

Role Play to Improve Speaking Skills: A Case Study at SMKN 2 Blitar

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Abstract: Speaking English remains a major challenge for vocational students, who often experience limited vocabulary, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of role play as a teaching strategy to enhance students' speaking skills. Conducted at SMKN 2 Blitar in the Fashion Design program, the research applied a qualitative case study design. Data were collected from one English teacher and selected students through interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The results revealed that teachers prepared role play by selecting communicative topics, designing scenarios, and grouping students according to readiness. During implementation, students performed in groups, which fostered collaboration, reduced anxiety, and encouraged more active participation. Assessment was carried out using rubrics covering pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and confidence. The findings indicate that role play improved students' motivation, classroom engagement, and ability to express ideas more confidently. In conclusion, role play proved to be an effective instructional strategy for vocational students, addressing both linguistic and psychological challenges in speaking.

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency plays a pivotal role in contemporary education and professional contexts. As the lingua franca of global communication, English functions not only as a means of interaction but also as a gateway to knowledge exchange, technological advancement, and international collaboration (Crystal, 2003; Alfarisy, 2021). In Indonesia, English is formally introduced from early education to higher education as a foreign language, yet the outcomes of learning often remain unsatisfactory, particularly in productive skills such as speaking (Zhang, 2009; Hidayati, 2018). Speaking, as an oral productive skill, demands the integration of multiple competencies, including vocabulary mastery, grammatical accuracy, fluency, and confidence (Brown, 2004; Richards, 2008).

These requirements make speaking the most challenging skill to acquire, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where exposure to authentic communication is limited.

In vocational high schools, the urgency to master speaking is even greater because graduates are expected to engage in workplace communication that often involves English. Vocational students in Indonesia, including those at SMKN 2 Blitar, frequently encounter situations where their inability to communicate effectively in English becomes a barrier to professional readiness (Nurdiana et al., 2022). Despite having theoretical knowledge, students often remain passive in class, lack confidence, and hesitate to participate in conversations. This phenomenon illustrates a gap between the goals of English education in vocational schools which aim to prepare students for global competitiveness and the actual speaking performance achieved by learners. Hence, the challenge is not only linguistic but also pedagogical: how can teachers implement innovative strategies that motivate students and provide authentic contexts for practicing speaking

A considerable body of literature suggests that interactive and communicative approaches are more effective in promoting speaking ability compared to traditional grammar-based methods (Littlewood, 2011; Derakhshan et al., 2015). Among these approaches, role play has gained recognition as a practical and engaging strategy. Role play provides learners with opportunities to simulate real-life situations, practice target language use, and develop communicative competence within a controlled classroom environment (Ladousse, 2001; Huang, 2008). By adopting different roles, students practice vocabulary, pronunciation, and expressions in meaningful contexts, which reduces anxiety and increases motivation (Kusnierek, 2015; Huda, 2019). Moreover, role play aligns with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes interaction as both the means and goal of language learning.

The urgency of adopting role play in vocational schools is further underscored by the demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Vocational students require not only general communication skills but also professional

language relevant to their fields of study, such as hospitality, business, or engineering (Cahyati et al., 2015). Role play allows for contextual adaptation, where teachers can design scenarios related to workplace interactions, customer service, or job interviews, thereby bridging classroom learning with real-world applications. Several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of role play in enhancing vocational students' communication, confidence, and problem-solving skills (Taufan, 2020; Yuliani, 2021). However, these studies are still limited in scope, particularly within the Indonesian vocational school context, creating a need for further exploration and empirical evidence.

State-of-the-art research on speaking instruction has evolved significantly over the past decade. Digital-based strategies such as mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) (Burston, 2014; Viberg & Grönlund, 2017), virtual reality simulations (Lin & Lan, 2015), and online collaborative platforms (Hung & Higgins, 2016) have been introduced to enhance speaking practice. While these approaches demonstrate promise, they often require technological infrastructure and digital literacy that may not be equally available in all schools, particularly in rural or semi-urban areas like Blitar. In contrast, role play remains a low cost, adaptable, and sustainable strategy that can be implemented in diverse educational contexts without dependency on advanced technology. This characteristic strengthens the relevance of role play as a pedagogical innovation suited for vocational schools in developing regions.

Despite the acknowledged benefits, there remains a research gap in how role play is systematically implemented in vocational school classrooms and how it directly influences students' speaking performance. Previous studies often highlight improvements in motivation or classroom atmosphere (Sarıçoban & Karakurt, 2016; Fitriani, 2019), but fewer provide in-depth qualitative insights into the preparation, execution, and assessment stages of role play activities. This study attempts to fill that gap by examining not only the outcomes but also the processes involved in role play as a teaching strategy, particularly focusing on the experiences of teachers and students at SMKN 2 Blitar.

The novelty of this research lies in its contextual contribution to vocational

education. Unlike many studies conducted in general high schools or university settings, this research situates role play within the specific needs of vocational learners, whose language use is closely tied to employability and workplace communication. Furthermore, the study integrates observations, interviews, and documentation to provide a comprehensive analysis of how role play affects students' speaking ability. By highlighting both challenges and successes, the study aims to generate pedagogical insights that can inform teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing effective speaking instruction for vocational education.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study reinforces the communicative approach to language teaching while demonstrating the practical application of role play in vocational contexts. Practically, it offers a replicable model of role play activities that can be adopted and adapted by English teachers in similar schools. The broader impact is the potential to enhance vocational students' readiness for workplace communication, thereby aligning English education with national goals of producing globally competitive graduates.

Based on this rationale, the objective of the study is to explore the implementation of role play as a teaching strategy and to investigate its impact on improving students' speaking skills at SMKN 2 Blitar. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of English language teaching, particularly in vocational education. Therefore, the problem formulation of this study is: How is role play implemented in teaching speaking, and to what extent does it improve vocational students' speaking skills at SMKN 2 Blitar.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study aimed to explore the implementation of role play as a teaching strategy and its contribution to improving students' speaking skills in a vocational high school. To achieve this objective, a research design was selected that corresponded with the nature of the study and the educational context. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in depth understanding

of the phenomena in the classroom, particularly the experiences of teachers and students in applying role play. This approach emphasizes descriptive data, natural classroom interactions, and the subjective perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2014).

The design employed was a case study, which is appropriate when the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). The focus of this study was one class at SMKN 2 Blitar, East Java, specifically students from the Fashion Design Department in the 2024/2025 academic year. Through this case study, the researcher was able to observe not only what happened in the implementation of role play but also how and why the process occurred in relation to students' speaking skill development.

The participants of this study included one English teacher and three tenth-grade students. The teacher, who acted as the key informant, was selected through purposive sampling because she directly implemented role play in her teaching. The students were chosen using criterion-based sampling recommended by the teacher, representing three different levels of English proficiency: high, medium, and low achievers. This procedure ensured that the data reflected varied student abilities and provided a comprehensive perspective on the strategy's effectiveness (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2018).

Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. In depth interviews were conducted with both the teacher and students. The interview guide for the teacher focused on preparation, implementation, and assessment of role play, while the student interviews explored their perceptions, challenges, and benefits gained from the activities. Observations were carried out in a non-participatory manner, allowing the researcher to record classroom activities without interfering in the natural learning process. Field notes were taken to capture details of interaction, student engagement, and teacher instructions. Documentation included lesson plans, assessment rubrics, student performance records, and photographs of classroom activities to provide additional support and triangulation.

The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and

Saldana (2018), consisting of three stages: (1) data reduction, where raw data from interviews, observations, and documentation were simplified and categorized; (2) data display, where data were presented in narrative form, tables, and matrices to highlight emerging themes; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, where interpretations were made and validated through triangulation and participant checks.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed triangulation of sources and techniques as suggested by Creswell (2014). Triangulation was carried out by comparing the findings from interviews, classroom observations, and documentation to strengthen the credibility of the research. In addition, the data were cross-checked between the teacher as the key informant and the students as supporting informants. This procedure helped confirm the consistency of the findings and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of role play in speaking activities. Verification was conducted continuously throughout the research process to maintain the reliability and accuracy of the conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2018).

Through these methodological procedures, the study provided a systematic account of how role play was implemented at SMKN 2 Blitar and how it contributed to the improvement of students' speaking skills. The combination of interviews, observations, and documentation offered a holistic picture of the classroom dynamics, ensuring that the results were both valid and meaningful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the process of implementing role play as a teaching strategy to enhance students' speaking skills at SMKN 2 Blitar. Data were collected from interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, then analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Three interconnected themes emerged: preparation, implementation, and assessment. Together, these stages demonstrate how role play created a structured and interactive pathway for students to practice speaking in English.

The first focus is on preparation. Before conducting role play, the teacher designed lesson plans that incorporated communicative scenarios relevant to the students' context, such as customer service conversations and job interviews. These scenarios were carefully chosen to reflect real life communication needs of vocational students. During this stage, the teacher explained the objectives of the activity, clarified the roles students would perform, and provided vocabulary support to ensure students could participate actively. Students were also given time to rehearse in pairs or groups before the actual performance.

Classroom observations and interviews revealed that this preparation stage helped students reduce their nervousness and increase readiness. Students with low English achievement, who initially felt anxious, became more confident when they understood the purpose of the activity and practiced beforehand. High-achieving students, on the other hand, expressed that preparation allowed them to polish their vocabulary and pronunciation before performing.

Table 1 summarizes the selective coding for focus one

Table 1. Selective coding focus 1

No	Selective theme	Axial category	Thematic description
1	Teacher preparation	Lesson plan, scenario design	Teacher prepared lesson plans and scenarios reflecting communicative situations.
2	Student readiness	Role understanding, practice	Students practiced their roles before performing, which increased confidence.

The importance of this preparation aligns with Brown (2004), who stated that students need adequate readiness to perform speaking tasks effectively, since fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation require rehearsal. Byrne (1986) similarly emphasized that role play is flexible and adaptable, but its success depends on how well students are prepared to enter the communicative situation. Nunan (2003) further argued that structured communicative tasks enable learners to use language in a way that is both purposeful and effective, confirming the necessity of planning in role play activities.

In the implementation stage, students were organized into pairs or small groups and assigned roles to perform. The teacher facilitated the process, monitored

student performance, and offered prompts or corrections when needed. Students actively engaged in practicing dialogues, using vocabulary and expressions in meaningful contexts.

Observations revealed different levels of performance. High-achieving students performed confidently, demonstrating fluency and accurate pronunciation. Medium-achieving students showed progress as they gained support from peers and the teacher. Low achieving students initially struggled but improved through repeated practice and encouragement. Importantly, role play transformed the classroom into a lively, interactive environment where students enjoyed learning English more than in traditional grammar focused lessons.

Table 2 summarizes the selective coding for focus two.

Table 2. Selective coding focus 2

No	Selective theme	Axial category	Thematic description
1	Student participation	Fluency, vocabulary use	High-achieving students showed fluency; others improved gradually with practice.
2	Classroom interaction	Dialogue practice, feedback	Role play created active interaction, supported by teacher feedback.

These results confirm Harmer's (2007) assertion that speaking activities should allow students to express themselves in meaningful situations. Huang (2008) also noted that role play reduces anxiety, making it easier for students to participate actively. Littlewood (2011) explained that communicative language teaching is built on interaction and negotiation of meaning, which was evident during these role play sessions. Richards (2006) added that speaking is a social skill, and role play allowed students to engage in authentic social interaction within the classroom.

In addition, Larsen and Freeman (2000) emphasized that teachers in communicative classrooms act as facilitators rather than sole knowledge providers. This was reflected in the role of the teacher in SMKN 2 Blitar, who guided, encouraged, and corrected rather than dominated the interaction. This teaching style enabled students to take responsibility for their learning and fostered collaboration among peers.

The third focus was on assessment. The teacher assessed speaking skills based

on vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and confidence. Observations during role play were complemented by immediate feedback sessions, where the teacher highlighted strengths and areas for improvement. Students valued the feedback, acknowledging that it motivated them to perform better in subsequent sessions.

Table 3 summarizes the selective coding for focus three.

Table 3. Selective coding focus 3

No	Selective theme	Axial category	Thematic description
1	Teacher assessment	Vocabulary, fluency, confidence	Teacher assessed students' speaking through role play performances.
2	Student reflection	Motivation, self-improvement	Students reflected on feedback and showed motivation to improve further.

This finding supports Hughes (2002), who argued that speaking assessment should cover multiple components, not only grammar but also fluency, accuracy, and confidence. Brown (2004) also stressed that effective assessment involves comprehensive indicators of communicative competence. In this study, teacher feedback encouraged students to reflect on their performance, aligning with Harmer's (2007) claim that constructive feedback boosts learners' motivation.

The integration of preparation, implementation, and assessment demonstrates that role play was an effective strategy to enhance speaking skills in SMKN 2 Blitar. Preparation gave students the clarity and readiness they needed, implementation created meaningful interaction, and assessment provided reinforcement and guidance for improvement.

These findings are consistent with Communicative Language Teaching principles (Littlewood, 2011; Larsen & Freeman, 2000), which emphasize interaction, authentic communication, and student-centered learning. Students were not only practicing English as an academic subject but also using it as a communicative tool, which is crucial for vocational students preparing for professional contexts.

National research supports these results. Sutikno (2019) and Yoniswan (2020) concluded that role play builds confidence and fluency among Indonesian students. Suryanto and Zahra (2021) highlighted that role play promotes active

involvement in vocational classrooms, while Tauchid et al. (2022) confirmed that interactive strategies improve student engagement. More recently, Wijaya et al. (2024) emphasized that role play helps vocational students align their English skills with workplace communication demands.

The novelty of this study lies in its application in a vocational school context, specifically SMKN 2 Blitar. While many studies focus on general senior high schools, this research shows that role play can bridge the gap between classroom learning and workplace communication. It demonstrates that role play is not only effective for improving speaking skills but also relevant for preparing vocational students to meet industry demands.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the use of role play as a strategy to improve students' speaking skills at SMKN 2 Blitar. The findings indicate that the success of role play lies in three interconnected stages: preparation, implementation, and assessment.

In the preparation stage, the teacher designed lesson plans and scenarios that were relevant to students' vocational context, while students practiced their roles to build readiness and confidence. During implementation, role play created an interactive classroom atmosphere where students actively engaged in dialogues, developed vocabulary, and improved fluency. Assessment provided constructive feedback that encouraged reflection and motivated students to enhance their speaking performance.

Overall, the study concludes that role play is an effective and motivating teaching strategy to improve speaking skills, particularly in vocational schools. The novelty of this research lies in its application within a vocational setting, where role play not only improved oral communication but also prepared students for professional interactions in future workplace contexts.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, teachers are encouraged to adopt role play more frequently as a classroom strategy, particularly in vocational schools, to bridge language learning with real-life

communication. Second, students should be motivated to engage actively in role play and use it as an opportunity to practice speaking both inside and outside the classroom. Third, schools are advised to support English teachers by providing resources and training for implementing communicative strategies such as role play.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct studies with larger sample sizes and in different vocational contexts to gain broader insights into the effectiveness of role play. Further studies could also compare role play with other communicative strategies to evaluate which approach is more effective in enhancing different aspects of speaking skills.

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