



## The implementation of role play in supporting speaking class

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### Abstract

In the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century education and the growing importance of communicative competence, oral instruction in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms faces increasing expectations and ongoing challenges. The current Indonesian high school classroom, marked by the “*Kurikulum Merdeka*”, requires instructional strategies that promote student engagement, collaboration, and meaningful oral communication. This paper discusses how role play can be integrated into English teaching at the senior high school level in Indonesia to strengthen students’ oral communication skills. Based on the principles of communicative language teaching, sociocultural theory, and cooperative learning, role-play is viewed not only as a teaching activity but also as a strategic framework for language development. This article synthesizes relevant theoretical and empirical literature highlights the transformative potential of role-play, and proposes a practical framework for its implementation in Indonesian classrooms. Considering challenges such as teacher preparation, class size, and assessment focus, and then propose strategic considerations to address these challenges. By repositioning role-play as a reflective, student-centered process rather than a performance-oriented task, this article advocates for its inclusion as a core component of oral instruction. Role-play not only promotes language development but also enables EFL learners to build confidence, empathy, and autonomy, which are essential for developing 21<sup>st</sup>-century communication competence.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the era of 21<sup>st</sup> century education, the ability to communicate effectively in English is no longer considered a luxury but a necessity. As Indonesia fully adopts the *Kurikulum Merdeka* in the 2024/2025 academic year, students are expected to be more active, collaborative, and communicative in classroom activities, especially in speaking English. This nationwide implementation was formalized through the issuance of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No.12 of 2024, which establishes *Kurikulum Merdeka* as the national curriculum for all educational levels in Indonesia. However, in reality, many EFL learners particularly at the senior high school level still struggle with speaking skills due to anxiety, lack of confidence, and limited exposure to meaningful speaking practice (Muqorrobin et al., 2022; Zulfikar, 2022; Mukminin et al., 2023). On the other hand, teachers also find it daunting to initiate stimulating and student-centered speaking activities leading to real communication (Raikhel, A. M., 2025).

These problems are tied up with weak classroom management skills, resource constraints, and low participation as well as confidence of the students (Puspitasari & Dewi, 2023; Muluk et al., 2021). Furthermore, the gap between curriculum policy and actual classroom practices in Indonesia remains wide. Teachers are often overwhelmed by large class sizes, mixed-ability learners, and insufficient training in communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, leading to reliance on grammar translation methods and teacher-centered instruction (Rohmah, 2017; Nazim et al., 2024). Since speaking is crucial for real-life communication, it is a core language skill essential for academic and social success. Dewaele and Li (2020) argue that speaking is among the most anxiety-provoking skills, requiring real-time processing, face-to-face interaction, and immediate responses. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) also highlights speaking as a core competence to build social contact, solve problems, and negotiate meaning.

Role play has emerged as one of the most promising strategies to address speaking challenges. Ladousse (1987) defines role play as “a student takes a real or assumed role and performs within a hypothetical situation,” encouraging spontaneous and interactive language use. Role play presents realistic communication contexts, helping students gain confidence, improve fluency, and boost motivation (Katemba & Grace, 2023; Mugair et al., 2022). This aligns with the principles of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasize student-centered, collaborative, and communicative learning. With the growing demand for 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, 2019), revisiting role play in English language teaching is timely. Learners’ communicative competence has become a central concern in foreign language education (Boholano, 2017; Pun, 2019). As Indonesia shifts towards a communicative, competency-based curriculum, practical frameworks grounded in local realities but supported by global theory are urgently needed.

Despite existing studies, there is still a need for frameworks that connect role play with curriculum goals to build students’ communicative competence in authentic, student-centered classrooms. This paper discusses how role play can be integrated into English teaching at the senior high school level in Indonesia to strengthen students’ oral communication skills. By situating role play with the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework, it highlights the theoretical foundations, pedagogical benefits, practical considerations, and ongoing challenges, offering valuable insights for teachers and curriculum developers that have not yet been systematically explored in previous studies.

## Theoretical foundation

The overall use of drama in facilitating oral instruction is rooted in major educational and psychological theories that focus on student centered, meaningful communication, and social construction of knowledge (Richards, 2015; Vygotsky, in Johnson & Golombek, 2016). Role-play can be implemented as an interesting classroom task and, at the same time, as an effective teaching device which is grounded in basic principles of language teaching and language learning; it facilitates authentic language use and collaborative meaning- construction (Walsh, 2019). The remaining part is to offer a backdrop to role play which are sprinkled by three interrelated considerations: communicative language teaching, the organization and interaction of the spoken lesson and a sociocultural and cooperative view of learning (Lantolf & Poehner, 2016).

As its core, role-play is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), which places authentic communication at the center of language acquisition. CLT advocates student-centered instruction, where learners use the target language in authentic or simulated communication situations, rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy or memorization

(Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Role-play achieves this by allowing students to express meaning in a social context, thereby improving language fluency and communication skills.

This approach answers the need for purposeful, contextualized speaking activities that Ur (2012) has long promoted, and that has been reaffirmed by more recent research emphasizing meaningful interaction (Walsh, 2019). Thornbury (2005) pointed out how important spontaneity and unpredictability are in spoken discourse, with Dewaele and Li (2020) showing that learners' emotions and personal traits strongly shape their speaking performance. Effective oral instruction, as argued by Goh and Burns (2012) and supported by Derakhshan and Karimi (2021), should ideally combine cognitive, affective, and social elements. Role-playing brings these dimensions together by prompting learners to think on their feet, manage performance-related stress, and build authentic interactions with classmates.

From a psychological perspective, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) provides a powerful lens through which to understand role play as a socially supported learning activity. The concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) emphasizes the value of peer and teacher assistance to help learners move beyond their current independent capabilities.

Furthermore, role play provides a structured yet flexible environment for learners to co-construct meaning and develop communicative competence through interaction. Research shows that understanding students' individual needs such as speaking anxiety, confidence level, and learning preferences is crucial for effective planning (Kheryadi & Hilmiyati, 2021; Mukminin et al., 2023; Muqorrobin et al., 2022). This aligns with the principles of needs-based instruction and learner-centered pedagogy. In addition, contextually relevant and culturally meaningful scenarios such as classroom debates, ordering food, or resolving social conflicts are found to increase student engagement and promote deeper language use (Di Pardo Leon-Henri & Jain, 2017). The *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes thematic flexibility, allows teachers to integrate character education, local values, and real-life communication into speaking tasks. Structuring role play into clear phases preparation, performance, reflection, and assessment not only enhances fluency and interaction but also promotes self-awareness through peer and teacher feedback (Hidayat, 2023). Ultimately, reflective teaching is key to sustaining the effectiveness of role play, as teachers continually adapt materials and strategies based on classroom observations and learner output (Imhof, Starker & Spaude, 2016). These theoretical and empirical insights support the repositioning of role play from a peripheral activity to a core instructional approach in Indonesian EFL classrooms (Putri & Santoso, 2023; Haryanto, 2024).

Cooperative learning theory, particularly as proposed by Slavin (1995), provides another important lens for understanding how role play fosters collaborative learning. In classrooms with large student populations and varied proficiency levels as is common in Indonesian schools role play encourages positive interdependence. Students must rely on one another to sustain dialogue, interpret meaning, and support mutual understanding (Gillies, 2019).

. This dynamic can significantly reduce anxiety for introverted or less confident learners while also promoting equity in speaking opportunities. Classroom management strategies such as dividing students into rotating groups, assigning peer facilitators, or incorporating simple tech tools (e.g., voice recording, Google Forms reflection) can support implementation in larger classes (Rahman & Sari, 2022; Wijaya et al., 2023).

Effective implementation also requires tasks that are meaningful and contextually relevant. As noted by Di Pardo Leon-Henri and Jain (2017), role play is most engaging when it reflects familiar cultural and social situations. In Indonesia, the *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides teachers with thematic flexibility to design role plays that integrate language use with character education, local wisdom, and citizenship (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2024).

Although role play offers clear benefits for speaking classes, its implementation in Indonesian secondary schools faces significant challenges, both structural and pedagogical. Large class sizes, limited instructional time, and rigid curricula are common structural barriers (WorldMetrics, 2024; Wahyuni, 2024), while many teachers still lack confidence or experience in communicative language teaching due to limited training and contextual constraints (Rohmah, 2017; Muluk, Rahmawati, & Mulyani, 2021; Tiwari, 2021). This often leads to a superficial application of role play, where activities become overly scripted and lose their interactive value (Moreno Guerrero & Lopez Belmonte, 2019).

Unequal student participation is another concern dominant students may overshadow quieter peers, and cultural factors often discourage risk-taking in oral tasks (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2021;

Tsui, 2021; Nurhadi & Supriyanto, 2023). Furthermore, traditional assessment practices tend to undervalue spontaneous oral interaction, favoring structured, individual tasks that fail to capture communicative competence (Gan et al., 2020; Brown, 2020; Kurniawati & Hasanah, 2022). These issues are compounded by the risk of role-play activities becoming repetitive or disconnected from students' interests if not regularly refreshed (Winardy & Septiana, 2023). To address these concerns, scholars emphasize the need for strategic teacher training, curriculum support, and innovative, flexible design. Teachers can incorporate peer mentoring, use group-based or tech-supported formats, and design role play cycles with clear preparation, performance, and reflection phases to ensure inclusion and engagement. As one teacher insightfully noted, "*Role-play is great in theory, but it's hard to implement with 40 students. Sometimes I just don't know how to give everyone a chance*" (Muluk et al., 2021). This highlights the practical gap between theory and classroom reality.

However, when supported with thoughtful planning, dynamic scenario design, and reflective practice, role play has the potential to shift from a peripheral technique to a transformative instructional strategy. It can redefine speaking classes as spaces not only for language learning but for building confidence, creativity, and authentic communication skills (Littlewood, 2021; Thornbury, 2016; Richards, 2020; Wilkinson & Potts, 2022).

## METHODS

This conceptual article adopts a narrative review and thematic synthesis design, following established guidelines for constructing integrative conceptual frameworks in educational research (Torraco, 2016; Yazan, 2022). Rather than collecting primary empirical data, this study draws from secondary sources to critically examine, reinterpret, and reorganize theoretical and empirical insights on role play in EFL speaking instruction, particularly within the Indonesian context.

### Data set

The data set consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and policy documents that explore the role of role play in language education, speaking anxiety, communicative language teaching, sociocultural theory, and the pedagogical aspects of Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia. These sources were systematically selected from academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and Taylor & Francis Online. The publication period of selected materials spans from 2015 to 2024, ensuring the integration of recent scholarly developments. Foundational works, including those by Vygotsky (1978), Ladousse (1987), and Slavin (1995), were also incorporated to support the conceptual and theoretical foundation of this study.

Sources were included based on their relevance to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, with particular emphasis on speaking instruction and role-play pedagogy. The selection process prioritized studies that addressed themes such as communicative competence, student-centered learning, and classroom interaction. Only studies available in full-text English and published in reputable journals indexed in Scopus or Web of Science, or by established academic publishers, were considered. In total, 68 studies fulfilled these criteria and were included in the final analysis.

### Data collection

The literature was identified using structured keyword searches across selected databases. Keywords included: "role play in ELT," "speaking anxiety in EFL," "student-centered instruction," "communicative competence," "cooperative learning," and "Kurikulum Merdeka." Boolean operators (AND, OR) and filters (e.g., year, peer-reviewed only) were applied to narrow down results.

All relevant studies were imported into a reference manager (Zotero), and duplicates were removed. Abstracts and full texts were then screened to ensure alignment with the scope of the review.

### Data analysis

The selected studies were analyzed using thematic analysis, adopting Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This involved an initial process of familiarization with the data, followed by the generation of initial codes derived from recurring patterns. Emerging codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed for internal coherence and refined to ensure

conceptual clarity. Each theme was clearly defined and named, and the final report was produced based on the synthesis of these thematic insights.

Several major themes were identified throughout the analysis. One key theme was EFL students' speaking anxiety, as highlighted in recent studies such as Mukminin et al. (2023). Another prominent theme was teachers' challenges in managing role play effectively in classroom settings, including issues of time management, student participation, and class size, as observed by Muluk et al. (2021). The role of sociocultural scaffolding also emerged as a recurring theme, particularly drawing on theoretical perspectives from Lantolf and Poehner (2016). In addition, the integration of cooperative learning and communicative strategies was frequently cited as an essential aspect of successful role-play implementation, as emphasized by Lee and Lee (2020).

To support the analytic process, concept mapping was employed to visualize and organize the relationships among key theoretical constructs such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and cooperative learning and their applications in pedagogical practice within the Indonesian classroom context. This method facilitated the construction of a context-sensitive framework for role-play implementation. The framework was further refined through iterative discussions among the authors, ensuring coherence and reducing interpretation bias.

### **Policy and contextual reflection**

To align the proposed framework with current national education policy, the study also analyzed curriculum documents from the Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Indonesia, especially those related to *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Considerations included learner agency, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning principles.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the conceptual insights drawn from the literature analysis, which serve as the foundation for proposing a framework for role-playing implementation in EFL speaking instruction.

### **Speaking class as a learning environment**

To truly grasp the function of role play, we need to view the speaking class not just as a space for language output, but as an active learning setting that involves interaction, emotional involvement, and mental effort. In EFL classrooms, especially in Indonesia, speaking lessons often come with their own set of challenges. These include students' feelings of anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and the tendency for lessons to be dominated by teacher talk (Mukminin et al., 2015; Puspitasari & Dewi, 2023). As a result, many students choose to stay quiet and hesitant to participate, particularly in large classes where speaking chances are limited and not fairly shared among learners. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from purely teacher-led activities to more interactive, collaborative, and student-centered approaches.

Speaking classrooms present a dynamic space where students are expected to engage in authentic, meaningful interactions rather than simply rehearse scripted dialogues. From a sociocultural perspective, learners develop their speaking skills through mediated interactions and the support of peers and teachers, creating opportunities to build competence within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Poehner, 2016). Role-play tasks match this principle by offering a scaffolded environment where learners can experiment with language, take on different social identities, and negotiate meaning in a collaborative way. In addition, communicative language teaching emphasizes the need for real-life communication and negotiation of meaning, moving beyond mechanical drills (Littlewood, 2021). Role play supports this by providing realistic scenarios that encourage learners to convey messages spontaneously and adaptively. Moreover, cooperative learning elements are embedded in role-play activities because students must work together, share language resources, and support each other to achieve common communicative goals (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Gillies, 2016). This social and interactive design makes the speaking class feel more authentic and less intimidating, motivating students to participate actively and develop both fluency and confidence. Altogether, role-play activities reflect a balanced combination of preparation and improvisation, helping students transfer classroom speaking practice into their real-world language use.

A speaking class is not just a place to practice language skills; it is also a social and emotional space where students' sense of safety matters just as much as their ability to use the language (Mercer, 2016). Their willingness to speak often depends on the classroom atmosphere, their relationships with peers, and how secure they feel when expressing themselves (Dewaele & Li, 2020). In this setting, role play can be a useful way to encourage empathy and help students see things from different perspectives, as they take on various roles and situations (Kavanagh & Sneyd, 2022). This kind of activity does more than improve language skills; it also builds emotional involvement and strengthens the sense of belonging in the class (Lee & Lee, 2020). When role play is used with purpose, students are not only learning to speak, but also learning through speaking in ways that make the process enjoyable, safe, and socially engaging.

### **Repositioning role play for speaking class**

Despite its long presence in language teaching, role-playing games are often viewed as a supplementary or playful activity rather than a structured teaching strategy. In many English as a foreign language classrooms, including Indonesia, role-playing is often used as an isolated exercise, either to fill time or as a reward at the end of a lesson, and does not fully fit in with the learning objectives or curriculum framework. To realize its full potential, role-playing must be repositioned as a core and targeted component of oral teaching (Katemba & Grace, 2023).

The repositioning of role-playing requires teachers to change their role concept: from a performance-oriented task to a process-oriented learning experience. Role-playing should not be viewed as a one-off activity, but should be integrated into oral lessons as a cyclical learning process, involving preparation, interaction, reflection and feedback. This teaching framework is consistent with task-based learning, in which learners complete communicative tasks that reflect real-life scenarios, thereby improving not only language proficiency but also functional language use (Ellis, 2003).

A key part of this repositioning involves the intentional design of role play scenarios. Teachers should select themes that are relevant to students' lives, curriculum content, and language goals (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020; Richards, 2015). For instance, the theme "*negotiation*" can be developed into a customer service dialogue, a school committee debate, or a peer conflict resolution scene. Similarly, the theme "*career*" can lead to role plays such as mock job interviews or office meetings. Meanwhile, the theme "*travel*" may be used for simulating airport check-ins, hotel bookings, or lost passport situations.

These scenarios can be scaffolded with role cards, vocabulary support, and example dialogues (Rido & Sari, 2023). Importantly, the goal is not scripted performance, but authentic interaction grounded in purpose.

A reoriented role play approach also demands intentional design. Scenarios must be relevant, culturally appropriate, and calibrated to students' proficiency levels. Unstructured role plays risk producing chaotic interactions, off-task behavior, or even linguistic fossilization (Goh & Burns, 2012). Teachers need to establish clear communicative goals and provide linguistic scaffolds such as vocabulary banks, role cards, or sentence starters, especially critical for low-intermediate learners in Indonesian senior high schools (Katemba & Grace, 2023).

Furthermore, role play must be integrated with formative assessment practices, since timely feedback helps learners notice gaps and refine their spoken language (Lee & Lyster, 2016). Instead of merely observing performances, teachers can assess speaking performance using rubrics that measure fluency, interaction, coherence, and language accuracy (Puspitasari & Dewi, 2023). More importantly, learners should be involved in self- and peer-assessment, which promotes metacognition and deepens learning (Lee & Lin, 2019). Reflection after the role play, whether through journaling, discussion, or guided debriefing, transforms the activity from a brief performance to a reflective learning experience (Chang, 2019; Venkatesamy, 2023).

Another key to reframing role play is to adapt it to classroom realities (Fu & Li, 2025). In large, multigrade classrooms, it may not be practical for the entire class to role play simultaneously. Therefore, it is more practical for small groups to take turns performing the roles. Technology can also support implementation: video recording, digital prompts, or platforms such as Padlet and Flipgrid can help expand speaking opportunities beyond the classroom (Pun, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020). These tools enable students to practice speaking asynchronously, reduce anxiety, and receive feedback in a low-pressure environment.

Finally, role play must be viewed as a tool to promote not only language development but also social-emotional growth. When students engage in scenarios that involve empathy, negotiation skills, or cultural awareness, they simultaneously develop 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies such as collaboration, adaptability, and critical thinking which emphasized in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2024) and global education standards (Boholano, 2017). Reframing role play, therefore, entails shifting the focus from merely "learning to speak" to "learning by speaking," where language serves as a medium for holistic personal development.

In summary, the value of role play in speaking classes lies not only in its novelty or engagement, but also in its potential to transform speaking classes into spaces for purposeful, reflective, and socially meaningful language use. To make the most of this potential, teachers need to carefully reconsider how they plan, carry out, and connect role play activities with the wider goals of the curriculum (Arifin & Dewi, 2023; Sari & Putra, 2024).

### **Empirical reflections from literature**

More and more studies show that role plays can really help students improve their speaking skills. Research indicates that these activities boost learners' fluency, confidence, and overall ability to communicate in EFL classrooms (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2019; Heriansyah, 2022). But when we look closer at the research, especially studies from Indonesia and other Asian countries, we find not just benefits but also some challenges and important lessons for how to use role play effectively in different settings.

One interesting focus is on how role play affects learners who usually struggle more, like those with lower language proficiency or introverted personalities. For example, Alasmari and Ahmed (2019) found that introverted and less skilled students did better in role plays done in small groups. Playing a role helped them feel less worried because they could "step out" of their own identity and take risks without fear of making mistakes (Khasbani & Seli, 2021). The authors even said that role plays act like a kind of "psychological shield" for anxious students, encouraging them to speak more than usual.

Several studies have consistently shown that role play contributes to increased speaking fluency, confidence, and motivation. Katemba and Grace (2023), in an experimental study involving senior high school students in Indonesia, found significant improvement in learners' speaking performance after several weeks of structured role play activities. Similarly, Mugair et al. (2022) demonstrated that role play reduced students' speaking anxiety and encouraged more spontaneous verbal output among EFL learners in Malaysian classrooms. These studies reinforce the claim that role play, when well-structured, provides a psychologically safe environment for learners to take risks in using the target language.

However, closer inspection of the research design reveals certain limitations that must be considered before generalizing their findings. Many studies are conducted under controlled conditions, small class sizes, well-trained teachers, or extracurricular programs that do not always reflect the realities of public school classrooms. In real-world conditions, teachers often face large classes, limited time, and inconsistent student participation, which may compromise the effectiveness of role play unless adaptations are made (Muluk et al., 2021; Puspitasari & Dewi, 2023).

Moreover, empirical studies often focus on short-term gains (e.g., pre-test and post-test improvement), but rarely explore the sustainability of speaking improvement or how role play impacts learners' long-term communicative competence (Lee & Lyster, 2016). There is also limited exploration of how role play affects different types of learners such as introverted students, lower-proficiency learners, or those with minimal exposure to English outside the classroom (Chen, 2018; Muluk et al., 2021).

Importantly, most empirical studies emphasize outcomes, such as fluency and accuracy while paying less attention to the process by which students construct meaning, develop agency, or collaborate during role play activities. Yet these elements are crucial in evaluating the true pedagogical value of role play. As Burns and Joyce (1997) argue, the development of speaking ability involves not just the mastery of linguistic forms, but also the development of interactional competence, which can only be fostered through sustained and reflective practice.

Another common gap in the literature is the absence of teacher perspectives. While students are frequently surveyed or tested, fewer studies examine how teachers design, facilitate, and evaluate

role play in practice (Djaguna et al., 2023; Widiarti & Astuti, 2023). Because of this, there's often a gap between what theory says and what actually happens in the classroom. Closing that gap is especially important in Indonesia, where teachers are key to tailoring activities to fit their students and local conditions (Djaguna et al., 2023).

To sum up, while research shows promising benefits of role-playing, it also reminds us that we need to adapt it to fit the specific classroom context, design activities that include all kinds of learners, and keep supporting teachers along the way (Ishak & Aziz, 2022; Tambunan et al., 2024). Role-playing isn't a one-size-fits-all fix, it's more like a flexible approach that should be adjusted to meet the different needs of students, especially those who usually stay quiet in typical speaking tasks (Kamengko, 2023).

### Operationalizing role play in learning outcomes

Curriculum developers play a critical role in translating pedagogical concepts into practical, scalable learning experiences. Within the framework of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which emphasizes student autonomy, contextualized learning, and competence-based assessment, role play offers a strategic entry point for achieving these goals in English language education. However, despite the prominence of communicative approaches in the curriculum guidelines, concrete integration of role play into instructional design and assessment remains underdeveloped.

To operationalize role play as a core learning strategy, curriculum developers must explicitly embed it into the structure of learning modules (*Modul Ajar*), teaching scenarios, and performance indicators. This involves aligning role play activities with the targeted *CP (Capaian Pembelajaran)* and *TP (Tujuan Pembelajaran)* for English subjects, particularly those that aim to develop speaking, collaboration, and social awareness competencies. For example, in a unit themed "Offering Help and Expressing Gratitude," role play scenarios such as "Helping a Friend in the School Canteen" or "Assisting a Lost Tourist" can serve as both formative and summative assessments of students' oral communication and interpersonal skills.

Moreover, curriculum developers are encouraged to design role play activities with differentiation and inclusivity in mind. By scaffolding tasks according to learners' proficiency levels and integrating multimodal supports (e.g., visual prompts, cue cards, or audio recordings), role play becomes accessible and meaningful for diverse learners. This practice aligns with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and the inclusive education mandates within the national curriculum policy.

Another key consideration is the integration of authentic assessment tools that capture the holistic learning outcomes of role play activities. Rubrics should assess not only linguistic accuracy and fluency but also aspects such as interactional strategies, empathy, turn-taking, and creative use of language. When aligned with *Kurikulum Merdeka*'s emphasis on higher-order thinking and real-world application, these assessments help validate role play as a serious instructional tool rather than a peripheral task.

In sum, curriculum developers hold the strategic capacity to reposition role play from a supplementary technique to a central pedagogical mechanism within the formal curriculum. By doing so, they bridge the gap between communicative language theory and classroom practice, creating a curriculum that is not only compliant with national standards but also responsive to the dynamic needs of Indonesian learners.

### CONCLUSION

This conceptual article has argued that role-play deserves a central place in Indonesian speaking classes, particularly as the *Kurikulum Merdeka* rolls out to promote student-centered, communicative, and collaborative learning. By revisiting role-play through current theories and best practices, this paper offers a practical framework that helps teachers move beyond grammar-focused teaching toward meaningful oral communication. In doing so, it also highlights the need for teacher training, flexible assessment tools, and supportive classroom management to create an environment where students feel confident and engaged. The contribution of this work lies in linking role-play with the spirit of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, while still respecting the diverse realities of Indonesian classrooms. Teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers can draw on these insights to encourage more authentic speaking practice. Moving forward, research is needed to explore how these ideas work on the ground, especially in mixed-level or resource-limited classrooms, so that



role-play can become a sustainable and empowering strategy for developing students' communication skills in the long term.

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