

**ROLE PLAY AS A BRIDGE FOR COMMUNICATION IN THE
WORKPLACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF
ENGLISH-SPEAKING SKILLS IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS**

THESIS PROPOSAL

**Submitted in the English Education Department of the School of Graduate
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Degree**



Written by:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

In the era of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, English proficiency particularly in speaking, has become a critical skill for success in the workplace. English serves not only as an international lingua franca but also as a medium for effective interaction in multicultural and professional environments that demand clarity, confidence, and contextual appropriateness (Bolton & Jenks, 2022; Schnurr, 2024). Competence in English speaking reflects a student's readiness to meet workplace demands, demonstrating both linguistic ability and communicative effectiveness (Sulistyanto et al., 2021).

In the context of Indonesia, vocational high schools (SMK) have a strategic role in preparing students for employment. However, English instruction in these institutions often lacks alignment with industry-specific communication needs. Many studies have indicated that English lessons are still too general and do not sufficiently reflect the real communication tasks required in various occupational sectors (Fadlia et al., 2020; Yuanti & Vardhani, 2021). This mismatch results in students' low confidence and limited opportunities to engage in meaningful, contextual speaking practices (Pratiwi & Murtini, 2024; Sari & Wirza, 2021).

Moreover, English teaching in SMK is often delivered through grammar-focused and teacher-centered approaches, which neglect the importance of speaking as a productive skill closely linked to students' future careers (Aziz & Anjaniputra, 2025; Hulwa & Wirza, 2025). The materials used are frequently generic and fail to represent the specific communicative demands of fields like marketing, hospitality, or business services. As a result, students are inadequately prepared to navigate workplace interactions, such as negotiating with clients, responding to customer inquiries, or giving professional presentations.

To address these gaps, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) offers a pedagogical framework that aligns instructional materials, methods, and assessments with students' vocational needs. ESP promotes purpose-driven learning that focuses on language use in specific professional contexts (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Recent literature suggests that ESP has evolved into a transformative model capable of equipping learners with both linguistic and pragmatic skills needed in global workplaces (Mohammed, 2022; Ghafar, 2022; Chaovanapricha & Champakaew, 2024).

Within the ESP framework, role play emerges as a highly relevant strategy, especially for vocational students. Role play provides students with opportunities to simulate real-life professional scenarios such as working as receptionists, marketing officers, or customer service representatives that require effective spoken communication (Negara, 2021; Tomlinson, 2023). Through these simulations, learners can practice authentic dialogues, build confidence, and develop communicative competence in a safe, interactive environment (Ayuningtias & Yana, 2019; Suprayogi & Pranoto, 2020).

In addition, role play aligns with learner-centered and experiential learning approaches. It encourages students to actively participate, collaborate with peers, and reflect on their performance, all of which are critical components of language acquisition and vocational readiness (Blumberg, 2023; Muñoz, 2021). It not only develops students' speaking fluency but also enhances critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills.

Although communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have been widely promoted, few studies have integrated ESP principles with role play in vocational contexts. Most research has focused either on general communicative competence or on ESP curriculum development, without emphasizing the intersection between ESP and experiential techniques like role play (Aziz & Anjaniputra, 2025; Ghafar, 2022). This highlights a gap in current pedagogical research.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the use of ESP-based role play as a pedagogical strategy to improve students' speaking skills for workplace

Tomlinson (2023) emphasized the effectiveness of experiential techniques such as role play in enhancing both accuracy and fluency by embedding language use within authentic, problem-based scenarios. Pinatih (2021) demonstrated that role play integrated with ESP instruction allowed students to practice functional and professional discourse—including negotiation, marketing, and customer service—in ways that mirrored real workplace situations. Chaovanapricha and Champakaew (2024) expanded this discussion through their study in Thailand, confirming that ESP-based role play significantly improved students’ spoken proficiency and understanding of workplace discourse. Their findings reinforce the potential of combining ESP principles with interactive strategies to enhance professional communication skills.

Additionally, Blumberg (2023) and Muñoz (2021) stressed the value of learner-centered instruction, in which students are actively engaged in planning and reflecting on their learning. These approaches promote autonomy, decision-making, and interaction—key attributes in speaking development. Such insights are crucial for understanding how experiential and learner-centered methods can enhance communicative competence in vocational settings.

Despite the evidence supporting ESP and role play, most studies have investigated them separately. Few have focused on their integration within vocational English education, especially regarding speaking skills for workplace use. This gap justifies the current study, which explores how role play serves as a bridge between ESP objectives and the speaking demands of real-world vocational settings.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an instructional approach designed to meet learners’ professional and academic communication needs. Hutchinson & Waters, (1987) conceptualize ESP as an approach centered on learners’ goals and the communicative demands of specific disciplines. In the same vein, Dudley-Evans & St John, (1998) highlight three defining features of ESP: (1) purpose-

driven learning objectives, (2) curriculum and materials informed by systematic needs analysis, and (3) instructional practices that reflect real communication contexts in the target field.

Within vocational education, ESP functions as a bridge between school and industry by emphasizing functional and contextual language use. It equips learners with the communication skills required in real workplace situations—such as handling customers, negotiating, and presenting information—by prioritizing meaning-focused tasks over purely grammatical instruction. Recent developments indicate a shift from a language-centered to a learning-centered orientation (Mohammed, 2022; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2020), where students actively construct meaning through authentic, problem-based learning experiences.

However, ESP implementation in vocational contexts remains challenging. Ghafar, (2022) observes that many teachers struggle to design tasks that genuinely reflect workplace discourse. These limitations underscore the need for adaptive strategies such as role play, which brings workplace realities into the classroom through simulated, interactive communication experiences.

2.2.2 Role Play in ESP-Based Speaking Instruction

Role play is a communicative technique that enables learners to enact professional scenarios and practice English for specific occupational purposes. Research by Negara, (2021) and Pinatih, (2021) demonstrates that role play enhances fluency, confidence, and pragmatic awareness because learners engage in context-rich situations such as meetings, interviews, and customer service interactions. Tomlinson, (2023) emphasizes that role play is most impactful when supported by authentic and profession-relevant materials, allowing students to practice language that mirrors real workplace usage.

In the ESP framework, role play functions as an experiential learning tool that operationalizes theoretical knowledge into communicative performance. It supports collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability—competencies essential for modern workplaces. Suprayogi & Pranoto, (2020) confirm that ESP-based role