IJIET, e-ISSN 2548-8430, p-ISSN 2548-8422, Vol. 9, No. 2, July 2025, pp. 321-333

International Journal of Indonesian Education and Teaching
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/IJIET
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE APPLICATION OF ROLE-PLAYING ACTIVITIES IN LEGAL ENGLISH CLASSES

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https://doi.org/10.24071/ijiet.v9i2.11914
received 12 March 2025; accepted 28 July 2025

Abstract
Role-play, an integrated language teaching method, is highly recommended in English-for-specific-purposes classes for its valuable benefits. This paper focuses on investigating learners' perspectives on role-play activity utilization in legal English lessons at Hanoi Law University. To achieve the aim, a 15-week study was carried out with the participation of sixty-seven second-year law students who were instructed with role-playing activities in legal English lessons. Data were collected through survey questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews, which addressed the benefits of role-play in terms of enhancing learners' legal English skills and legal English terms, as well as fostering their learning motivation. Accordingly, instructors might consider such findings to maximize the efficacy of role-playing activities in teaching legal English.

Keywords: law student, legal English, perspective, role-play activity

Introduction
Previously, the method of teaching English in general, and specialized English in particular, mainly focused on teaching grammar using the traditional grammar-translation method (Ly, 2020), resulting in learners' limited speaking and writing skills. In other words, learners' English proficiency did not meet the requirements of the labor market, where English is used as a crucial working tool. New approaches and methods aiming at comprehensively enhancing learners' English language proficiency have been increasingly applied. The choice of method depends on students' learning styles, their goals, and its suitability (Sayed et al., 2023). One of the relatively popular methods is the integrated teaching approach, which incorporates English skills within a single task or lesson unit. Integrated teaching can be implemented through role-playing activities in which learners can utilize language vocabulary, grammar, and skills to fulfill the lesson's requirements. According to Richards (2015), role-playing activities help students develop thinking habits, analyze issues, and especially improve their speaking and listening skills for real-life communication. Additionally, these activities enhance students' motivation and learning efficiency.

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Role-playing has attracted the attention of both domestic and international educators, who have addressed it as a vital strategy in English teaching and learning. Almada and Munawaroh (2022), as well as Nilmah and co-authors (2019), conducting research concluded that role-playing activities are likely to develop learners' accurate and fluent speaking skills. Furthermore, role-playing helps students become more confident and express their opinions more naturally. In the context of English teaching in Vietnam, Phan, Cao and Nguyen (2022) also emphasized that role-playing is one of the most effective methods for enhancing speaking and communication skills as students have the opportunity to practice language in realistic situations.

In the legal field, the international integration process has created a demand for a high-quality workforce that is well-trained in law and proficient in using English as a working language. Therefore, legal English plays an essential role in achieving success in today's globalized context. It is evident that equipping students with legal knowledge and legal English is increasingly emphasized at law training institutions. As a result, legal English has become a subject within the curriculum of law programs at tertiary contexts, including Hanoi Law University. Legal English has never been considered an easy subject due to its unique characteristics (Nhac, 2022). Thus, there has been a growing concern in innovating teaching methods to enhance students' legal English proficiency in line with employers' expectations. Similar to general English teaching, integrated teaching methods, incorporating multiple skills through role-playing activities have been increasingly implemented in legal-related scenarios. Research has shown that role-playing activities assist students in expanding their legal English terminology and improve their listening, speaking skills, legal vocabulary, and the contextual use of legal terms (Amirbayeva, 2021). However, at Hanoi Law University, there has yet been any documented study on the application of role-playing activities in teaching legal English. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the use of role-playing activities in legal English teaching and learning by examining law students' perspectives.

Definition of role-playing activity

According to Richards (2015), role-playing is understood as an activity in which students are assigned roles and improvise based on a given context using predetermined information or cues. Similarly, Brown and Lee (2015) define role-playing as assigning roles to one or a group of members and setting objectives that must be achieved. In simpler terms, role-playing is a method that allows learners to practice and "experiment" with specific behaviors in a simulated situation. Therefore, educators need to design scenarios with appropriate learning content or situations, requiring students to perform their assigned roles. This activity encourages learners to deeply consider an issue by focusing on a specific situation or event and demonstrating the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the characters. Through this experience, knowledge and skills could be applied and developed. Role-playing is one of the integrated teaching strategies incorporating multiple skills, with the prominence of speaking and listening ones. Additionally, reading and research skills are maximized in class, allowing students to build a foundation of knowledge and language to apply in specific role-playing situations.

Benefits of role-playing in enhancing learners' language competence

Recent studies have highlighted the benefits of role-playing in various educational aspects, including expanding vocabulary, improving speaking and communication skills, and increasing students' motivation to learn.

Enhancing vocabulary and terminology

Fahim and Sabah (2012) conducted a study on the impact of games and role-playing activities on vocabulary and terminology acquisition among university students in Iran. The results showed that role-playing activities remarkably helped students enhance their ability to learn and retain vocabulary. Similarly, Alabsi (2016) carried out a quasi-experimental study to evaluate the effectiveness of role-playing in vocabulary instruction. By comparing test results before and after implementing role-playing activities, Alabsi found that the experimental group scored significantly higher than the group that did not engage in role-playing. More recently, in 2023, studies by Soori et al. and Sarwat et al. concluded that role-playing has a vital and positive impact on vocabulary acquisition and retention compared to traditional teaching methods.

Improving students' speaking skills

Neupane (2019) confirmed the efficacy of role-playing in improving the speaking skills of 40 students in a school setting. Using a quasi-experimental research method, the author demonstrated that students participating in role-playing activities showed greater improvement in English-speaking skills than those taught through traditional grammar-based methods. More specifically, focusing on fluency and comprehension in communication, Tandipayuk et al. (2023) evaluated the impact of role-playing on tourism students. The results indicated that role-playing tasks positively affected fluency, comprehension, and increased students' confidence and comfort in speaking.

Enhancing communication skills

Role-playing is a widely used activity in teaching communication skills. Ashok (2015) emphasized the significant benefits of role-playing in improving learners' communication skills and language capacitites. These activities allow foreign language learners to experience simulated real-life situations, thereby enhancing their communication skills. It is evident that role-playing positively affects students' speaking skills, including fluency, comprehension, and interaction, while also fostering confidence in communication (Ishak & Aziz, 2022). Similarly, Alghamdy (2022) conducted a study comparing the effectiveness of role-playing versus traditional teaching methods in improving English learners' communication skills. The findings demonstrated that role-playing significantly enhances learners' communication abilities.

Promoting the integration of language and social skills

A study by Chaitanya and Raman (2013) investigated the use of role-playing as the primary method for improving learners' language skills. The results showed that role-playing, as an integrated skill-based approach, helps students overcome anxiety and shyness, enabling them to actively participate in learning and interact with teachers and peers. This finding was consistent with the research

of Lahbibi and Farhane (2023). Additionally, role-playing enhances negotiation skills (Yu, 2023) and strengthens learners' social skills (Baca et al., 2020).

Boosting learning motivation

In 2021, Amir et al. conducted an experimental study to determine whether role-playing activities increased learners' motivation. The research indicated that implementing role-playing enhanced learning motivation, improved academic performance, and positively changed learners' attitudes. More specifically, Gusmuliana et al. (2021) confirmed the positive impact of role-playing in encouraging students to actively and naturally express their opinions, thereby fostering motivation in English-speaking activities.

Method

Research design

This study employed a quantitative and qualitative method to evaluate both the benefits and challenges of role-playing activities in the process of learning legal English from students' perspectives.

Participants and context

The participants in this study were sixty-seven second-year law students attending a compulsory basic legal English course of at Hanoi Law University during the first semester of the 2022–2023 academic year. All of the participants expressed their eagerness and voluntarily took part in role-playing activities. In order to ensure confidentiality, the information and data gathered were treated and stored anonymously. Furthermore, the participants were duly informed of the unconditional right to withdraw at any time.

The legal English course lasts 15 weeks. The course content focused on five main topics: Company Law, Commercial Law, Litigation and Arbitration, International Law, and Comparative Law. The primary textbook used was *Introduction to International Legal English*, published by Cambridge University Press.

Research instrument

The study utilized a quantitative and qualitative research approach to determine students' views on the application of role-playing activities in legal English classes. Role-playing activities were designed for learners to simulate certain situations with the integration of various skills, includding reading, researching materials, listening, speaking, legal terminology, and communication skills. Therefore, a questionnaire consisting of 18 statements via Google Forms, along with three questions for follow-up interviews, aimed to gather students' viewpoints on the benefits they gained in terms of knowledge and language skills as well as their learning motivation. Students were also expected to share any difficulties they encountered when engaging in role-playing activities that required them to integrate multiple skills to complete lesson tasks. The survey questionnaire also included a statement to assess students' satisfaction and the effectiveness of role-playing compared to traditional learning tasks, for example, doing written review exercises.

For survey questionnaires, participants were required to respond based on a Likert scale (1-5): 1: Strongly Disagree / Very Dissatisfied; 2: Disagree / Dissatisfied; 3: Neutral / Average; 4: Agree / Satisfied; 5: Strongly Agree / Very Satisfied

Data collection and analysis

In the first week of the semester, students were informed of the specific requirements for participating in role-playing activities as part of their language practice, alongside traditional exercises. Role-playing tasks in the legal English course-book were adapted to be suitable for students to apply their background knowledge and theory of law subjects.

Throughout the 15-week Legal English course, one period (50 minutes) per each week was utilized for implementing role-playing activities which required students to practice their speaking, listening, reading, and research skills in order to finish the tasks. The process included five main steps below.

Step 1. Indentifying learning objectives and lesson goals. Creating role-playing scenarios based on each lesson's theme. For example: *Lawyer-Client Interview* – Advising clients on business types according to Vietnamese Law.
Step 2. Assigning roles: Designating students as *lawyers* and *clients.*
Step 3. Analyzing the scenario. Preparing dialogue based on the scenario and relevant research.
Step 4. Performing the role-play. Each role-play session lasts 7–10 minutes.
Step 5. Post-role-play discussion: Follow-up discussion(s) to allow students to reflect on their experiences and observations.

Finally, the instructor provided feedback on students' performance regarding language knowledge and skills as well as their communication skills based on evaluation criteria (Table 1)

Table 1. Evaluation criteria

Criteria	Unsatisfactory (1) (1-4 points)	Developing (2) (5-6 points)	Good (3) (7-8 points)	Excellent (4) (9-10 points)
Knowledge	Off-topic, lacks relevant content	Covers basic content	Provides sufficient information	Provides complete and diverse information
Language Usage	Limited, unable to convey ideas	Simple language, conveys meaning adequately	Uses more complex and diverse vocabulary and sentence structures	Accurate and flexible language usage
Soft Skills (communication, negotiation, etc.)	Lacks skills: No use of language, eye contact, or gestures in communication	Demonstrates basic verbal and non-verbal communication	More proficient in using non-verbal communication skills	Professional verbal and non-verbal skills
Attitude & Style	Poor	Fairly good	Good	Excellent

After the 15-week implementation period, survey questionnaires were sent to the participants' email address in the Google form link. They were required to respond within five days since the date of receival. Notably, all of the participants completed their survey in the two first days. The statistics were processed with the assistance of SPSS software to identify students' viewpoints, which was interpreted as Strongly Disagree / Very Dissatisfied (1.0-1.80; ; Disagree / Dissatisfied (1.81-2.60); Neutral / Average (2.61-3.40); Agree / Satisfied (3/41-4.20); Strongly Agree / Very Satisfied (4.21-5.00).

Afterwards, to gain deeper understanding of their opinion, five participants were invited for follow-up interviews. Each 30-minute interview was carried out in Vietnamese to ensure the clarity of their viewpoints. Such qualitative findings were taken note to provide further clarifications and discussions in the forms of quotes or sayings.

Findings and Discussion

Students' perspectives on the benefits of role-playing activities legal English lessons

Regarding the benefits of participating in role-playing activities integrating various skills in legal English classes, the results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 2. Benefits of role-playing activities

No.	Statement	N	Mean	SD
1	Participating in role-playing activities is very interesting.	67	3.54	1.072
2	Role-playing activities help me improve my English listening skills.	67	3.47	1.109
3	Role-playing activities help me improve my English speaking skills.	67	3.52	1.158
4	Role-playing activities help me understand how to use legal English terminology.	67	3.98	1.023
5	Role-playing activities help me improve my communication skills.	67	3.59	.998
6	I feel more confident when participating in role-playing activities.	67	3.77	1.084
7	The feedback from instructors after role-playing activities is very helpful.	67	4.13	1.177
8	I acquire more legal knowledge when participating in role-playing activities.	67	3.68	1.065
9	I develop research and document-reading skills for role-playing activities.	67	3.97	1.042
10	My vocabulary and legal terminology increase significantly when participating in role-playing activities.	67	4.02	1.021
11	I enhance my critical thinking and problem-solving skills when participating in role-playing activities.	67	3.48	1.036
12	I feel more excited and motivated to study legal English when participating in role-playing activities.	67	3.79	1.028

Table 2 shows that the mean values are relatively high, ranging from M = {3.47; 4.13}, indicating that most surveyed students perceived the benefits of role-playing activities application in legal English classes. Regarding their overall attitudes towards role-playing activities, students found them quite engaging, with a high average value (M=3.54, SD=1.072). Specifically, most students agreed that their legal vocabulary and terminology significantly improved through role-playing (M=4.02, SD=1.021). Furthermore, students knew how to use legal terminology accurately (M=3.98, SD=1.023). This result is understandable because role-playing activities required students to research and study legal materials beforehand. As a result, they needed to read and comprehend supplementary English-language documents, fostering their reading and research skills (M=3.97, SD=1.042). Such results were strengthened in the follow-up interviews.

> *When participating a role-playing activity, we simulate authentic legal scenarios, for example, client consultations, which providing us a chance to practice legal terms in realistic contexts. This practical application promotes both the retention and precision in terminology usage.* – St2.

> *Honestly, being assigned in a role-play task helps me to acquire the legal English language in functional chunks instead of memorizing isolated terms. I find it much easier to remember and acquire them.* – St4.

> *Through the preparation of role-play, we are often required to engage with authentic texts, such as statutes, case briefs or legal commentaries in order to build background knowledge. This encourages us to develop reading and researching skills including skimming, scanning and identifying key arguments.*– St3.

The role-playing activity positively impacted students' speaking skills (M=3.52, SD=1.158) and listening skills (M=3.47, SD=1.109). More broadly, many students believed role-playing enhances overall communication skills (M=3.59, SD=.998) and increased their confidence (M=3.77, SD=1.084). Such findings are reasonable because role-playing involves practicing real-life scenarios, allowing students to engage in conversations naturally rather than relying solely on textbooks. During role-play, students can fully utilize language, gestures, and attitudes to complete tasks effectively.

> *Role-play provides me with opportunities to practice fluency, accuracy and appropriateness in legal discourse. Moreover, simulated structured practice helps me gain confidence in delivering arguments in legal contexts.* – St3

> *In my opinion, role-playing promotes active and focused listening as I have to understand complex legal language and respond appropriately to opposing arguments or give legal advice to clients.* – St1

> *I think that taking part in role-playing activities helps to strengthen my overall communication skills, i.e., turn-taking, questioning techniques and negotiation strategies, as well.* – St2

These align with previous research, such as Ashok (2015), Ishak and Aziz (2022), and Alghamdy (2022).

Besides language and communication skills, students also agreed that role-playing helped them gain legal knowledge (M=3.68, SD=1.065), enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills (M=3.48, SD=1.036). The role-playing scenarios often involve legal topics such as contract consulting, business consulting, and commercial issues. Students were typically assigned roles as "Lawyer" and "Client," requiring them to research legal regulations to provide advice and solutions. Even at a basic level, the "lawyer" must analyze and apply relevant laws, improving their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This is consistent with studies by Jayanti (2022) and Elouali (2023), who highlighted the positive effects of role-playing on critical thinking and problem-solving skills in different contexts. Additionally, the majority of students recognized the value of instructor feedback after each role-playing activity (M=4.13, SD=1.177), which contributes to their enthusiasm and motivation to study legal English (M=3.79, SD=1.028).

> *Admittedly, engaging with role-play tasks enhances my motivation and reduces language anxiety. I feel more confident in using legal English terms when I am practiced in a low-risk interactive setting.* – St1

> *Structured and timely lectures 'feedback is precious for role-play activities. I can learn a lot in terms of language accuracy development, particularly in the use of legal vocabulary, grammatical structures and expression from my teacher's feedback.* – St2

> *I know how to use legal language appropriately in context through teachers' feedback. Also, their comments on communicative aspects, such as persuasive techniques, managing turn-taking and maintaining professional tone helps me to understand and adapt to different roles.* – St5

Students' perspectives on the challenges of role-playing activities in legal English lessons

Although role-playing activities received positive feedback from students, they differed significantly from traditional exercises in the sense that role-playing activities required students to apply multiple skills simultaneously (reading, research, listening, speaking, etc.), which can be challenging. Table 2 presents the difficulties or factors students may encounter.

Table 3. Challenges of role-playing activities

No.	Statement	N	Mean	SD
1	My English proficiency is not sufficient.	67	3.54	1.067
2	I lack specialized legal vocabulary.	67	3.49	1.107
3	I lack legal knowledge.	67	3.56	1.058
4	I feel anxious and lack confidence.	67	3.43	1.113
5	Preparing for role-playing takes a lot of time and effort.	67	3.78	1.036
6	The time allocated for role-playing in class is insufficient.	67	3.89	1.097

Table 3 indicates that a high number of students agreed that English proficiency, legal terminology, and legal knowledge are barriers, with mean values of M=3.54, M=3.49, and M=3.56, respectively. Such finding is understandable because role-playing activities in legal English lessons required students to integrate multiple skills while addressing legal issues. The given situations are somewhat related to legal issues that require legal knowledge. Students are required to hold good grammar and vocabulary resources, as well as legal knowledge and language flexibility to complete the tasks. Therefore, in many cases, students felt anxious when participating in role-playing due to a lack of confidence in their English proficiency and specialized knowledge (M=3.43, SD=1.113). Many students even struggled with translating their thoughts from Vietnamese to English, which further hinders their performance. Moreover, students reported that role-playing requires significant preparation time (M=3.78, SD=1.036), yet the class time allocated for role-playing was insufficient (M=3.89, SD=1.097). Typically, students had one period per week for role-playing in class, which limits opportunities for practice and instructor feedback. Such descriptive statistics were further explained in the follow-up interviews.

> *My English competence is not good, thus, I find it difficult to fully engage in role-play scenarios, which requires a wide range of legal English vocabulary and its accurate usage.* – St5

> *Sometimes, I feel that my background knowledge of legal concepts is insufficient, preventing me from responding appropriately in context-rich legal simulations. It is extremely problematic as it makes me demotivated.* – St2

> *Role-playing tasks consume a huge amount of time for preparing, performance and feedback while time-constrained curricula in exam-oriented systems do not allow us to fully engage in them. Sometimes, we need to "rush" to finish the activity and even do not have time for teachers' feedback.* – St3

These findings align with research by Nguyễn (2023) and Phan et al. (2022), who emphasized language proficiency limitations as a key challenge for students in role-playing tasks.

Effectiveness of role-playing in comparison with traditional teaching

Table 4. Effectiveness of role-playing in comparison with traditional teaching

	Paired Differences							
		Std.Dev.	Std.Er. M	95%Confidence interval of the difference				Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean			Lower	Upper	t	df	
Pair 1: role-play Traditional method	-.160	.733	.060	-.278	-.042	-2.672	149	.002

Table 4 shows that the Sig. (2-tailed) value = 0.002 < 0.05, which means the hypothesis that applying and not applying role-playing activities and have the same effectiveness in legal English learning is incorrect. Clearly, there is a significant difference in the effectiveness of the two methods, as shown by the difference range of -0.278 to -0.042. This proves that role-playing activities have a positive impact on students' skills and knowledge, as stated below,

> *It cannot be denied that traditional written exercises are important for developing linguistic accuracy and reinforcing language rules, role-playing offers me a better chance to deeply understand legal language use, and simultaneously a more communicative learning approach.* – St1

> *An experiential learning method in the form of role-playing can provide more effective outcomes, especially in specialized domains such as law. Clearly, it is much more difficult than doing written exercises as it requires many skills and knowledge. However, I can learn a lot from my friends and my teacher's feedback and comments.* – St3

Students' satisfaction with role-playing compared to traditional teaching methods

Table 5. Students' satisfaction with role-playing vs. traditional teaching methods

Method	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Role-Playing activities	3.78	67	1.069	0.092
Traditional Teaching methods	2.63	67	1.132	0.084

The role-playing activity received strong support from many students, with a high average score (M = 3.78, SD = 1.069). In contrast, the traditional teaching method (which mainly involves vocabulary exercises, reading comprehension, and grammar) received less agreement from students (M = 2.63, SD = 1.132). Thus, it can be seen that most students recognized the benefits of this activity for learning and acquiring knowledge of Legal English, despite some difficulties and challenges.

> *Generally, I feel satisfied with the sense of authenticity role-play brings to legal English lessons, particularly when I take on roles of lawyers, or judges… This simulated practice helps to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice.* – St4

> *I think that role-playing in legal English lessons offers us a chance to utilize both language and legal knowledge we have to practice. Such activities are challenging, of course, yet create a collaborative learning environment where I feel more comfortable expressing myself in English. It not only improves my legal English skills but also prepares me for real-world professional encounters.* – St5

Conclusion

It can be seen that the application of role-playing activities receives positive feedback from students due to its benefits in enhancing legal English proficiency. Besides focusing on developing listening and speaking skills, participating in role-playing activities serves as an effective integrated approach to improving reading skills, document research, specialized vocabulary, and communication, critical thinking skills. Legal topics related to real-life situations create a more practical and engaging learning environment for students.

However, engaging in role-playing activities also presents several difficulties due to subjective factors such as students' English proficiency, vocabulary, specialized terminology, legal knowledge, and objective factors such as limited time allocated for these activities. Addressing these challenges requires careful task design, scaffolding, and institutional support to create space for meaningful language use in legal contexts. Therefore, certain factors should be considered to ensure effective implementation. Firstly, instructors need to focus on managing class time and appropriately allocating time for role-playing activities so that students have the opportunity to practice, fully demonstrate their language abilities and knowledge, and maximize the effectiveness of this learning method. Additionally, role-play scenarios should be designed to be diverse and realistic, helping students improve both language skills and social and communication skills. Students are advised to actively and enthusiastically participate in role-playing activities to enhance their knowledge, confidence, and English proficiency. Concerning administrators' roles, arranging language classes with a smaller number of students is also a recommendation that should be considered to facilitate interactive and integrated learning activities.

This study has identified students' perspectives on the application of role-playing activities as an integrated skill approach. However, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the study only employed qualitative methods to determine students' opinions without assessing their actual learning outcomes, changes, or progress through appropriate evaluation methods. The second limitation concerns the sample size of surveyed students. With the participation of only sixty-seven students, the results may not be representative of a larger student population. Therefore, future research should employ multiple methods such as surveys, interviews, classroom observations, or experiments on a broader scale to ensure more reliable results.

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