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Developing Communication Skills of ESP Students Through Role-Play Activities: A Classroom-Based Study in an Oil and Gas Context

Fariza Musayeva
Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers National Research University, Uzbekistan
Branch of Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas in Tashkent, Uzbekistan
musayeva_fariza@mail.ru

Abstract

This study investigates the use of structured role-play activities as a means of developing speaking skills among English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students preparing for careers in the oil and gas industry. A four-week, classroom-based, quasi-experimental intervention was carried out with 48 third-year undergraduate students at the Branch of Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas in Tashkent. Two intact class groups (approximately 24 students each) were taught by the same instructor; one group received a series of safety-themed role-play tasks targeting the passive voice, while the other followed conventional coursebook-based ESP instruction over the same period. Pre- and post-intervention speaking performance was rated on a CEFR-based rubric, and informal post-intervention conversations with students provided complementary perspectives on the learning experience. The experimental group showed a notable gain in mean speaking score (from 62% to 85%), considerably exceeding the modest improvement observed in the comparison group (60% to 63%). Student reflections, although informally collected, suggested increased confidence in using domain-specific language and engaging with workplace communication tasks such as safety briefings and incident reporting. The study reports practitioner-level evidence that purposefully designed role-play can support ESP speaking development, while transparently acknowledging the methodological limitations of a single-instructor, single-site intact-groups design. Implications for ESP curriculum design and directions for more rigorous follow-up research are discussed.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, role-play, speaking skills, oil and gas industry, classroom-based research, passive voice.

Rozwijanie umiejętności komunikacyjnych studentów ESP na podstawie zajęć z odgrywaniem ról

Streszczenie

Niniejsze badanie analizuje skuteczność ustrukturyzowanych zajęć opartych na odgrywaniu ról w rozwijaniu umiejętności mówienia studentów ESP (English for Specific Purposes) przygotowujących się do pracy w sektorze naftowym i gazowym. Czterotygodniowa quasi-eksperymentalna interwencja oparta na pracy na zajęciach została przeprowadzona z udziałem 48 studentów trzeciego roku w taszkienckim oddziale Rosyjskiego Państwowego Uniwersytetu Nafty i Gazu im. I.M. Gubkina. Dwie istniejące grupy zajęciowe (po około 24 studentów) były prowadzone przez tę samą wykładowczynię; jedna grupa uczestniczyła w zajęciach z odgrywania ról opartych na tematyce bezpieczeństwa pracy i ukierunkowanych na stronę bierną, druga zaś realizowała tradycyjny program ESP w oparciu o podręcznik. Sprawność mówienia oceniono przed interwencją i po jej zakończeniu za pomocą rubryki opartej na deskryptorach CEFR, a nieformalne rozmowy ze studentami po zakończeniu zajęć dostarczyły uzupełniających informacji o ich doświadczeniach. Grupa eksperymentalna wykazała wyraźny wzrost średniego wyniku (z 62% do 85%), znacznie przewyższający niewielką poprawę w grupie porównawczej (z 60% do 63%). Refleksje studentów, choć zebrane nieformalnie, wskazywały na wzrost pewności siebie w używaniu języka specjalistycznego oraz w wykonywaniu zadań komunikacyjnych charakterystycznych dla miejsca pracy. Badanie przedstawia dowody na poziomie praktyki nauczycielskiej, że celowo zaprojektowane zajęcia z odgrywania ról mogą wspierać rozwój mówienia w ESP, otwarcie wskazując jednocześnie ograniczenia metodologiczne wynikające z projektu opartego na jednym nauczycielu, jednej instytucji i istniejących grupach zajęciowych.

Słowa kluczowe: English for Specific Purposes, odgrywanie ról, sprawność mówienia, przemysł naftowy i gazowy, badania w ramach zajęć, strona bierna.

1. Introduction

English has become an essential medium of professional and academic communication in a globalised world (Sahli 2022). Within higher education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) aims to develop learners' ability to use English appropriately within their professional domains (Basturkmen 2010). For graduates entering technical industries such as oil and gas, this involves not only general language proficiency but also the ability to communicate effectively in workplace-specific situations, including safety briefings, incident reporting, and on-site coordination.

A persistent challenge in ESP instruction in technical universities is the gap between classroom practice and real-world communication demands. Many graduates encounter difficulty applying their English in professional settings, in part due to limited opportunities for authentic, practice-oriented communication during their studies (Hashim and Isa 2012; Zakaria, Hashim and

Yunus 2019). Learners' speaking performance is further affected by anxiety, restricted active vocabulary, and limited exposure to spoken English outside the classroom.

Among the pedagogical approaches proposed to address these issues, role-play has been described as a particularly effective strategy for developing communicative competence, as it simulates real-life situations and provides a relatively low-pressure context for meaningful interaction (Togimin and Jaafar 2020; Vani, Mohan and Ramkumar 2022). The present study contributes practitioner-level evidence on how a short, purposefully designed sequence of role-play tasks – targeting workplace safety scenarios and the passive voice – can support speaking development among ESP learners in a Russian-medium technical university in Tashkent. In doing so, it complements the largely conceptual or short-vignette literature on role-play in ESP with a transparent account of classroom implementation and outcomes.

Specifically, the study addresses the following question: To what extent does a four-week, safety-themed role-play intervention support gains in oral performance among third-year oil and gas ESP students, compared with conventional coursebook-based instruction?

2. Role-play in ESP speaking instruction

Speaking is widely regarded as the most demanding skill in second-language learning, requiring real-time integration of linguistic accuracy, fluency, and pragmatic appropriateness (Rayhan 2014; Samat, Muthu and Yunus 2019). The Communicative Language Teaching tradition, which has been formally promoted in Uzbekistan since the late 1990s, emphasises meaningful interaction and real-life language use; however, its implementation in technical universities remains uneven, and students frequently report limited opportunities to practise spoken English in their specialty (Hasanova 2007; Zokirova 2021, 2024).

Role-play is one well-established response to this gap. By inviting learners to enact defined social roles within plausible scenarios, role-play encourages the use of context-appropriate language and supports the development of confidence, fluency, and pragmatic awareness (Dorathy and Mahalakshmi 2011; Altun 2015; Angelianawati 2019). In ESP contexts specifically, role-play allows learners to rehearse domain-specific interactions such as job interviews, technical briefings, and routine workplace exchanges (Musayeva 2025), aligning naturally with task-based and learner-centred pedagogies.

Empirical work in adjacent contexts supports these claims. Rakhmonova (2023), in an experimental study with Uzbek university students, reported greater speaking gains in a role-play group than in a conventionally taught comparison group. Krisdiana, Irawati and Kadarisman (2018) and Razali and Ismail (2017) report similar patterns in school and university EFL settings. Across this literature, three themes recur: that the pedagogical design of the role-play matters more than the technique label; that authentic, domain-relevant scenarios increase engagement; and that targeted grammatical foci can be productively embedded within communicative tasks (Liu and Ding 2009).

Building on these themes, the present study designs its role-play sequence around two ESP-specific anchors. The thematic anchor is workplace safety – a domain in which clear, accurate communication is professionally critical for oil and gas personnel. The linguistic anchor is the passive voice, a structure that is both characteristic of safety and incident reporting and known to cause persistent difficulty for learners. Embedding these elements in the role-play sequence is intended to bring together communicative competence and grammatical accuracy in a way that reflects authentic workplace language use.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and study context

The study employed a classroom-based, quasi-experimental design with two intact groups, supplemented by informal post-intervention conversations to gather student perspectives. The intervention was carried out during the 2024 academic year at the Branch of Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where the author teaches English for Specific Purposes as a part-time instructor while pursuing doctoral research at Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers National Research University (TIIAME NRU). The medium of instruction at the Gubkin Tashkent Branch is Russian; English is taught as a foreign language within the ESP curriculum for students specialising in petroleum and gas engineering disciplines.

The role-play activities described below were delivered as part of the regular ESP course rather than as a separately designed research protocol. Pre- and post-instructional speaking assessments and a needs-analysis questionnaire that formed part of routine course administration

were subsequently used to investigate the pedagogical effectiveness of the role-play approach. All data were anonymised before analysis. Because the intervention consisted of routine classroom activities and the use of normally collected coursework data, no formal ethical approval was sought; this is acknowledged transparently in Section 6 as a limitation of the present study and a point for strengthening in future research.

3.2. Participants

Forty-eight third-year undergraduate students enrolled in the ESP course at the Gubkin Tashkent Branch participated in the study. All students were majoring in oil and gas-related engineering specialisations. The cohort was mixed in gender, with male students predominating, and ranged in age from approximately 19 to 21 years. Students came from mixed first-language backgrounds (Uzbek and Russian); however, Russian functions as the institutional working language at the Gubkin Tashkent Branch, and all classroom communication in subjects other than English was conducted in Russian. Students' English proficiency was estimated at CEFR B1 (intermediate), based on a placement test administered by the author at the start of the semester.

Two intact class groups of approximately 24 students each, taught by the author within the standard timetable, formed the basis for the comparison. One group was designated as the experimental group and received the role-play intervention described in Section 3.4; the other served as the comparison group and continued with conventional coursebook-based ESP instruction over the same period. Group assignment followed the existing class structure of the timetable; no random allocation between groups was possible. Students were not informed that the parallel classes formed part of a comparative pedagogical study; their participation reflected ordinary course enrolment. The implications of this approach for the interpretation of the findings are addressed in Section 6.

3.3. Instruments and data collection

Three data sources were used:

(a) **a needs-analysis questionnaire** administered at the start of the semester to all 48 students;
(b) **pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments** for both groups; and
(c) **informal post-intervention conversations** with students in the experimental group.

The needs-analysis questionnaire was a six-item Google Forms survey covering students' background information, prior English study, perceived areas of difficulty, and self-identified priority skills for their future profession. The present manuscript reports only the data from the final item, which asked students which language skill they would most like to improve in relation to their specialty (Figure 1), because this item most directly motivates the focus of the present study. The remaining items collected demographic and background information and are not analysed here.

The pre- and post-speaking assessments consisted of short paired interactive tasks (approximately five minutes per pair) on familiar topics related to the students' field. Performance was rated against a four-band rubric derived from the CEFR descriptors for spoken interaction, covering range, accuracy, fluency, and interaction. Band ratings were converted to a percentage score to allow straightforward comparison between groups and across time points. All ratings were carried out by the author, who also served as the course instructor for both groups; this single-rater design is openly acknowledged as a methodological limitation in Section 6.

Post-intervention conversations were held individually with all 48 students at the end of the four-week period. These conversations were brief (approximately three to five minutes per student) and were conducted in a mixture of English and Russian, depending on student preference. The conversations were not audio-recorded; the author took written notes immediately afterwards, summarising the main points raised by each student. The reflections discussed in Section 4.3 are therefore drawn from the author's contemporaneous notes rather than from verbatim transcripts.

3.4. The role-play intervention

The role-play intervention ran for four consecutive weeks, with one 90-minute session per week within the regular ESP timetable for the experimental group. The total intervention time was therefore approximately six classroom hours. The comparison group received the same number of ESP contact hours over the same four-week period, working through the conventional coursebook materials without the role-play sequence.

All scenarios were drawn from authentic workplace situations in the oil and gas industry and targeted the passive voice as their grammatical focus, given its prevalence in safety and incident reporting. Each session followed a consistent four-stage structure: (i) pre-teaching of relevant technical vocabulary; (ii) modelled exchange demonstrating the target structure; (iii) student-led

role-play in small groups; and (iv) post-task reflection and language feedback. Roles included safety officer, site supervisor, new worker, attendant, emergency responder, witness and team leader. The five scenarios used across the intervention are summarised below.

Role-play 1 — Sudden change in conditions
Scenario: ground instability occurs near a mud pit and reserve pit. *Roles:* worker, supervisor, safety officer. *Task:* decide what actions should be taken immediately. *Target structure:* passive voice. *Example utterances:* Work must be stopped. The area must be evacuated. The condition must be evaluated.

Role-play 2 — Alarms
Scenario: a flammable-gas alarm sounds in a confined space. *Roles:* entrant, attendant, emergency responder. *Task:* decide step-by-step actions after the alarm. *Target structure:* passive voice. *Example utterances:* Workers are evacuated immediately. The ignition source must be controlled.

Role-play 3 — Improper use of equipment
Scenario: a new worker uses equipment incorrectly. *Roles:* new worker, experienced worker, site supervisor. *Task:* discuss how the situation should be handled. *Target structure:* passive voice. *Example utterances:* The vehicle must be stopped. The issue must be reported. The procedure must be explained.

Role-play 4 — Lack of information
Scenario: a worker is unsure about safety procedures before entering a confined space. *Roles:* new worker, supervisor, safety trainer. *Task:* decide what actions must be taken before starting work. *Target structure:* passive voice. *Example utterances:* The space must be evaluated. Training must be provided. Questions must be clarified.

Role-play 5 — Near-miss incident
Scenario: a tool nearly falls into a work area. *Roles:* witness, team leader, safety officer. *Task:* discuss how the incident should be handled. *Target structure:* passive voice. *Example utterances:* The incident must be reported. The area must be inspected. Corrective actions must be taken.

3.5. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively. Pre- and post-intervention mean scores were calculated for each group, and the magnitude of within-group change was examined alongside the between-group difference. Given the small sample, the absence of randomisation, and the single-

rater design, no inferential statistics were applied; the findings should therefore be read as indicative rather than confirmatory.

Qualitative data from the post-intervention notes were re-read by the author and recurring observations were grouped into broad descriptive categories. This procedure is best characterised as informal thematic grouping rather than formal qualitative coding (e.g. with double coding or an audit trail); its limitations are addressed in Section 6.

4. Results

4.1. Needs analysis

At the start of the semester, students were asked to identify which English language skill they would most like to improve for their future profession. As shown in Figure 1, speaking was identified as the priority by a clear majority (79.2%), followed by listening (12.5%), with vocabulary, writing and reading each selected by a small minority. This pattern supports the decision to focus the intervention on speaking and aligns with prior reports from technical-university ESP contexts in Uzbekistan (Zokirova 2024).

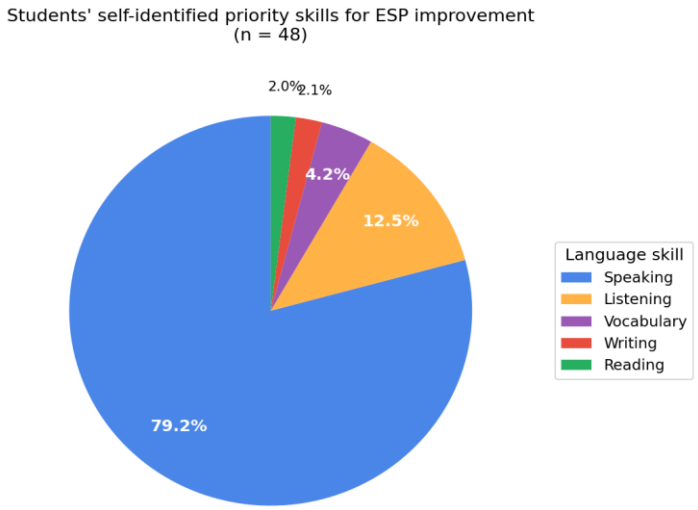

Figure 1. Students' self-identified priority skill for ESP improvement (needs analysis, n = 48)

4.2. Speaking performance

At the pre-intervention assessment, mean speaking scores for the two groups were closely comparable: 60% for the comparison group and 62% for the experimental group, indicating a

similar starting point. Following the four-week intervention, the experimental group's mean score rose to 85%, while the comparison group showed a small change to 63%. These percentage scores were obtained by rating each pair's short paired speaking task against the four-band rubric derived from the CEFR descriptors for spoken interaction (covering range, accuracy, fluency, and interaction) and converting the band ratings to a percentage, using the same procedure at both the pre- and post-intervention assessments (see Section 3). The between-group difference at post-intervention was therefore considerably larger than at the baseline, in line with the direction of effect reported in earlier role-play studies (Rakhmonova 2023; Togimin and Jaafar 2020). Figure 2 displays the pre- and post-intervention means for the two groups.

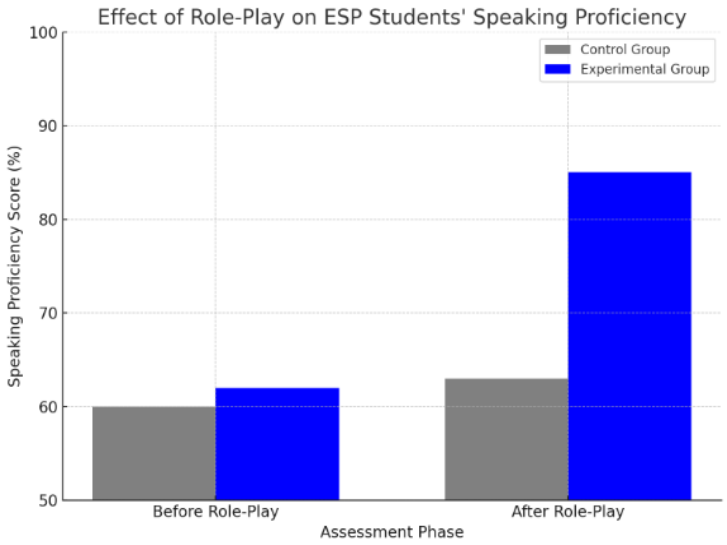

Figure 2. Mean speaking scores (%) for the comparison and experimental groups, before and after the four-week role-play intervention

These figures should be read with the methodological constraints set out in Section 6 in mind: the assessments were rated by a single rater who was also the instructor, and the design lacks randomised allocation. The pattern is therefore indicative of a pedagogically useful direction rather than evidence of a precise effect size.

4.3. Students' reflections

During the post-intervention conversations, all 48 students in the experimental group spoke briefly with the author about their experience of the role-play tasks. Three recurring observations emerged from the author's contemporaneous notes. First, a majority of students described feeling more

confident speaking English in work-related scenarios than they had at the start of the course, particularly when responding to plausible incidents such as alarms and near-misses. Second, many students commented that the repeated use of safety vocabulary across scenarios helped them feel more secure with technical terminology that had previously seemed remote from classroom use. Third, several students remarked that the structure of the role-plays – with assigned roles and a clear task – made it easier to participate than in open speaking activities, where they reported uncertainty about what to say.

These observations are reported as illustrative of patterns in the notes rather than as the output of a formal qualitative analysis; verbatim quotation is not provided because the conversations were not audio-recorded.

5. Discussion

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative observations are consistent with the broader role-play literature in suggesting that structured, scenario-based role-play can support speaking development in ESP contexts (Aziz and Kashinathan 2021; Ishak and Aziz 2022). The pattern of a larger gain in the role-play group than in the conventionally taught comparison group aligns with earlier findings (Rakhmonova 2023; Togimin and Jaafar 2020), and the students' own reports of increased confidence echo themes reported in other ESP role-play studies (Zulfa, Suryanti and Tazali 2024).

Two features of the present intervention appear particularly relevant for interpretation. First, the scenarios were drawn from a single, professionally salient domain (workplace safety) and were linked to a defined linguistic focus (the passive voice). This combination provided students with repeated, structured opportunities to use a specific grammatical form in semantically meaningful situations, which may have contributed to the consistency of language use observed in the post-tests. Second, the activities were embedded in the regular ESP timetable rather than added as an extra-curricular component; this points to the practical feasibility of incorporating role-play in existing technical-university ESP courses with minimal change to overall contact hours.

At the same time, the design constraints summarised below preclude any strong causal interpretation. The role-play group was taught by the same instructor as the comparison group and was assessed by that same instructor, leaving open the possibility that scoring or instructional differences – rather than the role-play sequence itself – contributed to the observed pattern. The

post-intervention reflections likewise reflect what students chose to share in a brief conversation with their own instructor, and may overstate positive reception. The findings should therefore be read as classroom-based, practitioner-level evidence pointing in a direction that warrants more rigorous follow-up.

6. Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be made explicit.

1. **Single-rater, instructor-as-assessor design.** All speaking performances were rated by the author, who was also the instructor of both groups. Rater bias and instructor effects therefore cannot be ruled out. A second, independent rater – or, ideally, a blinded external rater – would strengthen confidence in the score comparisons. Inter-rater reliability was not calculated.
2. **Intact groups and absence of randomisation.** Students were assigned to the experimental and comparison groups by the existing timetable rather than randomly. Although baseline scores were similar, unmeasured group differences may have contributed to the post-intervention gap.
3. **Short intervention duration.** The intervention lasted four weeks (approximately six classroom hours). Longitudinal designs are needed to assess whether the observed gains in speaking performance are retained over time and transfer to other communicative contexts.
4. **Single site and small sample.** The study involved a single cohort at one institution. Replication across institutions, year groups, and disciplines within the oil and gas sector – as well as other ESP fields – is necessary before broader claims can be made.
5. **Informal qualitative method.** Post-intervention conversations were not audio-recorded and were not subjected to formal qualitative analysis (such as transcription, systematic coding, or member checking). The themes reported in Section 4.3 should therefore be read as the author's distilled impressions rather than as a formal qualitative dataset.
6. **Absence of teacher data.** This study reports only student-side evidence. Teacher perspectives – through interviews, surveys, or peer observation – would provide important context on the feasibility of role-play in the wider ESP curriculum and are recommended as a direction for follow-up work.

7. **No formal ethical approval.** Because the activities described here were delivered as part of the routine ESP course and used coursework data subsequently for analysis, no formal ethical approval was sought. Future studies designed explicitly as research should be reviewed by an appropriate institutional body and should incorporate informed consent procedures.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This classroom-based study reports practitioner-level evidence that a four-week, safety-themed role-play sequence, embedded in a regular ESP course and anchored on the passive voice, was associated with notable gains in speaking performance among third-year oil and gas students at the Gubkin Tashkent Branch, alongside students' reports of increased confidence in professionally relevant communication. The pattern is consistent with the broader literature on role-play in ESP and suggests that purposefully designed role-play tasks are a practical, low-cost addition to existing technical-university ESP curricula.

These findings should be treated as a starting point rather than a definitive demonstration. The methodological limitations summarised in Section 6 – particularly the single-rater design, the intact-groups comparison, the short intervention duration, and the informal qualitative method – indicate clear directions for stronger follow-up research. Future studies should incorporate independent rating, longer interventions, multiple sites, and a teacher-side component; collecting recorded student reflections and applying systematic qualitative analysis would also strengthen the interpretive layer of the work.

For ESP practitioners, the practical implication is that even short sequences of well-designed role-play, tied to a specific domain and a specific grammatical focus, can be integrated into existing courses without disrupting the wider curriculum. Teacher training in scenario design and post-task feedback techniques would help make such integration more reliable across instructors.

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