

## EMPOWERING ESP LEARNERS THROUGH BUSINESS MEETING SIMULATIONS: INSIGHTS ON CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

**Latifa Ika Sari**

*Port and Shipping Management Department, Politeknik Ilmu Pelayaran Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia*  
Email: [latifa.ika@gmail.com](mailto:latifa.ika@gmail.com)

**Ria Hermina Sari**

*Nautical Studies Department, Politeknik Ilmu Pelayaran Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia*  
Email: [ria.hermina.sari@gmail.com](mailto:ria.hermina.sari@gmail.com)

**Yozar Firdaus Amrullah**

*Port and Shipping Management Department, Politeknik Ilmu Pelayaran Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia*  
Email: [yozar@pip-semarang.ac.id](mailto:yozar@pip-semarang.ac.id)

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**Abstract:** In ESP courses, it is important to provide students with authentic and realistic learning activities to improve their communicative competence. The competence is needed to enable students communicate effectively in their future workplaces. This study explores students' perceptions of the use of business meeting simulation in an ESP course. There are two research questions guiding this study (1) How do the students perceive the use of business meeting simulation in improving their communicative competence? (2) What obstacles are faced by students in conducting the business meeting simulation? This research was conducted at the Port and Shipping Management department of a maritime polytechnic in Indonesia. A questionnaire consisting of close-ended questions and open-ended questions was used to collect data. Twenty-four students in semester seven were involved in completing a questionnaire exploring their perceptions. The quantitative data obtained from the close-ended questions were recapped, while the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study showed that most students agreed that the activity of business meeting simulation can improve their communicative competence, especially politeness strategies which are important for students when they communicate with people who have different background and status. The study also revealed the obstacles faced by students, i.e., lack of vocabulary mastery and low self-confidence, limited time for preparation, and problems with group work.

**Keywords:** *business meeting; communicative competence; English for Specific Purposes; roleplay; simulation.*

### INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence is considered significant in language learning to support students' speaking skills. It has been widely recognized that knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is not enough to make students able to communicate effectively and fluently using English. Many English teachers have switched from the traditional teaching method which focused on grammar to more communicative and interactive methods. This is conducted to encourage students to actively practice their English and boost their English communication abilities (Giang et al., 2023; Volobueva & Stepanova, 2020).

The concept of communicative competence has been greatly developed since it was initially

introduced. It was first Chomsky (1957) who stated the importance of linguistic competence in language learning. Dell Hymes (1972) then responded to Chomsky's argument that language learners do not only need knowledge about rules of sentences and sound systems. They also need the so-called socio-linguistic competence to know how to use the language in an appropriate context. Canale and Swain (1980) added strategic competence as one of the competencies needed by language learners. Canale (1983) then introduced the term "discourse competence" which refers to the learners' ability to produce and interpret language beyond the sentence level. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) reviewed the concept proposed by the previous scholars and proposed five competencies: linguistic, strategic,

sociocultural, actional, and discourse competence which are interrelated in affecting language learning. In 2007, Celce-Murcia introduced an updated model by adding formulaic competence and changing the term actional competence into interactional competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007).

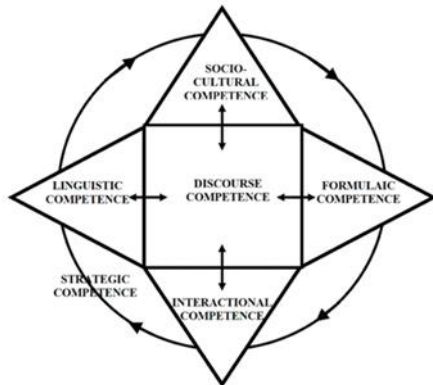


Figure 1. *The schema of communicative competence according to Celce-Murcia (2007)*

However, English teachers in countries where English become a foreign language have experienced challenges teaching English, especially when they want to implement communicative language teaching. In speaking class, teachers are struggling with students' reluctance and low motivation to engage in class activities and the excessive use of L1 (mother tongue) in the classroom. They also find it difficult to fulfill the course objectives with different levels of students' English proficiency (Alrayes, 2023; Nosidlak, 2023; Purwati et al., 2023; Yoshihara et al., 2020)

From the students' side, various drawbacks affect their language-learning process. Psychological barriers such as anxiety, afraid of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluations, and low self-confidence are reported to be the top three obstacles for students to achieve the best performance (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Kasap & Power, 2019; Ngoc & Dung, 2020; Quoc Thao & Thi Nhu Nguyet, 2019; Riadil, 2020). Students also perceived that low vocabulary and grammar mastery have become great issues for them when it comes to speaking activities (Rahayu et al., 2020; Zainurrahman & Sangaji, 2019).

The communicative competence concept which was discussed by the scholars mostly concerned with English language teaching and learning in general. The current study attempts to enhance the research on this topic by exploring communicative competence in an ESP setting. In ESP teaching, where English is used for a more specific purpose, the problems have escalated. Many ESP courses are criticized for a lack of meaningful classroom activities and student interaction due to the focus on

the translation of technical terms. Inauthentic and unattractive teaching materials also contribute to the poor quality of ESP courses. The courses, thus, failed to meet the student's needs to master the ability to communicate in their future workplaces (Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2023; Fonseca & Arias, 2023; Gu et al., 2019; Lebedev et al., 2020).

This issue has become a great challenge for ESP teachers, in which the use of simulation is expected to solve the above-mentioned problems. Simulation refers to the replication of real-world activities to provide students with closer exposure to the real world. It is commonly used in the classroom to mimic real-world events, problems, processes, or abilities to achieve desired results. The terms simulation in language teaching and learning are often used interchangeably with roleplay. However, role-playing is more concerned with the interactions between the characters, whereas simulations typically try to allow students to solve problems or address issues. Despite this difference, the terms "role-play activities" and "simulation-based activities" are understood in the context of this study to refer to the same strategy that allows students to practice in specific contexts and is thought to be beneficial in helping them acquire expected knowledge (Nhac, 2023).

Simulation-based activity is considered one of the innovative practices applied in education. Thus, it has gained popularity among educators and scholars. Amirkhanova and Bobyreva (2020) revealed the advantages of using simulation in English classes for student teachers. They found that simulation activities are useful for students' future teaching activities. They could learn to use classroom expressions and practice spontaneous speech which makes them more prepared for the real condition of teaching. Alghamdy (2022) reported the result of his experimental study with L2 students and proved that the use of simulations can improve students' communication skills, including imitation, repetition, confirmation, responding to colleagues, and giving examples. Xie (2023) joined the group by conducting survey research and found that simulation activities were effective in improving students' vocabulary, teamwork, and even relations with teachers. Students can also gain professional competence and start preparing for their careers early on through simulation.

This study aims to investigate students' perspectives regarding the use of business meeting simulation in an ESP course at the Port and Shipping Management Department of a vocational higher education institution. Even though many researchers have been working on roleplay

simulations, very few researchers reported on the use of business meeting simulation with regard to communicative competence. The current study focuses on students' perspectives by exploring the benefits and the obstacles faced by students. These data are very useful as a basis for designing teaching and learning activities, especially in ESP courses.

There are two research questions guiding the current study: (1) How does the business meeting simulation improve students' communicative competence? (2) What obstacles are faced by students in conducting the business meeting simulation?

## METHOD

The research was conducted at the Port and Shipping Management (PSM) department of a maritime polytechnic in Indonesia. The students of PSM receive English lessons every semester, except in semesters 5 and 6 when they have to undergo an internship program in related industries. In semester 7, students practice the activity of business meeting simulation during their English class. The English course in semester 7 provides students with the knowledge and skills to be involved in a meeting using the English language. There were 16 meetings in one semester, including the mid-term and final examinations. In each meeting, students had a lot of activities, including writing emails related to meetings and also doing roleplay/simulation of a business meeting to practice various expressions. The teaching materials include how to arrange a meeting, start a meeting, chair a meeting, report progress, express agreement and disagreement, make interruptions and give clarifications, negotiate an agreement, etc. The final examination requires the students to work together in a group of four to do a business meeting simulation. The students arranged the settings of their meetings, including the topic, the background, and the roles they wanted to take.

This study employed a survey research design by involving semester 7 students as research participants. The authors adopted the design proposed by Jann and Hinz (2017). We believed that students were able to provide meaningful insights into the research questions. Twenty-four students were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of two main parts. In the first part, the students were asked to respond to 16 statements. They had to decide whether they strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statements related to the development of communicative competence. In the second part, the students were asked to write their personal views regarding the

activity of business meeting simulation, what they liked and disliked, their expectations and difficulties when completing the tasks, how the activity enhanced their communicative competence, and suggestions for improvements of the course, if any.

The questionnaire was distributed using a Google form to the students. Nine female students and fifteen male students filled out the Google form and submitted the form back. The results of the questionnaire were then recapped. The quantitative data from the close-ended questions were transformed into percentage tables to make it easier to read the results. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analyzed and categorized based on themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The activity of business meeting simulation is aimed to provide students with a near-real experience of communicating in a specific setting. Generally, most students have a positive perception of the activity. Working together in a group helped students to boost their teamwork and leadership skills. In addition to that, frequent speaking practices enhanced their self-confidence. The students also said that the activity is useful for them since it is relevant to students' tasks in their future workplaces, where students might have to participate frequently in meetings.

### *Students' perception of the use of business meeting simulation to improve their communicative competence*

The students' responses regarding how the business meeting simulation improved their communicative competence were presented in Table 1. They comprise sociocultural competence, discourse competence, linguistic competence, formulaic competence, interactional competence, and strategic competence.

The students' perspective regarding their sociocultural competence is shown in items no.1-3. From the table, we learn that the majority of students strongly agreed that the business meeting simulation improved their sociocultural competence. They could learn that differences in age, status/position affect their choice of words when speaking. For instance, they will use somewhat different vocabulary when speaking with their supervisor and their coworkers. 75% of the students strongly agreed that they learned politeness strategies in English when speaking in a meeting. However, regarding cultural differences, 13% of the students were not sure or in a neutral position when they were asked whether they learned that cultural

differences affected how they should speak in a meeting. This was probably because all students shared similar cultural backgrounds so there were no cultural barriers when interacting or communicating during the simulation and they did not need to adjust to cultural differences.

Many scholars confirm that sociocultural competence become an important aspect of communication. The ability to address sociocultural issues in communication can increase understanding between interlocutors and thus improve the effectiveness and accuracy of communication. This is in line with a study conducted by Hardin et al.

(2023) who found that teaching sociocultural aspects of communication can benefit both the teachers as well as the students.

The discourse competence is shown in item no. 4. According to Celce-Murcia (2007), discourse competence has a central role in any construct of communicative competence. It is important that the students are able to identify the segment of oral discourse, such as in a business meeting. The majority of students agreed that they learned the general structure or sequence of activities in a meeting using English.

*Table 1. Students' responses (in percentage) regarding how the business meeting simulation improved their communicative competence*

No	Statements	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1	I learned that differences in age, status/position affect my choice of words when speaking in meetings.	50	29	17	0	4
2	I learned that cultural differences affect how I should speak in meetings.	42	42	13	4	0
3	I learned politeness strategies in English when speaking in meetings.	75	21	4	0	0
4	I studied the general structure or sequence of activities in a meeting using English.	67	29	4	0	0
5	I learned how to pronounce words/ sentences in English correctly (pronunciation/ intonation/ word-stress)	67	29	4	0	0
6	I learned a variety of vocabulary used in meetings, including verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc.	54	38	8	0	0
7	I studied changes in the form of words in English (for example from verbs to nouns, adjectives, etc.)	54	33	13	0	0
8	I studied word order and sentence construction in English.	50	42	8	0	0
9	I learned various fixed expressions (phrases or sentences) in English that are useful for supporting communication in meetings.	63	29	8	0	0
10	I learned how to interact with other people in a meeting (e.g. giving/asking for information, giving/asking for opinions, telling a problem, giving suggestions, telling plans, etc.)	75	21	4	0	0
11	I learned strategies for having a conversation in English (e.g. how to open and close a conversation, change the subject, interrupt, etc.)	67	29	4	0	0
12	I learned non-verbal communication strategies (e.g. eye contact, body gestures, facial expressions, etc.) to support conversation during meetings using English	67	25	8	0	0
13	I made notes/summaries (containing important points) to help me learn how to prepare for meetings using English.	46	42	13	0	0
14	I evaluated my performance based on input from lecturers/ friends, or by watching the performance of my friends and the feedback given to them	63	38	0	0	0
15	I tried to memorize words/sentences using abbreviations, pictures, sounds, points, or other clues	71	25	4	0	0
16	I learned to use various communication strategies when I lost my words in the middle of communication	63	29	4	4	0

They include arranging a meeting, saying hello and making introductions, starting the meeting, stating the objectives, reporting progress, summarizing the results of a meeting, ending a meeting and thanking the participants, and confirming decisions and action points. The current

finding agrees with Chang (2023) who highlighted that knowledge about genre and thematic progression can help students grasp the gist during communication.

Items no. 5-8 show students' responses regarding the development of their linguistic competence. More than 50% of students strongly agreed that they could learn various vocabulary used in communication during a meeting, sentence construction, word changes, as well as pronunciation, intonation, and word stress. It is no doubt that linguistic competence is very important in foreign language learning. According to Celce-Murcia (2007), linguistic competence comprises four types of knowledge: phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic. When it comes to ESP teaching, the role of linguistic competence becomes highly significant. To be able to communicate effectively and accurately, the students need to master various technical vocabulary. They have to know how to pronounce it, when to use it in sentences, how to change its form as needed, how to construct sentences, etc. This study supports Fielden Burns and Rico García (2022) who found that linguistic competence is as important as intercultural competence in supporting students to engage in communication in their future workplace.

Item no. 9 shows whether the students learned useful expressions in English to support communication in a meeting. This item refers to formulaic competence. Most students strongly agreed that they could learn fixed expressions in English that can support their communication when participating in a meeting. As one of the students said in the questionnaire:

"The material about business meeting simulation greatly improved my vocabulary and expressions in English. I practice using the expressions explained by the teacher. They stick in my head and help me to speak better."

As cited by Masoni (2019), formulaic expressions refer to a series of words or other meaning components that can be continuous or discontinuous and that is, or seems to be, prefabricated. They are stored cognitively and recalled by the speakers as single lexical units. Formulaic expressions are also often referred to as multiword expressions (El-Dakhs et al., 2022). "In the near future", "on the other hand, and "make a big difference" are some examples of formulaic expressions commonly used in business communication. This study is in line with some studies that revealed the contribution of formulaic

expressions to students' fluency. By mastering various fixed and fabricated expressions, students can speak more automatically with shorter and fewer pauses due to less cognitive burden (Thomson et al., 2023).

Students' responses regarding interactional competence are summarized in items 10-12. Most students agreed that they could learn how to interact with other people in a meeting, including how to give/ask for information, give/ask for opinions, tell a problem, give suggestions, etc. They could also learn various strategies in a conversation, such as opening and closing a conversation, changing the subject, interrupting, etc. Besides that, students could also learn non-verbal communication strategies to support communication during a meeting. For example, they learned that they can clear their throat or cough to get the audience's attention as a signal that they want to make an interruption in the meeting. Montasseri and Ahmadi (2022) recommend that more emphasis be placed on interactional competence in English language classrooms, as it appears to be receiving less focus in EFL instruction. This can be achieved by reviewing and improving teaching materials to cover interactional strategies.

Items 13-16 refer to strategic competence. This competence refers to students' ability to use effective strategies for their language learning (Celce-Murcia, 2007). Most students agreed that the activity of business meeting simulation can improve their strategic competence, including cognitive, metacognitive, and memory-related. They could evaluate their performance based on input from the lecturer or by watching the performance of their friends and the feedback given to them. They also learned various communication strategies when they lost their words in the middle of speaking. They also practiced memorizing words/sentences using abbreviations, pictures, sounds, points, or other clues.

#### *Obstacles faced by students in conducting business meeting simulation*

The qualitative data from the questionnaire revealed students' difficulties when conducting the business meeting simulation. The authors categorized the students' responses into several themes which are illustrated in Figure 2. The figure shows that there are four main difficulties faced by the students. Lack of vocabulary becomes the number one obstacle perceived by the students. Many of them said that they have a limited vocabulary used in formal communication. Sometimes they lose their words in the middle of the talks and experience great

difficulties in finding the appropriate words and continuing the talks. They realized that formal situation requires them to use more formal language. They find it hard to use formal language because they have limited exposure to the formal language used in business meetings.

Lack of preparation time becomes the second obstacle. In completing the assignment of business meeting simulation, the students had to discuss first with their group the topic they wanted to have for the meeting. They need to find a topic that all members of the group are familiar with. They also need to think about the possible scenarios and prepare for the responses. However, some students admitted that they had difficulties in the preparation stage because of the limitation of time. Students' workload becomes the main cause of this problem.

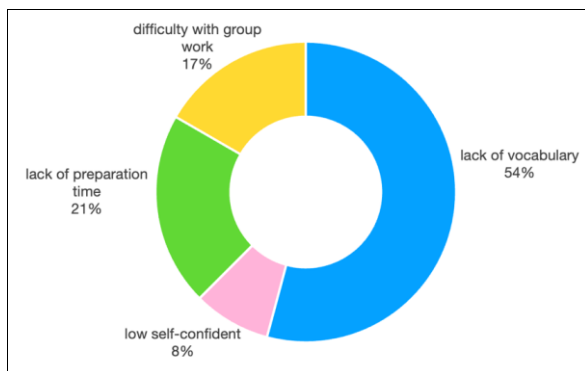


Figure 2. *Students' difficulties when conducting business meeting simulation*

Besides joining the English course, students of semester 7 also join other courses and activities that consume their time and energy. They found it hard to find the time to have group discussions. Students also explained that working together with their fellow friends was not an easy thing to do. The activity of business meeting simulation requires the students to work in groups. They need to allocate time for practicing with their team members. As told by one of the students:

“The difficulty my team and I had when working on this assignment was to build the relations between all the members. We must make a great effort to make sure that our utterances can be understood by our friends and avoid miscommunication in the meeting. That’s why we need to prepare every detail. Another difficulty was when we had to gather to discuss the projects. Each of us has a tight schedule, so it was not easy for us to work together.”

Some students mentioned that they often found it hard to work with friends who had different levels of English proficiency and motivation. The leader of

the group had already arranged and divided the tasks for all group members, but some students showed reluctance to give their best effort in the project. This issue had become one of the concerns of students because they realized this situation could impact overall group performance.

Last but not least, students confessed that low self-confidence becomes one of the factors that hinder them from giving the best performance. Some students were not confident with their English proficiency. They thought that they did not master enough vocabulary and grammar, and thus, became hesitant to speak.

ESP courses are designed to equip students with English language competence specifically tailored to their professional needs. Even though the topic of communicative competence is not new in ESP teaching, many ESP teachers are still struggling to improve the student's ability to communicate effectively and fluently in English. The use of business meeting simulations might become a game-changer for ESP teachers to train students to engage in near-real communication.

As mentioned previously, students generally perceive the business meeting simulation as highly beneficial. The simulation can provide students with an authentic experience of communication practice. The scenario of the business meeting simulation mirrors the real-world scenario that students might encounter in their future workplaces. Students can engage in simulated discussions, negotiations, as well as decision-making processes. Those activities can enhance students' understanding of professional communication norms and protocols which are reflected in the discourse competence. In addition to that, the use of business meeting simulation can enhance student's language acquisition. Being involved in realistic communication tasks can promote students' active language use and vocabulary expansion. Students can learn and practice using specialized business terminologies and idiomatic expressions. In other words, business meeting simulation can improve students' linguistic and formulaic competence. Activities in business meeting simulations can also provide students with opportunities to train their active skills such as speaking and listening skills. They can also practice effective communication strategies in meetings including giving presentations, reporting unpleasant situations, asking and giving opinions, and expressing agreement and disagreement in diplomatic language which refers to interactional competence. Another thing that can be enhanced is the students' cultural awareness or socio-cultural competence. Different cultural viewpoints that are

incorporated into business meeting simulations can support students in navigating the intercultural communication issues that are frequently experienced in international business situations. By obtaining knowledge of culture and communication techniques, students are better equipped to communicate with colleagues around the world. The complexity of the simulation task has encouraged students to develop their strategic competence, which in the end, can foster their language proficiency.

This research supports a considerable number of scholars who have been interested in exploring the contribution of strategic competence to language learners' proficiency. W. Zhang et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of strategic competence to support the management function of language learning. The students can set their goals, assess the strategy to complete the tasks, and plan to use the language knowledge for task completion. By having good strategic competence, language learners can understand what they should do to learn a foreign language effectively, how to do it, when and where to do it, and why they should do it (D. Zhang & Zhang, 2019). Strategic competence can also boost learners' self-regulation learning in which they can manage and control their efforts and resources in language learning (Katsarou & Kambakis-Vougiouklis, 2020).

Despite the benefits received by the students, the business meeting simulation also poses some challenges. Lack of vocabulary mastery, lack of preparation time, difficulty with group work, and low self-confidence become the main obstacles reported by the students. Lack of vocabulary had caused students difficulty when they had to improvise during the meeting. Some of the students said that they experienced anxiety and discomfort feelings when the dialogue developed because they were unprepared for what happened next. Zondag (2021) explored students' experience with improvisation in spontaneous speech activities and found that improvisation can improve speaking confidence because students found the activities enjoyable. The results of this study, however, indicated a different finding that students viewed improvisation as a potentially threatening condition.

Many scholars have studied how affective variables affect students' language learning, in which self-confidence becomes one of the most influential ones. Fatima et al., (2020) and Waluyo and Bakoko (2022) studied EFL learners in Iran and Thailand respectively, and found that L2 self-confidence, or how students perceive their English ability had a great impact on their willingness to

speak or communicate using English. This study supports their findings, which showed that students' poor self-perceptions or low self-confidence may prevent them from giving their best work. To overcome this problem, teachers can employ scaffolding strategies to assist students in performing the simulation. Teachers can divide the assignments into smaller parts and give feedback to students before they are assigned to perform a full meeting simulation. By implementing this, students can be more prepared and gain more self-confidence despite the limited preparation time.

Concerning group work, many scholars agree that group dynamics can influence learning outcomes, either directly or indirectly. The group work environment has a significant impact on students' motivation (Tanaka, 2022), students' engagement (Zhong et al., 2024), as well as students' resilience in the process of language learning (Kiyota, 2021). There is no doubt that the composition of students in a group has a vital impact on the success of the simulation activity. Thus, it is important to ensure that students can contribute equally and participate in group activities. The best practice for dealing with this problem is by grouping the high-proficiency students with the low ones. Teachers can also include "teamwork" as one of the indicators of evaluation and encourage students with higher proficiency levels to empower their team members.

## CONCLUSION

Generally, students have a positive perception of the business meeting simulation activity. Most of them agreed that the simulation could improve their communicative competence. They could learn politeness strategies and become aware that differences in status/position could affect the choice of words. They could also learn the general structure of a business meeting as well as various expressions and vocabulary commonly used in such meetings. In completing the assignment of business meeting simulation, students put a great effort into their preparation. They made some notes containing important points and tried to memorize them. They also paid great attention to the explanation and feedback given by the teacher.

However, there were some obstacles faced by the students when completing the assignment. Lack of vocabulary mastery in participating in a conversation in a formal setting became the number one obstacle. Students also reported that they had difficulty with doing improvisation during the meeting. Some students also admitted that they had limited time for preparation due to high study load.

Students also found difficulty when they had to work together in a group. Since many of them have a tight schedule, finding a comfortable time for everyone became a great challenge. Low self-confidence also became one of the obstacles that hindered them from showing their best performance.

The findings of this study bring several pedagogical implications in ESP teaching. First, the use of roleplay/simulation is found to be effective in improving students' communicative competence in specific settings. Thus, ESP teachers are encouraged to use roleplay/simulation in the teaching and learning activities. Second, in arranging the students for group work, the teachers must consider the group dynamics to balance the student participation in the group. This study also becomes a kind reminder for English teachers that affective variable such as self-confidence has a great influence on students' performance. Therefore, teachers need to employ scaffolding strategies to make students more confident in their speaking abilities.

With regard to the challenges identified in this study, the authors suggest the next researchers explore innovative pedagogical approaches and technology-enhanced learning tools to mitigate role-play anxiety and enhance student engagement. Longitudinal studies can also be employed to track students' progress and obtain data on the long-term impact of simulation-based learning on language acquisition and the development of professional communication skills. By addressing those areas of future research, educators can improve their instructional practices and optimize the benefits of business meeting simulations for empowering English language learners in ESP classes.

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