

The Importance of Role Play in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Course.


La importancia del juego de roles en un curso de inglés para fines específicos (ESP).

DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31.e0153

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Received: 07/10/2025

Review: 11/10/2025

Approval: 16/11/2025

Abstract:

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a tailored approach to language teaching that focuses on the specific linguistic and communicative needs of learners in particular fields such as business, medicine, law, or engineering. In an ESP course, where learners need to acquire not just general English skills but also the terminology, discourse, and communicative competence relevant to their profession or area of study, traditional classroom methods may not be enough. One highly effective technique to meet these demands is role play. The present paper deals with the advantages of implementing this technique while planning a post graduate course to be delivered by the Languages Center staff at "Carlos Rafael Rodríguez" University.

Key words: English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Languages Center. Postgraduate course.

Resumen:

El inglés con fines específicos (ESP, English for Specific Purposes) es un enfoque personalizado de la enseñanza de idiomas que se centra en las necesidades lingüísticas y comunicativas específicas de los alumnos en campos concretos como los negocios, la medicina, el derecho o la ingeniería. En un curso de ESP, en el que los alumnos necesitan adquirir no sólo conocimientos generales de inglés, sino también la terminología, el discurso y la competencia comunicativa pertinentes para su profesión o área de estudio, los métodos tradicionales de clase pueden no ser suficientes.

Una técnica muy eficaz para satisfacer estas exigencias son los juegos de rol. El presente trabajo aborda las ventajas de aplicar esta técnica en la planificación de un curso de postgrado que impartirá el personal del Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad “Carlos Rafael Rodríguez”

Palabras clave: Inglés con fines específicos. Centro de idiomas. Curso de postgrado.

Introduction

Role play involves learners acting out scenarios that mimic real-world situations. This method offers an interactive, practical, and dynamic way for students to engage with the specific language and cultural contexts they will encounter in their professional lives. This article explores the importance of role play in an ESP course, highlighting how it enhances language learning, builds confidence, and fosters the practical application of skills. The latter element is considered as crucial, taking into consideration the benefits brought in terms of language acquisition at the time of preparing a postgraduate course of English. In the case at hand, a course designed for gastronomic services staff, role-play can be especially impactful, providing the learners with linguistic tools directed towards key abilities in their field such as Customer Interaction, Team Communication, Special Situations and Cultural Sensitivity, all of which will be properly addressed in the body of this paper.

Development

As it was previously stated, role play brings to the teaching- learning process of foreign languages a wide variety of advantages which are addressed below:

Contextual Learning

One of the key features of ESP is its focus on context-specific language use. Role play provides an ideal platform for contextual learning, where students can practice language that directly relates to their field of expertise. For example, in an English for Business course, role-playing scenarios such as business meetings, negotiations, or customer interactions helps students practice vocabulary, idioms, and expressions that are relevant to the business world. In a medical English course, students may engage in role plays involving doctor-patient consultations, allowing them to practice medical terminology and the sensitive communication skills required in healthcare.

By mimicking real-life professional situations, role play helps learners understand not only what to say, but also **how** to say it in the appropriate tone, register, and cultural context. This ensures that

students are not merely learning vocabulary and grammar in isolation but are acquiring the communicative skills they need to function effectively in their specific professional environments.

Developing Communication Skills

ESP learners often need more than just linguistic proficiency; they need to master specific communicative skills, including negotiation, problem-solving, and interpersonal interaction. Role play allows them to develop these skills in a safe, controlled environment where they can make mistakes, receive feedback, and improve.

For example, in an English for Law course, learners may participate in mock court trials or legal negotiations, which require not only knowledge of legal vocabulary but also the ability to present arguments persuasively, respond to counterarguments, and maintain professionalism under pressure. Role play exercises such as these help learners refine their ability to communicate effectively in high-stakes, professional settings.

Additionally, role play encourages **active listening**, an essential skill in any professional context. During role play, learners must pay close attention to their partners' responses and react appropriately, thus simulating the back-and-forth nature of real-world communication.

Building Confidence

Many ESP learners, especially those who are non-native English speakers, struggle with confidence when it comes to using English in their professional lives. This lack of confidence can stem from fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood in critical situations. Role play provides a supportive environment in which learners can practice without the fear of real-world consequences.

Repeatedly engaging in role play helps students build the confidence they need to communicate effectively in their specific field. For example, a student in an English for Aviation course might practice radio communication with air traffic control. Initially, the complexity of the terminology and the fast pace of communication might intimidate the learner, but with regular role play practice, they can become more confident and comfortable in handling such exchanges.

Through role play, learners also become accustomed to the pressure and unpredictability of real-life scenarios, which helps them prepare for their professional roles. As their confidence grows, so does their ability to function fluently and competently in real-life situations.

Fostering Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

Role play encourages critical thinking and problem-solving, skills that are particularly important in specialized fields. In role play scenarios, learners are often faced with unexpected situations where they must think on their feet, just as they would in real-life professional encounters.

For example, in an English for Hospitality course, students may role-play situations where they need to handle guest complaints or resolve customer service issues. These scenarios require not only language skills but also the ability to quickly assess the situation, determine the best course of action, and communicate a solution effectively. This kind of problem-solving practice is invaluable for preparing learners to meet the challenges of their professional roles with competence and composure.

Encouraging Cultural Competence

In many ESP contexts, learners must navigate not only language barriers but also cultural differences. Role play can be an excellent way to incorporate cultural competence into language learning. For example, in an English for International Business course, role play might involve cross-cultural negotiations where students must be sensitive to cultural norms, business etiquette, and communication styles that differ from their own.

By incorporating elements of cultural awareness into role play exercises, learners can practice adapting their language and behavior to suit different cultural contexts. This helps them avoid potential misunderstandings and fosters more effective communication in their professional interactions.

Motivating Learners through Realistic Application

Role play exercises can also increase learner motivation by demonstrating the real-world relevance of the language they are learning. ESP students are often highly motivated to improve their English skills because they understand the direct impact these skills will have on their professional success. Role play reinforces this connection by providing learners with tangible examples of how they will use English in their careers.

When students see the practical application of their language learning—whether through simulated business presentations, legal consultations, or healthcare scenarios—they are more likely to

stay engaged and motivated to improve their skills. This realistic, hands-on approach to learning keeps students focused and driven.

Being more specific, in a postgraduate course of English designed for gastronomic services staff, role-play can be especially impactful. Here are some role-play scenarios and ideas that could be beneficial. The course at issue makes the most out of this technique in the following areas:

Role-Play Scenarios:

1. Customer Interaction:

- Welcoming Guests: Practice different ways to greet and seat guests, including handling reservations and walk-ins.
- Taking Orders: Role-play the process of taking orders, including recommending dishes, upselling, and answering questions about the menu.
- Handling Complaints: Scenarios where staff deal with customer complaints about food, service, or ambiance.

2. Team Communication:

- Kitchen and Floor Coordination: Simulate interactions between kitchen staff and waitstaff to ensure smooth service.
- Shift Changes: Practice efficient handovers during shift changes to ensure continuity of service.

3. Special Situations:

- Dietary Restrictions: Role-play interactions with guests who have dietary restrictions or allergies.
- Large Group Events: Scenarios involving the coordination and service for large group bookings or events.

4. Cultural Sensitivity:

- International Guests: Practice interacting with guests from different cultural backgrounds, being mindful of cultural norms and expectations.

The Course Content comprises:

1. Language Skills:

- Vocabulary: Focus on industry-specific vocabulary related to food, beverages, and service.

- Politeness and Formality: Teach appropriate levels of politeness and formality for different scenarios.
- 2. **Soft Skills:**
 - Active Listening: Encourage active listening techniques to understand guest needs and preferences.
 - Empathy: Teach staff to show empathy and understanding in all guest interactions.
- 3. **Cultural Awareness:**
 - Global Cuisine: Provide knowledge about global cuisines and customs to enhance cultural sensitivity.
- 4. **Feedback and Improvement:**
 - Self-Evaluation: Encourage staff to self-evaluate their performance and identify areas for improvement.
 - Peer Feedback: Create a supportive environment where peers can provide constructive feedback.

Practical Exercises:

1. **Role-Play Sessions:** Regular role-play sessions with varying scenarios to build confidence and skills.
2. **Simulated Service:** Mock service scenarios where staff can practice their roles in a controlled environment.
3. **Guest Feedback:** Invite guests to provide feedback on service during role-play to simulate real-world conditions.

These ideas can help gastronomic services staff enhance their English language skills and improve their overall service quality.

Conclusions

- Role play is an essential component of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, offering learners the opportunity to practice language in context, develop professional communication skills, build confidence, and prepare for real-world scenarios. By engaging in role play, learners acquire not only the linguistic competence they need but also the critical thinking, problem-solving, and cultural awareness required to succeed in their specific professional fields.

- Through role play, ESP learners can move beyond theoretical knowledge and gain the practical experience they need to thrive in their careers, making it one of the most effective and important methods for language instruction in ESP contexts.

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