

Developing Assertive Communication through the Role-Play Method for Online Business and Retail Students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung

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ABSTRACT

Vocational high school graduates are expected to master not only technical competencies but also interpersonal skills that support their readiness for the workplace. Field observations at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung indicate that students in the Online Business and Retail (Bisnis Daring dan Ritel) program still show a low level of assertive communication, evidenced by their difficulty in expressing opinions confidently, refusing requests politely, and handling direct interaction with customers. This community service program (Program Kemitraan Masyarakat/PKM) was designed to develop students' assertive communication skills through the role-play method. The program consists of five stages: needs analysis, development of training materials and role-play scenarios, training and practice, evaluation and feedback, and continued mentoring. Students are placed in simulated roles such as seller, buyer, and observer in scenarios involving customer service, complaint handling, price negotiation, and teamwork. The information-dissemination approach combines material delivery, discussion, hands-on practice, and technical guidance. The program is expected to increase students' understanding of assertive communication concepts, strengthen their interpersonal communication skills, and provide an applied learning experience relevant to the demands of the retail and customer-service industry. The expected output of this activity is a scientific article published in a nationally accredited (Sinta) journal.

Keyword: Assertive Communication, Role Play, Vocational Students, Online Business and Retail, Community Service.

INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, education has become a basic need for every individual. The Indonesian government requires citizens to complete twelve years of compulsory education and encourages continuation beyond that level. Education is more than the acquisition of knowledge; it is a humanizing process through which individuals are shaped to become fully realized human beings (Habsy et al., 2024). Vocational education in Indonesia continues to adapt to rapid digital transformation and increasingly competitive labor markets. Vocational institutions play a central role in preparing human resources for the world of work, and they

must continuously evolve in line with industry needs. To produce graduates who are competent and relevant to industry demands, vocational schools provide applied and practical skills, one of which is delivered through internship or industrial work practice programs (Praktik Kerja Industri/Prakerin) (Salma et al., 2025). Prakerin is an educational, training, and learning activity carried out within a business or industrial environment that corresponds to students' fields of study, and it constitutes a mandatory component of the Dual Education System (Febrianti et al., 2023).

While internship programs give students direct exposure to workplace culture and professional expectations, field experience shows that the world of work demands more than technical competence; it requires the ability to interact effectively across a range of situations. Many students entering the workforce face communication challenges when coordinating with co-workers, receiving instructions from supervisors, or serving customers. This indicates that students' success in the workplace is strongly influenced by their ability to manage themselves and communicate appropriately. Vocational students therefore need to strengthen interpersonal skills as a complement to technical training in order to support professional performance in their respective fields.

One soft skill of particular importance for vocational graduates, especially those in the Online Business and Retail (Bisnis Daring dan Ritel/BDR) program, is assertive communication. Assertive communication is the ability to communicate in a direct and honest manner while still respecting the rights and feelings of others; it is regarded as one of the key competencies required by the modern business world for young people (Widhi Rachmawati et al., 2025). This ability is particularly relevant to online business and retail activities such as engaging with customers, building professional relationships, offering products, handling complaints, negotiating, and working within a team.

Nonetheless, a number of studies indicate that assertive communication skills among adolescents, including secondary school students, remain relatively low. Many students find it difficult to express their opinions confidently, tend to be passive in discussions, or, conversely, display aggressive responses under social pressure. This condition affects their readiness to enter the workforce, particularly in fields of study that demand a high intensity of interaction. Such conditions are also observed within vocational education settings, including SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung, which offers a range of competencies and prepares its students for direct entry into the workforce upon graduation.

SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung is one of the vocational institutions offering several fields of study, namely Accounting and Institutional Finance, Office Management, Online Business and

Retail, and Computer Network Engineering. Students select the field of study most suited to their interests and potential, and across three years of education the curriculum is designed to equip students with not only technical skills but also the ability to compete and adapt to evolving industry demands. In the Online Business and Retail program specifically, students learn modern business processes, digital marketing techniques, retail management, and quality customer service; because most of these activities involve interaction with consumers, colleagues, and other business stakeholders, strong communication skills are essential to supporting their professional performance.

To support the development of these skills, a learning method that actively engages students in communication practice is required. Role play is considered an effective method for this purpose. Role playing is a way of mastering learning material through the development of students' imagination and emotional involvement (Dosen et al., n.d.), focusing on engaging students' senses and emotions so they can observe and experience problem situations directly. Through activities resembling drama that encourage students to speak, this method makes the learning experience more enjoyable while helping students understand concepts individually and participate collaboratively in groups. Through role play, students can learn how to respond to various communication situations, build self-confidence, and strengthen the interpersonal skills required in the workplace. Given the Online Business and Retail program's demand for effective communication, customer-handling competence, and assertive communication, the development of assertive communication through role play is regarded as a strategic step to better prepare students for the demands of employment. This concern became the basis for a Community Partnership Program (Program Kemitraan Masyarakat/PKM) conducted collaboratively by a team from Universitas Pasundan to provide role-play-based communication development for Online Business and Retail students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung.

Based on the situational analysis above and preliminary observation, the following problems were identified among the partner's students:

1. Low assertive communication ability among students of SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung, particularly in the Online Business and Retail program, such that many students still struggle to express opinions clearly, confidently, and politely across a range of communication situations.
2. Suboptimal use of learning methods that directly train interpersonal communication skills, particularly those related to customer interaction, complaint handling, negotiation, and group collaboration, which constitute core requirements of the field.

3. Limited student awareness of the importance of assertive communication as a soft skill that supports employment readiness, despite the fact that the retail and customer-service industry requires graduates capable of communicating effectively and professionally.

Based on these problems, the implementation team identified a need to develop students' assertive communication skills through the role-play method for Online Business and Retail students at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung, as an effort to improve their readiness to meet the demands of the world of work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication refers to a style of communication in which a person expresses opinions, needs, and feelings directly, honestly, and confidently while continuing to respect the rights and feelings of others. It stands in contrast to both passive communication, in which individuals suppress their own needs to avoid conflict, and aggressive communication, in which individuals disregard the rights of others in order to dominate an interaction. Within a business and retail context, assertive communication enables employees to serve customers professionally, deliver clear information, decline unreasonable requests politely, negotiate effectively, and collaborate constructively within a team (Widhi Rachmawati et al., 2025). As a soft skill, assertive communication is widely regarded as a core competency for the contemporary world of work, particularly for young people entering customer-facing industries.

Role Play as a Learning Method

Role play is a learning method that engages participants' imagination and emotional involvement to help them master subject matter through direct experience of simulated situations (Dosen et al., n.d.). In this method, participants are assigned specific roles within a scenario resembling real-life conditions, allowing them to practice communication skills experientially rather than merely receiving theoretical explanation. Role play has been widely used in communication and public-speaking training because it provides participants with an opportunity to rehearse verbal and non-verbal responses, receive immediate feedback, and build confidence in a low-risk, simulated environment before applying the skills in authentic settings. When applied to assertive communication training, role play allows students to practice expressing opinions, handling disagreement, and responding to pressure within

contextually relevant business scenarios, such as serving a customer, negotiating a price, or resolving a complaint.

Vocational Education and Workplace Readiness

Vocational secondary education in Indonesia is designed to prepare graduates for direct entry into the workforce through a combination of theoretical instruction and applied practice, most notably through the Dual Education System and industrial work practice (Prakerin) (Febrianti et al., 2023). While technical competence remains central to vocational curricula, a growing body of research emphasizes that interpersonal and communication skills are equally decisive in determining workplace success, particularly in service-oriented fields such as online business and retail (Salma et al., 2025). This underlines the relevance of supplementing vocational curricula with structured, applied training in soft skills such as assertive communication.

METHOD

This community service program was implemented at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung, located at Jl. Balonggede No. 44, Balonggede, Regol Subdistrict, Bandung City, West Java, approximately 1.8 km from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Pasundan. The program targeted students of the Online Business and Retail program and was designed using an information-dissemination approach combining material delivery, discussion, hands-on practice, and technical guidance (bimbingan teknis). The implementation followed five sequential stages, as described below.

Preparation and Needs Analysis

This stage began with coordination between the implementation team and SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung to identify students' baseline condition, particularly with regard to assertive communication ability. Activities included preliminary observation, discussion with teachers, and mapping of learning needs relevant to the characteristics of Online Business and Retail students. The results of this analysis formed the basis for developing training materials and role-play scenarios suited to the business and retail context.

Development of Training Materials and Role-Play Scenarios

At this stage, the team developed training materials covering the concepts, principles, and application of assertive communication within the context of online business and retail services. Role-play scenarios were designed around situations commonly faced by students, such as serving customers, handling customer complaints, conducting negotiations, and

working in teams. Materials and scenarios were designed to be applicable and easy for students to understand and practice.

Training Implementation and Role-Play Practice

Implementation combined interactive material delivery with active role-play practice. Students were divided into small groups and assigned specific roles-such as seller, buyer, or observer-according to prepared scenarios. During this stage, students practiced expressing opinions, declining requests politely, and communicating assertively while respecting the other party. The implementation team acted as facilitators and observers throughout the process.

Evaluation and Feedback

Following each role-play session, evaluation was conducted through discussion and joint reflection between students and the implementation team. This evaluation aimed to measure students' understanding of assertive communication concepts and to assess their ability to apply these skills during simulation. The implementation team provided constructive feedback to help students refine and strengthen their communication skills.

Mentoring and Follow-up

As a final stage, mentoring was provided to encourage students to continue applying assertive communication in both learning activities and future work practice. The team offered recommendations for continued practice and strategies for applying assertive communication in workplace situations, aiming to ensure the sustainability of the program's impact and to strengthen students' readiness to enter a service- and communication-oriented job market.

Program Timeline

The activity was scheduled over three weeks, covering preparation, implementation, and evaluation/reporting, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Program implementation timeline.

Activity	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3
I. Preparation			
1. Developing an operational plan	X		
2. Coordination meeting	X		
3. Preparing instructors	X		
4. Preparing the partner school	X		
II. Implementation			
1. Assertive communication development session		X	
2. Role-play training and practice (job interview, customer service, team communication)		X	
III. Evaluation and Reporting			

1. Program evaluation and monitoring	X
2. Preparation of progress report	X
3. Preparation and submission of final report	X
4. Writing of the journal article	X

Evaluation and Sustainability Indicators

Program evaluation focused on the achievement of objectives based on the following success indicators: (1) improvement in students' understanding of the concept of assertive communication; (2) students' ability to communicate clearly and confidently; and (3) students' ability to apply effective communication through role play. Reporting on program implementation includes the preparation of a logbook, a progress report, a final report, and a scientific article for publication in a national journal.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Based on preliminary observation and analysis at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung, students of the Online Business and Retail program were found to have a relatively low level of assertive communication, evidenced by limited confidence in expressing opinions, difficulty declining or expressing disagreement appropriately, and challenges in handling direct interaction with consumers. Moreover, the prevailing learning process has tended to emphasize theoretical delivery of material without providing sufficient opportunity for students to practice communication skills directly and contextually. This is despite the fact that assertive communication constitutes an essential soft skill for the world of work, particularly in online business, marketing, and retail service fields that demand effective interpersonal communication. To address these problems, the implementation team proposes the following three solutions, delivered through the PKM program.

Solution 1: Building Understanding of Assertive Communication as a Workplace Soft Skill

The implementation team delivers foundational material on assertive communication, covering its definition, characteristics, and guiding principles, along with a comparison to passive and aggressive communication styles. Material is delivered through an interactive and contextual approach tailored to the needs of Online Business and Retail students. Through this activity, students are expected to understand the importance of assertive communication as essential preparation for entering the workforce, particularly in building professional relationships with customers, colleagues, and supervisors.

Solution 2: Developing Students' Assertive Communication through Role Play

To provide a more applied learning experience, the implementation team applies the role-play method by directly involving students in simulations of real situations commonly

encountered in business and retail. Students are assigned roles such as seller, buyer, or observer in scenarios involving customer service, complaint handling, price negotiation, and teamwork. Through this method, students not only understand the theory but also practice communicating firmly, clearly, and respectfully toward the other party. Role play is expected to increase students' confidence, empathy, and interpersonal communication skills.

Solution 3: Providing Continued Training, Evaluation, and Mentoring

To ensure the sustainability of the program's results, the implementation team provides training accompanied by staged practice and evaluation sessions. Each role-play session is followed by reflection and constructive feedback from facilitators and accompanying teachers, enabling students to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their communication style. Ongoing mentoring further aims to reinforce students' understanding of applying assertive communication across various workplace situations and to strengthen their readiness to enter a profession-oriented job market that demands professional, effective, and service-focused communication.

Target Outcomes

The expected outcomes of this program, based on the priority problems identified with the partner, are as follows:

- Increased student understanding of the concept and importance of assertive communication.
- Improved students' interpersonal communication skills, particularly in expressing opinions clearly, confidently, and respectfully; following role-play training, students are expected to demonstrate more effective communication in learning activities and simulated customer-service situations.
- An applied, industry-relevant learning experience that enables students to recognize their own communication potential and to develop skills aligned with the demands of the retail and customer-service industry.

As the primary output, this activity is directed toward a scientific article to be published in *Jurnal Kelola: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial* (Sinta 3), a nationally accredited journal, thereby contributing both to the partner school and to the broader scholarly literature on communication skills training in vocational education.

Implementation Team and Areas of Expertise

The program is implemented by a team of four members with complementary areas of expertise relevant to the program's theme, as summarized in Table 2.

Team Member			Role / Competence	Main Responsibilities
Zahrah Nabila Azka, S.I.Kom., M.I.Kom (Team Leader)			Assertive communication and public speaking	Coordinates the program, serves as main resource person/trainer, designs training materials and role-play scenarios, oversees planning, evaluation, and reporting
Dra. Yulia Segarwati, M.Si. (Member 1)			Communication management	Coordinates with the partner school and resource persons, arranges venue and facilities, supports overall logistics and reporting
Angelina Harazaky (Student Member 2)	Gea		Design and copywriting	Prepares training materials/visual aids, supports public-speaking content development, documents activities, drafts evaluation report
Ananda Avriliyana Lathifah (Student Member 3)	Nuur		Public speaking	Prepares training logistics, documents activities, supports material delivery, drafts evaluation report

Table 2. Implementation team and areas of expertise.

Budget Overview

The program is implemented across three activity clusters-briefing, mentoring, and facilitation-each encompassing honorarium, consumable materials, travel, and rental costs. A summary of the proposed budget is presented in Table 3. The total budget proposed for the entire program is Rp 10,180,000 (approximately USD 620 at prevailing exchange rates).

Component	Briefing Activities (Rp)	Mentoring Activities (Rp)	Facilitation Activities (Rp)
Honorarium	1,300,000	1,300,000	800,000
Consumable materials	485,000	485,000	900,000
Travel	760,000	850,000	950,000

Rental (venue, equipment, vehicle)	950,000	950,000	450,000
Subtotal	3,495,000	3,585,000	3,100,000

Table 3. Summary of the proposed program budget.

Partner Participation

The partner school contributes by providing time and venue for the implementation of the program. In other words, the partner's participation in this Community Partnership Program (PKM) consists of enabling and applying the methods delivered by the implementation team within the school's own learning environment, thereby supporting the sustainability of the training's impact beyond the program period.

CONCLUSION

Assertive communication is a critical soft skill for vocational students, particularly those in the Online Business and Retail program, whose future work will heavily involve direct interaction with customers, colleagues, and business partners. Preliminary observation at SMK Pasundan 1 Bandung indicates that students' assertive communication skills remain relatively low, while classroom learning has largely emphasized theoretical delivery over applied practice. The role-play method offers a strategic, experiential approach to bridge this gap by allowing students to practice expressing opinions, handling complaints, negotiating, and collaborating within realistic business scenarios. Through a structured program of needs analysis, material and scenario development, training and practice, evaluation, and continued mentoring, this Community Partnership Program is expected to strengthen students' understanding and practical mastery of assertive communication, better preparing them to meet the interpersonal demands of the retail and customer-service industry. It is recommended that similar role-play-based training be sustained and extended to other vocational programs with comparable customer-facing demands, and that its impact on students' workplace performance be examined through follow-up, longitudinal research.

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