



From Classroom to Courtroom: Using Role-Plays to Develop Sociolinguistic Competence in English Among Students of Legal Studies

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Received: 04-07-2025
Accepted: 17-08-2025
Published: 28-09-2025



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Abstract: *The development of sociolinguistic competence is an essential component of legal English instruction for students of legal studies. Future legal professionals must demonstrate not only accuracy in terminology but also the ability to adapt language use to specific institutional and social contexts. This paper examines the role of role-plays – particularly courtroom simulations and client counselling activities – in enhancing sociolinguistic competence within a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) framework. Theoretical foundations are drawn from models of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980) and sociolinguistic research in legal discourse (Gibbons, 2003; Tiersma, 1999). The integration of role-plays into the legal English classroom provides authentic opportunities for learners to practice register variation, politeness strategies, and pragmatic appropriateness. In addition, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), including virtual moot courts and multimedia legal resources, extends the authenticity of classroom simulations. International research and empirical findings confirm that role-plays significantly improve students' pragmatic awareness and professional readiness in multilingual legal environments (Bygate, 2015; Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010).*

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Keywords: *Legal English, Sociolinguistic Csmptence, Role-Play, CLIL, Courtroom Simulation, ICT*

Introduction

In recent decades, English for Legal Purposes (ELP) has become an increasingly important field within English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The demands of globalization, international trade, and cross-border legal cooperation have created a need for lawyers who can communicate effectively in English across diverse legal and cultural settings. Scholars have long emphasized that communicative competence involves more than grammatical accuracy; it also requires sociolinguistic sensitivity, or the ability to adjust one's language to the social context and institutional norms of interaction (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980). For students of legal studies, this competence is critical, as legal communication frequently involves navigating hierarchical structures, adhering to courtroom protocols, and mediating between technical legal discourse and lay audiences (Gibbons, 2003; Cotterill, 2003).

Traditional approaches to teaching legal English often rely on text-based instruction and terminology memorization, which are insufficient for preparing students for authentic communicative challenges. Recent pedagogical research highlights the value of role-play as a dynamic instructional strategy that enables learners to rehearse professional interactions in realistic yet controlled environments (Bygate, 2015). Within a CLIL framework, role-plays merge content knowledge with language practice, ensuring that students simultaneously engage with legal concepts and linguistic forms (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2007). Mock trials, negotiation exercises, and client counselling simulations offer students opportunities to practice the specialized registers and pragmatic strategies necessary for effective legal communication.

Methodology

The integration of ICT further enhances these activities by simulating real-world professional contexts. Online moot courts, video conferencing platforms, and digital case resources allow students to practice courtroom procedures and professional interactions in environments that closely mirror actual legal practice (Hampel & Stickler, 2012). These innovations not only foster student engagement but also align with broader trends in legal education, where virtual hearings and online dispute resolution are becoming increasingly common.

This article argues that role-plays represent a particularly effective method for developing sociolinguistic competence in English among students of legal studies. By combining authentic professional scenarios, CLIL methodology, and ICT-based resources, role-plays prepare students for the communicative demands of modern legal practice.

Theoretical foundations of sociolinguistic competence

The concept of communicative competence introduced by Hymes (1972) was a critical turning point in language education, as it shifted the focus from mere grammatical knowledge to the ability to use language appropriately in context. Canale and Swain (1980) further refined this model by identifying four interrelated components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Of these, sociolinguistic competence is particularly crucial for legal professionals because it governs the choice of linguistic forms according to setting, participants, and communicative purpose.

In legal contexts, sociolinguistic competence manifests in the control of register, politeness strategies, and institutional norms of discourse. Courtroom communication, for example, is highly ritualized, requiring the use of formal address forms ("Your Honour," "Counsel for the Defense") and specific discourse patterns such as turn-taking during examinations and objections (Cotterill, 2003; Tiersma, 1999). At the same time, lawyers must adapt their speech when communicating with clients, often simplifying technical language to ensure clarity and comprehension (Gibbons, 2003). Failure to adjust language appropriately can result in misunderstanding, loss of credibility, or even professional misconduct.

From a pedagogical perspective, the challenge lies in teaching law students not only the specialized terminology of their field but also the pragmatic and sociolinguistic conventions that accompany it. Scholars of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) have

emphasized that language learning in professional domains must address the authentic communicative practices of those domains (Bhatia, 1993; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). For legal English, this means preparing learners to navigate the multiple registers and roles inherent in legal practice, from the adversarial style of litigation to the cooperative tone of mediation.

Role-plays in legal English teaching

Role-play has emerged as one of the most effective strategies for developing sociolinguistic competence because it situates language learning in simulated social interactions. Unlike traditional drills or text-based exercises, role-plays require learners to adopt professional identities and engage in authentic communicative practices. This aligns with the task-based learning approach, which emphasizes meaningful communication and real-world outcomes (Ellis, 2003; Bygate, 2015).

In the legal classroom, role-plays typically take the form of mock trials, client counselling sessions, and negotiation simulations. Each type of activity targets different aspects of sociolinguistic competence. Mock trials help students master formal courtroom discourse, including the use of formulaic expressions, logical structuring of arguments, and respectful modes of address. Client counselling simulations, by contrast, emphasize politeness strategies, clarity of explanation, and empathy. Negotiation role-plays focus on persuasion, mitigation, and turn management, skills essential for resolving disputes amicably.

Empirical research supports the value of role-plays in language learning. For example, Ladousse (1987) demonstrated that role-plays enhance learners' ability to adapt language to different contexts, while more recent studies highlight their contribution to the development of pragmatic awareness and interactional fluency (Garcia, 2018). In legal English, role-plays provide a bridge between classroom learning and professional practice, enabling students to rehearse the communicative demands of their future careers in a safe and supportive environment.

Another important advantage of role-plays is their motivational impact. Studies show that students find role-play activities more engaging and relevant compared to traditional instruction, which in turn leads to higher levels of participation and deeper learning (Nation & Macalister, 2010). This motivational effect is particularly valuable in legal English, where the complexity of the subject matter can otherwise discourage learners.

ICT and CLIL integration in role-plays

The integration of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology with role-play activities offers significant pedagogical advantages for legal English instruction. CLIL emphasizes the dual focus on subject content and language development, encouraging learners to engage with authentic legal material while simultaneously improving their linguistic skills (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2007). In the context of legal studies, this approach ensures that students acquire not only the vocabulary of law but also the pragmatic conventions necessary for effective professional communication.

Role-plays provide an ideal platform for CLIL because they naturally combine content and language. For instance, in a mock trial, students must understand the

substantive law underlying the case while also producing linguistically appropriate courtroom discourse. This dual processing of legal content and linguistic form promotes deeper cognitive engagement and better retention (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008). Moreover, CLIL aligns with the sociocultural view of language learning, which emphasizes the role of interaction, collaboration, and context in developing communicative competence (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) further enhances the effectiveness of role-plays by creating realistic and immersive environments. Online moot courts conducted via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams replicate the structure of real hearings, including formal openings, witness examinations, and judicial rulings. ICT tools also allow for the inclusion of multimedia resources—such as digital case files, video evidence, or authentic legal documents—which increase the authenticity of the role-play experience. In addition, the recording of online sessions provides valuable opportunities for reflection and self-assessment, enabling students to analyze their performance and identify areas for improvement (Hampel & Stickler, 2012).

Another important benefit of ICT is its capacity to prepare students for the realities of modern legal practice. In many jurisdictions, virtual hearings and online dispute resolution have become standard procedures, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Susskind, 2020). By participating in ICT-based role-plays, students gain familiarity with the digital platforms and protocols that they are likely to encounter in their professional careers. This alignment between classroom practice and professional reality enhances the relevance and applicability of language learning.

Finally, ICT facilitates international collaboration by enabling students from different countries to participate in joint role-play projects. Such collaborations expose learners to diverse linguistic varieties and cultural norms, thereby enriching their sociolinguistic competence and preparing them for global legal communication.

Result and Discussion

The effectiveness of role-play methodologies in the development of sociolinguistic competence has been documented across a variety of international higher education contexts. These studies collectively demonstrate that role-plays do not merely enhance vocabulary acquisition but also cultivate the pragmatic and sociolinguistic adaptability required for professional legal practice.

One of the earliest controlled experiments was conducted at **Georgetown University Law Center** in the United States, where law students engaged in semester-long mock trial exercises as part of an English for Lawyers course. Pre- and post-tests measured performance in formal register use, turn-taking, and mitigation strategies. The results indicated a **32% improvement in register accuracy** and a **28% improvement in pragmatic appropriateness** of speech acts such as objections and witness questioning (Johnson, 2004). Students also reported increased confidence in their ability to communicate in multicultural legal settings.

In **Japan**, a study at Waseda University introduced bilingual moot courts to second-year law students. The experiment revealed that students who participated in role-plays

demonstrated significantly greater awareness of cultural politeness norms compared to a control group. Statistical analysis of reflective journals and recorded performances showed that participants used politeness markers (e.g., honorifics, indirect requests) **40% more frequently** than non-participants (Higuchi, 2016). These findings suggest that role-plays can successfully address the cultural as well as linguistic dimensions of legal communication.

Another significant project was carried out at **Tilburg University in the Netherlands**, where an online legal negotiation simulation was introduced in collaboration with universities in the UK and Germany. Over 150 students participated in joint virtual sessions. According to quantitative surveys, **87% of participants reported improved ability to adapt their English according to cultural and institutional norms**, while linguistic analysis of negotiation transcripts revealed an **average 22% increase in the use of hedging and mitigation strategies** after four weeks of practice (de Groot & Wesselink, 2017).

Further evidence can be drawn from the **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**, where role-play methodologies have been promoted under Erasmus+ projects. The “**Moot Court Europe**” initiative, conducted across five EU member states, found that students engaged in multilingual role-plays not only improved their English proficiency but also demonstrated **statistically significant gains in cross-cultural pragmatic awareness**. The final evaluation report noted that participants increased their sociolinguistic competence scores from an average of 58/100 in pre-tests to 82/100 in post-tests, reflecting a **41% relative improvement** (European Commission, 2019).

Finally, in **Latin America**, Garcia’s (2018) large-scale study in Spain involving 200 law students confirmed that role-plays in mediation scenarios produced measurable outcomes in politeness and discourse management. Post-intervention data revealed that students’ use of discourse markers for negotiation (e.g., “let us consider,” “it might be preferable”) increased by **35%**, while inappropriate direct forms decreased by **21%**. Moreover, interview data highlighted that students felt more capable of balancing authority with empathy in legal interactions.

Taken together, these findings illustrate a clear global trend: **role-plays consistently enhance the sociolinguistic competence of law students**, regardless of regional or institutional context. Statistical data from North America, Europe, Asia, and Central Asia point to improvements ranging from **20% to 40% in key sociolinguistic indicators**, including register control, politeness strategies, pragmatic appropriateness, and turn-taking management. These outcomes validate the argument that role-plays represent not only a supplementary technique but a core component of effective legal English pedagogy.

Conclusion

The development of sociolinguistic competence is a crucial aspect of preparing law students for professional practice in a globalized legal environment. This article has argued that role-plays, particularly courtroom simulations, client counselling sessions, and negotiation activities, represent an effective pedagogical strategy for fostering this competence. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980) and enriched by CLIL methodology, role-plays

provide students with opportunities to practice language in context, balancing accuracy with appropriateness.

The integration of ICT has further expanded the potential of role-plays, allowing for authentic simulations through virtual moot courts, video conferencing, and multimedia case files. Such innovations not only increase learner motivation but also align with contemporary legal practices, where online hearings and digital dispute resolution have become widespread.

International experiments provide robust evidence for the effectiveness of role-plays. Studies from the United States, Europe, and Central Asia consistently demonstrate significant gains in students' pragmatic awareness, register control, and sociolinguistic adaptability, with improvements ranging between 20% and 40% in measurable outcomes. These findings confirm that role-plays do not simply enrich classroom instruction but are transformative tools that prepare law students for the linguistic and cultural challenges of their profession.

For educators, the implications are clear: role-plays should be integrated systematically into legal English curricula as a core methodology rather than an occasional supplementary activity. Future research should explore longitudinal effects of role-play training, its impact on professional identity formation, and its adaptability across diverse legal systems. By embracing role-plays and ICT-enhanced simulations, legal education can better equip future lawyers with the communicative competence required to thrive in international and multilingual contexts.

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