidence in junior high school students; this also seen by Indriani & Sakina (2022) with vocabulary and pragmatic acquisition.

These results corroborate the constructivist notion that language learning occurs optimally when learners are actively constructing meaning through real time interaction (Riyadi et al., 2024). Role-play allows speakers to apply previously learned theory in practice so that the linguistic form is more likely to become native to them.

Role-play activities designed for specific professional contexts—such as business meetings—result in higher learner engagement and better communicative outcomes (Zhang, 2020). Not only in business meeting, but also in business negotiation role plays are effective in developing persuasion, language accuracy, and strategic use of English (Wang, 2017).

Teaching speaking in ESP contexts requires authentic situations and purposeful interactions (Rahimi & Riasati, 2015).

Secretarial communication training should emphasize clarity, politeness, and strategic presentation skills (Iskandar & Wulandari, 2021).

Role Play in Professional Scenarios: Negotiation, Presentations, and Meetings

Role play has been widely employed to teach general speaking skills, but simulating business communication tasks- negotiations, presentations, and meetings, for example- is especially appropriate for secretarial students. Communicative acts of this kind demand more than grammatical correctness; they need turn taking, politeness strategies, bargaining, and the use of persuasive language.

García & Elosúa (1999), also cited in Rojas & Villafuerte (2018), mention that if professional contexts are used in role play activities, students will achieve a greater pragmatic competence to communicate more adequately in formal contexts. According to Bora (2021), they become self-efficient and more strategic in the use of language when role play is integrated with professional tasks. Meanwhile, Riyadi et al. (2024) have shown that the use of workplace simulations in vocational training schools better prepares students for the real world job tasks, especially those involving multi-stakeholder's interactions and decision making.

Students often report increased confidence after performing role play in a low-risk classroom environment (Marwan & Husna, 2019).

Collaborative speaking tasks, such as role-play, provide learners with meaningful opportunities to practice language in context (Richards, 2015).

Moreover, studies emphasize that students benefit more when role play scenarios closely resemble authentic professional situations. For instance, role plays involving business negotiations help learners develop the ability to express agreement and disagreement diplomatically, manage conflict, and maintain professionalism under pressure. Likewise, presentation-based role plays enhance students' ability to organize thoughts, use formal register, and engage audiences. Simulating meetings also develops students' collaborative and leadership skills, such as giving suggestions, summarizing decisions, and managing group discussions.

Research Gap

Despite growing interest in role play as an instructional tool, much of the existing research focuses on secondary education or general English speaking skills. Few studies specifically examine how role play can support the development of professional communication competencies within secretarial programs. The role of English in tasks such as business negotiations, presentations, and meetings remains underexplored in ESP research, particularly in the Indonesian vocational higher education context.

This study seeks to address that gap by investigating how role play can be strategically implemented to enhance speaking performance among secretarial students. Through classroom observation and student reflection, the research aims to explore the practical outcomes of role play-based instruction and its relevance to students' future workplace communication needs.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the effectiveness of role play in enhancing students' speaking skills for professional secretarial contexts. In order to delve into some of the nuances of student participation and personal responses, traditional qualitative research design was employed to ascertain how language learning is occurring beyond test results. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative studies enable the researcher to look closely at how meaning is made of learning by the participants in a naturalistic classroom environment.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was implemented in Speaking for Professional Purposes the course of a Diploma III Secretarial Program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. The subjects comprised 25 second-year (Semester 3) participants who had studied at least two semesters of English. The class was chosen through purposive sampling as the students had some previous rudimentary English communicative skills and had just started looking into the content of the workplace, such as negotiation, meetings and business presentations.

Data Collection Instruments

To obtain rich and contextualized data, the study used two primary instruments:

1. Classroom Observation Sheet

Classroom observation is a key tool in assessing the impact of active learning strategies like role-play (Kurniasari et al., 2021).

Reflection allows students to assess their communicative performance and set learning goals (Nguyen, 2020).

The researcher observed students during three role play sessions, each focused on a specific professional scenario:

- Session 1: Business Negotiation
- Session 2: Business Presentation
- Session 3: Internal Office Meeting

The observation focused on students' participation, fluency, accuracy, use of appropriate vocabulary, interaction patterns, and confidence.

2. Student Reflection Questionnaire

After the role play sessions, students were asked to complete a reflection questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and Likert-scale items. The reflection focused on their perceived improvement, challenges faced, and how role play helped them prepare for real-world communication.

Procedure

The role play activities were integrated into the speaking course over a period of three weeks (one scenario per week). The stages included:

- Preparation Phase: Students received instruction on language expressions, vocabulary, and context-specific communication strategies relevant to the scenario.
- Practice Phase: Students worked in groups to develop scripts or outlines and rehearse their role plays.
- Performance Phase: Each group performed their role play in front of the class. The performances were observed and recorded for analysis.
- Reflection Phase: Students completed the reflection questionnaire and participated in a brief class discussion on their learning experience.

Data Analysis

The data from classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in student performance and behavior. Student reflections were coded and categorized to determine perceptions of effectiveness, areas of improvement, and motivational aspects of role play.

To ensure validity, triangulation was applied by comparing results from observations and student reflections. This process provided a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of role play on students' speaking skills in professional contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

Improvement in Speaking Performance

The classroom observations indicated clear progress in students' speaking skills—particularly in fluency, accuracy, interaction, and content relevance—across the three professional role play sessions.

Table 1. Progression of Speaking Performance Across Role Plays

Performance Aspect	Business Negotiation	Business Presentation	Office Meeting
Fluency	Moderate	Improved	Strong
Accuracy	Basic sentence use	Better grammar control	Mostly correct
Vocabulary Use	Limited (tentative)	More varied	Purposeful
Interactional Skills	Uneven turn-taking	Formal structure used	Dynamic & responsive

Observer Note:

By the third session, most students no longer relied on scripts and were able to respond naturally to challenges presented in the discussion.

Pragmatic Competence: Formality and Appropriateness

Students began to demonstrate greater awareness of context-appropriate language. In early sessions, many overused casual phrases, while later sessions showed growth in tone, politeness, and professional register.

Student A:

“At first, I didn’t know how to disagree without sounding rude. But after trying in the role play, I found expressions like ‘I understand your point, but I’d suggest...’ very helpful.”

Student B:

“In the meeting role play, I learned how to interrupt politely, like ‘Sorry to interrupt, may I clarify something?’ That’s something I’d never tried before.”

This aligns with Rojas & Villafuerte (2018), who emphasize role play’s effectiveness in building students’ sociolinguistic competence.

Student Confidence and Engagement

The post-activity reflection forms revealed strong increases in students’ self-reported confidence and motivation.

Table 2. Student Confidence Levels Before and After Role Play Activities (N=25)

Confidence Level	Before Role Play (%)	After Role Play (%)
Very confident	4%	32%
Confident	16%	52%
Neutral/uncertain	40%	12%
Not confident	28%	4%
Very unconfident	12%	0%

Student C:

“I never liked speaking in front of the class before. But in role play, it felt more natural because I was ‘being someone else.’ I wasn’t scared anymore.”

Student D:

“It was exciting and fun. I forgot I was speaking English.”

Perceived Benefits and Challenges

Table 3. Summary of Perceived Benefits and Challenges (from student reflections)

Benefits	Challenges
Boosted confidence in speaking	Difficulty remembering key vocabulary
Realistic practice of workplace language	Limited preparation time
Learned teamwork and collaboration	Staying in character during role play
Improved listening and response skills	Occasional nervousness in front of peers

Student E:

“The presentation role play helped me understand how to open and close a business talk professionally. I wish we had more time to prepare.”

Student F:

“I liked the business negotiation. It felt like a real office situation. But I needed more practice with formal words.”

These insights mirror findings from Indriani & Sakina (2022) and Bora (2021), who argue that role play requires scaffolding and pre-task preparation to maximize student outcomes.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provided strong evidence suggesting the benefits of role play in teaching speaking skills in professional secretarial settings. Students not just learned language better; they also gained confidence, adaptability and professionalism as communicators. This becomes more important in ESP classes as task-based learning develops language and soft skills (Stevens, 2015; Riyadi et al., 2024).

The rise in self-efficacy and performance supports the constructivist learning theory, which claims that knowledge is constructed most effectively when learners experience and reflect on it. Role play serves as the intermediary between theory and practise — allowing students to be doers rather than mere receivers.

6. Conclusion

This study is an attempt to examine the use of role play in teaching speaking to students in secretarial programme based on professional communication in the three aspects: Business Negotiation, Business Presentations, and Office Meetings. The results of classroom observation and students' reflection analyses suggest that role play is indeed a successful means of developing both language and pragmatics in English for specific purposes (ESP).

The students showed remarkable development in terms of fluency, range of vocabulary and interactional competence. Most importantly, students showed pragmatic skill by using the formal and polite language that would be expected at job consultation. Simulation also produced very positive effects on student confidence, motivation, and public speaking of English. These findings suggest the perception that task-orientated, experiential models for learning language, for example, role play, create authentic and engaging environments that connect theory of language with professional practice.

In addition, students became aware of the advantages of role play not only for learning the language but also in terms of soft skills, which would be useful for their future secretarial roles in terms of critical thinking, negotiation, team work, and leadership.

Yet, the analysis also identified several obstacles, such as time, the restricted vocabulary of the field, and maintaining character in use. These issues demonstrate the importance of providing a scaffolded structure and sufficient time for students to prepare to participate in effective role plays.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of the present study, several recommendations are proposed for English lecturers, curriculum designers, and future researchers. For English lecturers, the inclusion of role play as an intermittent feature in ESP Speaking classes—particularly within secretarial or business programs—is encouraged to foster practical language application. Effective role play implementation should be supported by providing students with functional phrases, vocabulary glossaries, and model scripts during the preparation phase. Furthermore, feedback should extend beyond grammar and pronunciation, emphasizing appropriateness, tone, and interactional competence. For curriculum designers, it is recommended that secretarial courses integrate authentic elements of workplace communication, such as business negotiations, proposal presentations, and active participation in meetings. Learning objectives should be closely aligned with real-world communication demands, recognizing role play as a legitimate mode of language assessment. Future research may benefit from employing a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative reflections with quantitative measures of linguistic development, such as pre- and post-tests, to enhance reliability. Additionally, investigations into the long-term impact of role play on job readiness and communication during internships or post-graduation could yield valuable insights. Comparative studies across different vocational domains—for

instance, secretarial versus business administration—may further elucidate the transferability and effectiveness of role play in professional language training.

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