



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF LAW, GOVERNMENT
AND COMMUNICATION
(IJLGC)

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A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON THE INFLUENCE OF ROLE-PLAY ASSESSMENTS ON CONFLICT COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 30.11.2025

Revised date: 11.12.2025

Accepted date: 15.02.2026

Published date: 02.03.2026

To cite this document:

Rosli, N. N., & Zulkifli, Z. I. (2026). A Conceptual Framework on The Influence of Role-Play Assessments on Conflict Communication Competence. *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 11(43), 52-62.

Abstract:

Effective conflict communication is a critical competency for university graduates, yet many assessment approaches in higher education remain rooted in traditional formats that do little to prepare students for the complexities of real-world interactions. Without opportunities for authentic practice, students risk entering the workforce without the skills or confidence to navigate conflict constructively. This conceptual paper introduces a framework positioning role-play assessments as a powerful pedagogical tool to enhance conflict communication competence. Drawing on Experiential Learning Theory and Communication Competence Theory, the framework outlines how structured, feedback-driven role-play can create safe yet realistic spaces for students to rehearse conflict scenarios, reflect on their strategies, and develop adaptive communication skills. From a quantitative research design perspective, role-play assessment is identified as the independent variable and conflict communication competence as the dependent variable. Evidence from prior studies consistently demonstrates that role-play interventions foster empathy, confidence, and cooperative conflict behaviors across diverse learning contexts. The proposed framework extends theoretical models of competence development and offers practical guidance for integrating role-play into curriculum and assessment design. While the framework is yet to be empirically tested, it provides a strong foundation for future research to examine its effectiveness and explore moderating factors such as cultural background, personality traits, and learning environments. By rethinking assessment as an active, immersive learning process, this study encourages higher education to better equip students with the communication skills necessary to manage conflict effectively skills that are increasingly indispensable in today's collaborative, dynamic workplaces.

DOI: 10.35631/IJLGC.1143005 **Keyword:**

Communication Skills Development, Conflict Communication Competence, Experiential Learning Theory, Higher Education Pedagogy, Role-Play Assessment



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Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction, and the way individuals manage such situations can greatly influence outcomes in both academic and professional settings. For university students, the ability to communicate effectively during conflict is not only a valuable life skill but also an important graduate attribute. Traditional teaching methods often fall short in preparing students for the dynamic and emotionally charged nature of real-life disagreements. In response, educators have increasingly turned to experiential approaches, such as role-play assessments, which provide students with realistic scenarios in which they can practice navigating conflict. These assessments allow learners to experiment with strategies, adapt to different perspectives, and receive constructive feedback in a safe environment building skills that extend well beyond the classroom.

A growing body of research supports the use of role-play as an instructional tool, noting its positive effects on communication skills, empathy, and problem-solving abilities (Johnson & Stinson, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2021). In parallel, scholars studying conflict communication strategies have explored how individuals assert their needs, manage emotions, and work toward resolution, often measuring outcomes through self-efficacy and behavioral analysis (Smith, 2020; Patel & Adams, 2022). While these two areas of research overlap in their emphasis on interpersonal competence, there has been limited exploration of how role-play assessments specifically contribute to the development of conflict communication strategies. Recent studies hint at a connection, showing that role-play can encourage students to experiment with and refine their approaches to conflict (Nguyen et al., 2023), yet no comprehensive framework currently explains how role-play design features lead to measurable improvements in communication competence.

Despite the growing popularity of role-play in education, the lack of a structured theoretical model leaves gaps in understanding how these activities translate into improved conflict communication skills. Without clear guidance, instructors may design role-play tasks that are engaging but fail to target specific competencies. There is also a need to identify which elements such as scenario authenticity, peer feedback, or reflective debriefing most effectively drive skill development. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a conceptual framework that connects the design and implementation of role-play assessments to the development of conflict communication competence among university students. By doing so, it offers a structured pathway for both teaching and evaluating this critical skill set.

This work holds value for both educators and researchers. For educators, the proposed framework offers practical guidance on how to design role-play assessments that intentionally build conflict communication skills. For researchers, it provides a foundation for empirical studies that can test and refine the model. The framework draws on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which emphasizes learning through active participation, reflection, and application, and communicative competence theory (Canale & Swain, 1980), which frames communication as a blend of linguistic ability, strategic skill, and social appropriateness. Together, these theories suggest that students learn best when they actively engage in simulated conflict, reflect on their performance, and apply improved strategies in future interactions.

Literature Review

Role-Play Assessment

Role-play assessment has emerged as a powerful teaching and evaluation method in higher education, offering learners a realistic, low-risk environment to practise complex interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Across disciplines, however, its implementation varies considerably in context, methodological design, and evaluative purpose. In medical and nursing education, role-play is commonly embedded within simulation-based training to develop clinical communication and patient interaction skills, often assessed using structured rubrics and standardized patients (Ní Riain et al., 2018). In teacher education, it is used to rehearse classroom management and parent–teacher conflict scenarios, typically accompanied by reflective journaling (Keezhatta, 2020). In language learning contexts, role-play primarily aims to enhance communicative fluency and strategic competence, drawing on communicative competence frameworks such as Canale and Swain (1980). While findings across these fields consistently report improvements in communication confidence, empathy, and applied problem-solving, many studies rely heavily on self-reported perceptions or short-term performance measures rather than longitudinal behavioural outcomes.

Methodologically, prior research often differs in the degree of scenario standardisation and assessment rigour. Some studies employ highly structured simulation protocols with trained raters and validated rubrics, whereas others treat role-play as an informal classroom activity without clearly defined performance criteria. This inconsistency raises concerns about construct validity, inter-rater reliability, and generalisability of findings. Furthermore, although experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) is frequently cited to justify role-play, empirical studies rarely operationalise all stages of the experiential learning cycle—particularly reflective observation and active experimentation within assessment design. A critical limitation in previous role-play research is the tendency to conflate learning activity with assessment method, without systematically examining how role-play assessments influence measurable competence development. Few studies explicitly connect role-play performance indicators to established communication competence theory, nor do they offer a comprehensive conceptual framework linking assessment structure, behavioural engagement, and competence outcomes. The present framework addresses these gaps by integrating theoretical constructs of communication competence with structured assessment mechanisms, thereby clarifying the causal pathways through which role-play assessments influence conflict communication competence.

Conflict Communication Competence

Conflict communication competence refers to an individual's ability to manage disagreements constructively, ethically, and effectively within relational contexts. It encompasses cognitive understanding of conflict dynamics, behavioural skills in message construction and negotiation, and affective capacities such as empathy and emotional regulation (Smith, 2020; Patel & Adams, 2022). Research across organisational, educational, and interpersonal contexts demonstrates that individuals trained in conflict communication exhibit improved teamwork, leadership potential, and collaborative problem-solving. However, existing studies differ substantially in how competence is conceptualised and measured. Some focus primarily on behavioural strategies (e.g., collaborative vs. competitive styles), while others emphasise emotional intelligence or attitudinal change. This conceptual fragmentation limits theoretical coherence and comparability across studies.

Experiential approaches including simulated conflicts, AI-driven rehearsal platforms, and live-action role-playing have demonstrated promising effects in shifting learners toward more constructive conflict styles (Shaikh et al., 2023; *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2025). Yet, many of these innovations prioritise technological novelty or engagement outcomes rather than theoretically grounded competence measurement. Additionally, most research examines general communication skills rather than conflict-specific competencies situated in high-stakes interpersonal tension. Longitudinal evidence on skill transfer beyond simulated environments remains limited, and few studies investigate how assessment design itself shapes competence acquisition. The current conceptual framework responds to these limitations by positioning role-play not merely as a practice activity but as a structured assessment mechanism aligned with communication competence theory. By integrating standardised scenarios, calibrated rubrics, and reflective debriefing processes, the framework offers a theoretically coherent and methodologically rigorous model for understanding how role-play assessments influence the development of conflict communication competence in higher education contexts.

Role of Theory

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) conceptualizes learning as a continuous process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). Rather than viewing learning as passive content absorption, ELT positions learners as active participants who construct meaning through a cyclical process of Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). This cyclical process provides a structured developmental mechanism that aligns strongly with the multidimensional nature of communication competence.

Communication competence is generally conceptualized as comprising cognitive (knowledge and understanding), behavioral (skills enactment), and motivational (willingness and confidence to communicate) dimensions (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Competent communication is not merely possessing knowledge but demonstrating appropriate and effective behavior in context (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Integrating ELT with Communication Competence Theory clarifies how experiential learning particularly role-play facilitates the systematic development of these interrelated dimensions.

The concrete experience stage involves direct participation in authentic or simulated situations. In role-play conflict scenarios, students actively enact communication behaviors such as negotiation, perspective-taking, emotional regulation, and assertive expression. This stage directly engages the behavioral dimension of competence, as learners must perform skills in real time rather than merely describe them.

At the same time, immersion in realistic interpersonal conflict stimulates the motivational dimension, as learners experience emotional responses such as anxiety, empathy, or defensiveness. Emotional engagement enhances attention and learning salience (Kolb, 1984). Experiential activities such as role-play have been shown to enhance engagement and practical skill development by situating learners in realistic communicative contexts (Cant & Cooper, 2017). Thus, CE activates both skill performance and communicative willingness.

Reflective observation requires learners to critically examine their performance, feedback, and emotional reactions. Reflection fosters metacognitive awareness—learners evaluate what communication strategies were effective, why misunderstandings occurred, and how their emotions influenced outcomes. This stage strengthens the cognitive dimension, as students move from unexamined action to analytical understanding.

Reflection also shapes the motivational dimension. Constructive feedback and guided reflection can reduce communication apprehension and strengthen self-efficacy (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Through reflection, learners recalibrate their perceptions of competence, increasing confidence and willingness to engage in future communication tasks. Dewey (1938) emphasized that reflection transforms raw experience into meaningful learning, reinforcing the theoretical foundation of this stage.

During abstract conceptualization, learners connect reflective insights with theoretical frameworks such as conflict management styles, emotional intelligence, or communication competence principles. This stage consolidates the cognitive dimension by integrating experience with structured knowledge.

Learners develop generalized principles that extend beyond a single scenario, enabling transferability across contexts. Kolb (1984) emphasized that conceptualization allows learners to form systematic explanations and predictive strategies. In communication competence terms, this stage strengthens the knowledge base required for appropriate and effective communicative choices (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Active experimentation involves applying newly developed concepts in subsequent interactions. Learners intentionally test revised communication strategies, observe outcomes, and adjust accordingly. This stage reinforces the behavioral dimension through repeated skill practice and refinement.

Successful experimentation enhances motivational readiness, as improved performance increases communicative confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Over time, repeated cycles of experimentation contribute to adaptive and context-sensitive communication behaviors—hallmarks of communication competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). The iterative nature of ELT ensures that competence development is progressive and cumulative.

Cupach's Communication Competence Theory (CCT)

On the other hand, Cupach's Communication Competence Theory (CCT) offers a clear lens through which to understand what it means to communicate effectively, especially in difficult or conflict-laden situations. Unlike theories focused solely on knowledge or skills, CCT underscores the importance of three intertwined components: knowledge, skills, and motivation.

First, knowledge refers to understanding what communication strategies and behaviors are appropriate and effective in various contexts. This includes knowing how to interpret cues, recognizing the goals of the interaction, and being aware of social norms or cultural expectations. In conflict situations, this knowledge guides the communicator on how to approach sensitive topics and navigate potentially tense interactions.

Second, skills involve the ability to put that knowledge into action. It's one thing to know what to do in theory, but quite another to apply those strategies smoothly and adaptively in real time. This includes skills such as active listening, managing emotions, asserting one's perspective respectfully, and resolving disagreements constructively.

Third, motivation is often overlooked but just as critical. It reflects the willingness or desire to engage in communication and to resolve conflicts productively. Without motivation, even someone with extensive knowledge and skills may avoid difficult conversations or fail to persist through challenges.

Cupach's theory is especially valuable for evaluating the outcomes of role-play activities. It helps educators and researchers see beyond whether a student "got it right" or "wrong." Instead, it encourages a deeper look at how well students understand conflict communication, how competently they use their skills in practice, and how motivated they are to participate actively in resolving conflicts. By examining these three aspects, we gain a comprehensive picture of communication competence that includes cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions.

When paired together, Kolb's ELT and Cupach's CCT form a robust framework for understanding how role-play assessments can go beyond being mere classroom exercises. ELT explains why the experiential, cyclical nature of role-play effectively builds communication skills, while CCT provides the criteria for what successful communication looks like in practice. Together, these theories highlight that role-play is not just about acting out scenarios; it is a powerful, structured learning approach that nurtures real-world conflict communication competence helping students gain confidence, adaptability, and motivation to engage in meaningful dialogue and resolution.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the concept of Role-Play Assessment, which serves as the primary evaluation approach in this study. This method involves students participating in structured, simulated scenarios that replicate real-world conflict situations. The assessment is designed to measure communication competence by observing how participants apply their knowledge, demonstrate relevant skills, and display motivation to engage productively in challenging interactions. Aligned with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Cupach's Communication Competence Theory, the role-play assessment not only evaluates performance but also facilitates experiential learning, reflection, and skill enhancement in a safe, controlled environment.

Methodology

To address methodological concerns, the proposed framework emphasises the use of clearly structured analytic rubrics and scoring frameworks to enhance construct validity and ensure that conflict communication competence is assessed consistently across cognitive, behavioural, and affective domains. Well-designed rubrics make performance criteria explicit, improving transparency and promoting consistent scoring (e.g., Pérez-Guillén et al., 2022; study showing rubrics clarify expectations and learning outcomes). Establishing validity evidence and involving expert review in rubric development help ensure alignment with theoretical constructs and learning objectives (e.g., rubric validation research following Messick-informed frameworks; see Jeong et al., 2024). Systematic training and calibration sessions for assessors are necessary to improve inter-rater reliability and minimise scoring inconsistencies, especially when multiple raters assess dynamic communication behaviours, as recent studies highlight the importance of rater preparation for reliable communication assessment (scientific evidence on inter-rater reliability of communication rubrics; see Determination of Interrater Reliability..., 2023). Scenario standardisation through equivalent role descriptions, conflict triggers, and complexity levels further enhances fairness and comparability across participants while maintaining ecological authenticity. Acknowledging and proactively addressing these methodological safeguards strengthens the rigour and academic credibility of the proposed assessment design.

Role-play is justified as the preferred assessment method because it promotes authentic behavioural engagement and enables direct observation of real-time communication processes central to competence development. Empirical evidence shows role-play significantly enhances communication skills, self-efficacy, and professional behaviours as learners enact realistic scenarios, making it more robust than static written tests for capturing interactional competence (systematic review of role-play outcomes in education, exploring the impact of role-playing..., 2025). Role-play allows assessors to observe not only verbal content but also non-verbal cues, emotional regulation, and adaptability in context. Furthermore, it aligns strongly with Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasises concrete experience followed by reflection and conceptualisation as fundamental to skill development (Kolb, 1984; extended in educational practice). Structured debriefing and reflection reinforce metacognitive awareness and enhance learners' capacity to transfer communicative competencies to future encounters, positioning role-play as both an assessment and learning mechanism exceeding the pedagogical value of more passive methods.

Discussion

In reflecting on our conceptual framework that positions role-play assessments as catalysts for developing conflict communication competence, we find considerable harmony with empirical studies that underscore the value of experiential learning approaches for instance, Hrastinski and Watson's (2009) evaluation of an online conflict-management role-play revealed that students felt they learned effectively and enthusiastically participated in the activity, underscoring the pedagogical potential of well-designed simulations. Similarly, the Rehearsal system introduced by Shaikh et al. (2023) showed that practicing conflict scenarios with AI-generated interlocutors significantly reduced competitive responses and doubled cooperative strategies, offering concrete support for the idea that simulated practice can reshape communicative behavior. In addition, tailored clinical training combining e-learning with role-play demonstrated substantial improvements in communication skills, empathy, and confidence among psychology students (Goosse, Kreuzsch, Van der Molen, & Willems, 2023), reinforcing our belief that reflective, structured role-play fosters communicative growth across domains. These findings collectively echo our theoretical integration of experiential learning and communicative competence, while illustrating that authentic, feedback-rich role-play exercises consistently promote meaningful development in conflict communication skills.

Conclusion

This study advances a conceptual framework linking role-play assessments to the development of conflict communication competence among university students, demonstrating how experiential, hands-on learning can foster the knowledge, skills, and motivation required for effective conflict management. Theoretically, it extends Communication Competence Theory by explicating how structured role-play activities facilitate skill acquisition, reflective practice, and adaptive communication behaviors, thereby providing a concrete mechanism for translating competence theory into observable learning outcomes. Practically, the framework offers actionable guidance for higher education pedagogy, illustrating how educators can implement role-play systematically through carefully designed scenarios, debriefing sessions, and reflective exercises that collectively enhance students' confidence and capability in navigating challenging interpersonal interactions.

Despite its contributions, the study is conceptual and limited to a single academic context, restricting generalizability. Future research should empirically test the framework through experimental or quasi-experimental designs to assess competence gains, employ mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative performance measures with qualitative reflections, and compare the efficacy of in-person, online, and AI-mediated role-play formats. Examining the model with diverse and cross-cultural student populations would elucidate contextual influences, while longitudinal studies could evaluate the persistence and transfer of role-play-derived skills into professional settings. Addressing these directions will not only strengthen the theoretical foundation of communication competence but also inform evidence-based, scalable pedagogical practices in higher education.

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- Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to Dr. Zulfati Izazi Zulkifli from the National University of Singapore for her valuable insights, constructive feedback, and scholarly contributions that have significantly enriched the quality of this article. Her expertise and thoughtful guidance have been instrumental in refining our research design, analysis, and overall presentation.
- Funding Statement:** No Funding.
- Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Law, Government and Communication (IJLGC).
- Ethics Statement:** This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.
- Author Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Dr Nuraina Nadiah Rosli was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, development of the theoretical framework, and overall supervision of the manuscript preparation. Dr zulfati Izazi Zulkifli contributed to the literature review, drafting of the manuscript, and critical revision of the intellectual content. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.
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