

The Effect of Role-Playing Techniques on Assertive Communication Ability among Online Business and Retail Students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung

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ABSTRACT

Assertive communication is a core competency for vocational high school (SMK) students, particularly those majoring in Online Business and Retail, whose future work demands strong interpersonal skills in customer service, negotiation, and teamwork. Classroom instruction in Indonesian vocational schools, however, still tends to privilege cognitive content over practical, contextual communication training. This study examines the effect of the role-playing technique on the assertive communication ability of twelfth-grade Online Business and Retail students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung. A quantitative survey approach is employed, with role playing—operationalized through three dimensions (role taking, role marking, and role negotiation) adapted from Zaini (2008)—as the independent variable, and assertive communication—operationalized through five dimensions adapted from Albert and Emmons (2001)—as the dependent variable. Given a population of 36 students, a saturated (census) sampling technique is used, so all members of the population serve as respondents. Data will be collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using path analysis with the assistance of SPSS, examining both the simultaneous effect of role playing on assertive communication and the partial effects of its three dimensions. The study is grounded in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which posits that behavior is acquired through observation, modeling, and reinforcement. The anticipated outcome is empirical evidence on the effectiveness of role playing in strengthening assertive communication, together with practical recommendations for teachers and schools seeking to design more participatory, work-relevant instructional strategies.

Keyword: Role Playing; Assertive Communication; Instructional Method; Vocational High School Students; Online Business And Retail.

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education in Indonesia plays a pivotal role in preparing a workforce that is not only technically ready for employment but also able to compete in an increasingly complex global environment. Vocational high schools (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan, SMK) are designed to deliver practical, directly applicable skills so that graduates can contribute effectively across economic sectors. Yet a persistent gap remains between the technical

preparation SMK provides and the broader demands of the labor market. Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik, BPS) reported in 2024 that open unemployment among SMK graduates reached 9.27 percent, notably higher than the 7.23 percent recorded for general senior high school (SMA) graduates. This disparity suggests that, despite being trained in vocational skills such as machine operation, product design, or business management, SMK students often remain underprepared in equally important non-technical areas—interpersonal communication, self-confidence, and the social competence required in professional settings.

The rapid growth of e-commerce and retail, driven by online platforms and mobile applications, has made assertive communication—the ability to express ideas, opinions, or needs clearly, politely, and firmly without offending others—an indispensable core competency. An online store employee, for instance, must interact with customers through chat, email, or telephone, where assertive communication helps prevent miscommunication, builds rapport, and increases customer satisfaction. Without this competency, SMK graduates may struggle to adapt to the workplace, raising the risk of unemployment or poor job performance. Vocational education therefore needs to place greater emphasis on developing such soft skills so that graduates are not only technically competent but also able to interact effectively in dynamic professional situations.

Communication is fundamental to human social life, functioning as the bridge through which individuals express thoughts, feelings, and needs, whether verbally or through body language, facial expression, and gesture (Thalib, 2010). Productive interpersonal communication depends on two closely related capacities: assertiveness and empathy. Assertiveness has been defined as the ability to communicate what one wants, feels, and thinks directly to others while still respecting their rights and feelings (Kuswara, 2009); assertive individuals are honest and open, yet able to regulate their emotions in challenging social situations such as business negotiation or conflict resolution. Empathy, in turn, is the capacity to sense and understand another person's emotional state and to respond in a supportive way (Dhedi, 2011), extending beyond sympathy to concrete supportive action such as active listening (Myers, 2012).

Assertiveness and empathy together form the basis of healthy, effective communication and contribute to the development of emotional intelligence—the capacity to recognize, regulate, and appropriately express one's own emotions in social interaction. For adolescents, and SMK students in particular, who are in the process of forming their identity and actualizing their potential, assertive and empathic behavior is essential for building self-confidence and social maturity (Thalib, 2010). Students with low assertiveness tend to withdraw, struggle to

adapt to new environments, and hesitate to voice their opinions, which can hinder their development; conversely, assertive behavior helps students build the courage to make decisions, strengthens self-confidence, and reinforces the ability to build harmonious social relationships. In an Online Business and Retail classroom, for example, assertive students participate more readily in group discussions on marketing strategy, while empathy allows them to understand the perspective of co-workers or customers, fostering more effective collaboration.

Low assertiveness and limited empathy are common concerns in vocational school settings, and school counselors and teachers need to address them seriously, since unaddressed deficits can have long-term consequences for students' working lives. Dynamic, interactive group guidance has been proposed as an effective way of training students' social skills (Prayitno & Amti, 2008); through intensive interaction among group members, students can build social awareness, empathy, and a balanced assertive disposition. One technique repeatedly shown to be effective in this respect is role playing, in which students are given the opportunity to enact social situations resembling real life. Through role playing, students learn to manage emotions, understand different social roles, and sharpen their communication skills through active experiential learning—for example, by practicing price negotiation with an online customer or handling a consumer complaint, both of which require the practical application of assertiveness and empathy.

Prior studies provide converging evidence for the positive effect of role playing on interpersonal communication and assertive behavior. Dharmayanti et al. (2025) found that role-playing techniques improved learners' communication competence through role simulations resembling real situations, making students more active in interaction, more able to grasp others' perspectives, and more effective communicators across social contexts. Similarly, Ningrum, Fitriana, and Lestari (2025) found that role playing used within group guidance services had a positive effect on students' assertive behavior, giving students the opportunity to practice the courage to voice opinions, express feelings appropriately, and build confidence in social interaction. Nurcahyani (2024) likewise showed that role playing effectively improved SMK students' communication skills in tourism-service instruction, allowing students to practice speaking, interacting, and responding to service situations directly.

These studies, however, share important limitations. Most focus on communication ability in general, intercultural communication, or assertive behavior within group-guidance and counseling contexts rather than classroom instruction. None specifically examines the assertive communication ability of SMK students majoring in Online Business and Retail, a field with

distinctive demands for professional communication in customer service, negotiation, and teamwork. Nor do earlier studies break the role-playing technique down into more specific dimensions—role taking, role marking, and role negotiation—to assess the contribution of each dimension to assertive communication ability. The present study addresses these gaps.

This study is grounded in Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which holds that human learning occurs not only through direct experience but also through observation, imitation, and behavioral modeling. In an educational setting, students acquire new behavior by observing a model—a teacher or a peer—and then reproducing it in relevant social situations. Role playing embodies this core mechanism of observational learning and modeling: students learn assertive behavior through enacted roles reinforced by positive feedback from instructors and peers. Bandura's theory thus provides a strong theoretical foundation for explaining how role playing can enhance assertive communication ability through a natural, contextual social-learning process.

Building on this rationale, the present study empirically examines the effect of the role-playing technique on the assertive communication ability of twelfth-grade Online Business and Retail students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung. Theoretically, the study is expected to reinforce the application of Bandura's social learning theory within vocational education and to offer new insight into how role playing may be integrated into the vocational curriculum. Practically, the findings are expected to help teachers and school counselors design instructional strategies that are innovative, reflective, and oriented toward developing students' character and social skills, thereby preparing them for the demands of the labor market.

Based on the background above, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How great is the effect of the role-playing technique on the assertive communication ability of Online Business and Retail students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung? (2) How great is the effect of the role-taking dimension—students' ability to adopt and adjust to an assigned role—on their assertive communication ability? (3) How great is the effect of the role-marking dimension—students' ability to modify, alter, or spontaneously develop a role—on their assertive communication ability? (4) How great is the effect of the role-negotiation dimension—students' ability to negotiate role allocation and interaction rules—on their assertive communication ability?.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Related Studies

Three recent studies inform the design of the present research. Dharmayanti et al. (2025), in a study on role-playing techniques to improve intercultural communication competence, used a quantitative, one-group pretest–posttest pre-experimental design among senior high school students and found a significant increase in assertive behavior following a role-playing-based group guidance intervention. Its scope, however, was limited to counseling-based group guidance rather than classroom instruction, and it did not decompose role playing into specific role dimensions. Ningrum, Fitriana, and Lestari (2025) examined the effect of group guidance using role playing on the assertive behavior of tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Jakenan using a quasi-experimental design with treatment and control groups, again finding that role-playing-based instruction produced better communication outcomes than conventional teaching, but without isolating assertive communication as a distinct construct or examining the contribution of individual role dimensions. Nurcahyani (2024) studied the effect of role playing on the communication skills of SMKN 3 Bandung students in a tourism-guidance course, using a quasi-experimental design and gain-score analysis, and found that role playing improved communication skills in customer-service contexts, though again without a specific focus on assertive communication or on the Online Business and Retail major.

Collectively, these studies confirm that role playing is an effective instructional and counseling technique for developing communication and assertive behavior, while leaving open three gaps that the present study seeks to close: a specific focus on assertive communication (rather than communication skill in general), a research setting within the Online Business and Retail major with its distinctive professional-communication demands, and an analysis of the differential contribution of role playing's constituent dimensions—role taking, role marking, and role negotiation—rather than treating role playing as a single undifferentiated variable.

Communication

Communication has been defined as a process of sharing meaning through symbols and behavior, shaped by individuals' ability to encode and interpret information (Chase & Shamo, 2012); on this view, a message is understood not merely from the words used but also from the surrounding social context, cultural background, and communicative experience. Effective communication has further been characterized as a two-way interactive process encompassing shared understanding of context, purpose, and feedback that allows meaning to be corrected and adjusted (Coughlan & Macredie, 2002), positioning the receiver as an active participant rather than a passive recipient. Taken together, these perspectives frame communication as a

fundamental social process through which individuals construct shared meaning, coordinate action, and build relationships, involving not merely the mechanical transmission of messages but an exchange of meaning constructed through symbols, context, and social experience.

The purpose of communication varies with social and professional context. In professional environments such as schools, businesses, or government institutions, communication functions as the connective tissue for cooperation, problem-solving, and evidence-based decision-making, and, in academic settings, as the medium through which knowledge is disseminated and scholarly dialogue is sustained (Bray et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2018). For communication to achieve its purpose, clarity of message and shared interpretation between sender and receiver are essential (Wheatcraft & Ryan, 2018), together with openness to giving and receiving feedback, empathy, honesty, and sensitivity to the receiver's background (Anwar et al., 2011). Structurally, communication is commonly analyzed in terms of sender, message, channel, receiver, and feedback operating as a dynamic system, in which feedback functions as the key indicator of whether communication has been effective (House et al., 2009; Akilandeswari et al., 2015).

Role Playing

Role playing is an instructional and social-simulation method in which participants are placed in a representational situation and enact a character, role, or condition for a learning purpose, combining elements of narrative, dramatization, and interaction so that learning occurs through active participation. Rather than mere behavioral imitation, role playing is a deliberately designed activity intended to develop interpersonal skills and heighten sensitivity to social dynamics (Lowenstein & Harris, 2007); participants are trained to encode, express, and review patterns of communication and emotional response within a structured context. Role playing has also been characterized as a social phenomenon governed by a shared set of norms and rules—covering role allocation, behavioral boundaries, and feedback mechanisms—that distinguish educational role playing from unstructured improvisation and that make the resulting experience replicable and analyzable for research purposes (Montola, 2008).

A central feature of role playing is its affective and reflective dimension: it gives participants room to express ideas and emotions within a controlled context, facilitating meaningful learning because participants do not merely receive information passively but internalize and test personal assumptions against the role performed (Wohlking & Gill, 1980). In formal education, role playing functions as an active-learning strategy that supports both cognitive understanding and social-competence development, translating abstract concepts into

practical experience through case simulations, short dramas, mock interviews, or customer-service scenarios, each adaptable to instructional goals such as improving assertive communication, decision-making, or conflict management (Craciun, 2010). Instructionally, the technique unfolds across three interrelated phases—preparation (scenario design, role assignment, and briefing), enactment (simulated action and interaction among participants), and reflection/evaluation (structured discussion, feedback, and behavioral analysis against instructional objectives)—reflecting the broader principle of learning by doing through cycles of action and reflection.

Reported benefits of role playing include strengthened empathy and perspective-taking, since participants must understand the background and motivation of the character they portray; strengthened verbal and non-verbal communication skills through realistic interactive practice; development of critical thinking and problem-solving when scenarios are designed to raise dilemmas requiring strategic reasoning; and increased learning motivation owing to its participatory, contextual format. At the same time, role playing has notable limitations: outcomes depend heavily on scenario design and facilitator capability, some participants may feel awkward or resist full participation, and evaluation can be subjective without a validated observation instrument and rubric. Recommended safeguards include developing reliable and valid evaluation instruments (e.g., an assertive-behavior observation rubric or pre-post questionnaire), structured debriefing to encourage critical reflection and transfer, and scenario/role rotation to reduce single-experience bias.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the capacity of an individual to express thoughts, feelings, and needs honestly and directly without disregarding or violating the rights of others. This conceptualization situates assertiveness at the intersection of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions—emotional experience, beliefs and situational judgment, and manner of message delivery—forming a multifaceted construct that shapes the quality of interpersonal interaction, with core components typically including the initiation of communication, the ability to set boundaries, constructive expression of feeling, and self-esteem-enhancing strategies. From a personality and developmental perspective, assertiveness has both a dispositional aspect and an element that can be modified through pedagogical intervention and communication training (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013), implying an important distinction—for research design and measurement—between assertiveness as a relatively stable trait and assertiveness as a trainable skill. Assertiveness development has also been framed within processes of socialization and contextual conditions such as family practice, educational norms,

and social circumstance (Nikolaiev & Herasina, 2023), underscoring the need to account for socio-demographic covariates and to consider cross-cultural variation in how assertive expression is perceived and evaluated.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication clarifies the communicative style expected of an assertive individual: directness and firmness combined with continued respect for the interlocutor. A systematic review of assertiveness in professional and clinical practice emphasizes that assertiveness is effective when combined with empathy, awareness of power dynamics, and emotional regulation (Gutgeld-Dror et al., 2024)—an integration especially relevant to organizational and service settings, where clarity of message must be balanced against contextual sensitivity. Assertive communication also plays a functional role in conflict management and organizational goal attainment; competency studies in nursing, for instance, indicate that conflict-handling ability, empathy, and emotional management correlate with professional communication effectiveness, supporting simulation-based approaches such as role playing for developing assertive skill in practice.

Methodologically, the measurement of assertiveness is best strengthened by combining multiple data sources: a validated self-report scale capturing individuals' subjective perception of, and comfort with, assertive tendencies; structured observation in a controlled situation such as simulation or role playing, which captures verbal and non-verbal behavior not always evident in self-report; and third-party assessment by facilitators or peers, which adds an additional perspective. Such triangulation helps reduce social-desirability bias common in self-report measures and enables analysis of mediating or moderating factors—such as emotion regulation or organizational support—that may explain how assertiveness affects outcomes such as performance or psychological well-being. Cross-cultural variation in what counts as assertive versus aggressive, potential self-report bias, and situational moderators of the assertiveness–outcome relationship remain important limitations to bear in mind when designing such research.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative approach using the survey method (Sugiyono, 2017), which is appropriate for testing the empirical relationship between the role-playing technique (X)—comprising the dimensions of role taking, role marking, and role negotiation—and students' assertive communication ability (Y). The quantitative approach enables the

magnitude of the relationship between variables to be measured objectively and expressed as a path coefficient, so that conclusions rest on a defensible statistical foundation. Primary data on the application of role playing and on students' assertive communication ability are collected directly from respondents through a questionnaire, allowing the study to test, within a relatively short period, whether a significant effect exists between the two variables.

Population and Sample

The population comprises all twelfth-grade students in the Online Business and Retail major at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung in the 2025/2026 academic year, totaling 36 students. Because the population is smaller than 50, the study employs saturated sampling (census), in which every member of the population serves as a respondent (Arikunto, 2010; Sugiyono, 2017); no sample-size formula (e.g., the Slovin formula) or probability-sampling procedure is therefore required. This approach was chosen because it yields a fully representative sample with no unrepresented population members, minimizes sampling error relative to probability-sampling techniques, and is an efficient use of the study's time and resources given the population size.

Data Collection

Primary data are collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Form to all twelfth-grade Online Business and Retail students, containing statements on the application of role playing and on students' assertive communication ability, completed independently by respondents under the researchers' supervision. Secondary data are obtained through a literature review of books, journal articles, and prior research relevant to role playing, assertiveness, and assertive communication, used to strengthen the theoretical foundation and to support instrument development and interpretation of findings.

Operationalization of Variables

Table 1 presents the operationalization of the role-playing variable (X) across its three dimensions and nine indicators, and Table 2 presents the operationalization of the assertive communication variable (Y) across its five dimensions and fifteen indicators.

Table 1. Operationalization of the Role-Playing Variable (X)

Dimension	Indicator	Item No.
Role Taking	Understanding of the assigned character/role	1
	Consistency between attitude/action and the role performed	2
	Consistency in sustaining the role throughout the simulation	3
Role Marking	Ability to spontaneously develop dialogue/role expression	4

	Creativity in adjusting the role to new situations in the scenario	5
	Variation of response to the evolving dynamics of the scenario	6
Role	Ability to discuss role allocation with group members	7
Negotiation		
	Ability to agree on interaction rules during the simulation	8
	Ability to adjust to the group's shared role agreement	9

Source: adapted from Zaini (2008) and the researchers' operationalization.

Table 2. Operationalization of the Assertive Communication Variable (Y)

Dimension	Indicator	Item No.
Using One's Opinion	Ability to express an opinion directly and clearly	10
	Ability to voice a personal opinion without waiting for others' approval	11
	Consistency in maintaining one's opinion during discussion	12
Stating Feelings	Ability to openly express feelings to others	13
	Ability to convey disagreement with appropriate emotional tone	14
	Honesty in expressing feelings during communication	15
Defending One's Rights	Ability to decline an inappropriate request	16
	Ability to defend an opinion without becoming aggressive	17
	Courage to resist pressure from others that is detrimental to oneself	18
Direct and Honest Communication	Ability to convey a message directly, without evasiveness	19
	Honesty in expressing personal needs or wishes	20
	Consistency between what is said and what is actually meant	21
Respecting Others' Rights	Ability to listen to and respect the interlocutor's opinion	22
	Ability to remain polite when opinions differ	23
	Sensitivity to others' feelings during communication	24

Source: adapted from Albert and Emmons (2001) and the researchers' operationalization.

Measurement, Validity, and Reliability

The research instrument comprises 24 statement items in total: 9 items for the role-playing variable and 15 items for the assertive communication variable, each measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, reverse-scored for negatively worded items). Category boundaries for each dimension and variable are determined using the ideal-interval formula $I = (\text{highest expected total score} - \text{lowest expected total score}) / \text{number of response categories}$ (Sugiyono, 2017), which is then used to classify respondents' scores into very high, high, moderate, low, and very low categories.

Prior to data collection, the instrument will be tested for validity and reliability. Item validity will be assessed using Pearson's Product-Moment correlation between each item score and the total score, with an item deemed valid when the calculated r -value (r -hitung) exceeds the critical r -value (r -tabel) at the chosen significance level and degrees of freedom ($n - 2$); items falling below this threshold will be revised or replaced. Reliability will be assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, with coefficients interpreted as follows: 0.90–1.00 very high/highly reliable, 0.70–0.89 high/reliable, 0.40–0.69 moderately reliable, 0.20–0.39 low, and below 0.20 very low/unreliable (Sugiyono, 2017).

Data Analysis Technique

Data will be analyzed using path analysis, appropriate when a theoretically grounded causal relationship among variables is assumed (Somantri & Muhidin, 2006), with the aid of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Analysis proceeds in two stages: a simultaneous analysis testing the overall effect of the role-playing technique (X) on students' assertive communication ability (Y), represented by the path coefficient P_{YX} and the residual path coefficient $P_{Y\epsilon}$; and a partial analysis testing the individual effects of role taking (X_1), role marking (X_2), and role negotiation (X_3) on assertive communication ability (Y), together with the intercorrelations among X_1 , X_2 , and X_3 and the residual path $P_{Y\epsilon}$, where the residual (ϵ) captures the influence of identified and unidentified variables outside X , measurement error, and unpredictable variation.

For the simultaneous test, the calculated F -value (F -hitung), obtained from SPSS output, will be compared with the critical F -value (F -tabel) at $\alpha = 0.05$ and degrees of freedom ($n - k - 1$); H_0 is rejected in favor of H_a —indicating a significant effect of role playing on assertive communication—when F -hitung exceeds F -tabel (or when the significance value is below 0.05). If the simultaneous test indicates a significant effect, partial tests will be conducted to determine the individual contribution of each role-playing dimension to assertive communication, using a t -test based on each path coefficient P_{YX_i} , the coefficient of

determination, and the corresponding diagonal element of the inverse correlation matrix, with the resulting statistic following a t-distribution with $n - k - 1$ degrees of freedom. This procedure additionally allows the direct and indirect effects of X1, X2, and X3 on Y to be decomposed and reported.

Research Procedure

The research procedure is organized into four stages. The preparation stage involves conducting a literature review, developing the research proposal, defining the population and sample, finalizing the research design and measurement instrument, pilot-testing the instrument for validity and reliability, and scheduling data collection. The implementation stage involves explaining the study's purpose to respondents, obtaining their consent, and administering the questionnaire individually. The data-processing stage involves collecting completed questionnaires, scoring and tabulating responses, and performing the statistical analysis needed to test the hypotheses. The discussion stage involves interpreting the statistical results in light of the theoretical and conceptual framework and formulating the study's conclusions.

Scope of the Study

The study is conducted at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung, located at Jl. Balonggede No. 44, Balonggede, Regol, Bandung, West Java. The unit of analysis is twelfth-grade students in the Online Business and Retail major who have undergone instruction incorporating the role-playing technique, with the study focusing on the effect of role playing on students' assertive communication ability within the context of vocational instruction in business and customer service.

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION AND CONCLUSION

This study is expected to yield empirical evidence on the effect of the role-playing technique—through its role-taking, role-marking, and role-negotiation dimensions—on the assertive communication ability of Online Business and Retail students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung. Should the hypothesized effects be confirmed, the findings would support the theoretical proposition, grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, that assertive communication behavior can be cultivated through structured observation, modeling, enactment, and feedback rather than acquired spontaneously.

Practically, the findings are expected to help teachers evaluate the feasibility of role playing relative to other instructional strategies for building students' confidence in expressing opinions politely; to give schools an evidence base for designing curricula or soft-skill

development programs relevant to business and customer-service fields; to help students recognize that assertive communication is a trainable skill rather than an innate trait, useful for teamwork, customer service, and future employment in retail and e-commerce; and to provide subsequent researchers with a comparative dataset and an opening to examine additional variables—such as self-confidence or self-efficacy—that may further explain the relationship between role playing and assertive communication.

Theoretically, the study is expected to contribute empirical evidence on the effectiveness of role playing within vocational instruction, to demonstrate the differential contribution of role playing's three constituent dimensions to assertive communication, and to extend the application of social learning theory within Indonesian vocational (SMK) education, providing a foundation for further research incorporating additional variables or refined instrumentation.

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