

Improving Students' Language Proficiency Through Drama in the EFL Classroom

LI Pei-qi

School of Air Transportation, Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Shanghai, 201620 China

This paper examines the application of drama-based pedagogy in EFL classrooms, demonstrating how script analysis, role-playing, and improvisation can effectively enhance students' integrated language skills. The study highlights the unique advantages of dramatic texts for pronunciation training, subtext interpretation, and cultural understanding, while providing practical teaching methods including conflict scene selection and stage direction adaptation. Findings indicate that drama techniques reduce learning anxiety, boost motivation, and create authentic language contexts, serving as an effective bridge between literary study and language practice.

Keywords: drama-based pedagogy, EFL teaching, language skills enhancement, role-playing activities, authentic language context

Introduction

The proliferation of multimedia has led to the emergence of diverse dramatic forms, including films, scripts, and stage performances. Raymond Williams (1975) characterizes modern society as a “dramatized society,” wherein drama exerts a profound yet subtle influence on human cognition and behavior. However, as autonomous thinkers, individuals should not merely consume dramatic culture but actively participate in its dissemination and enrichment. Drama pedagogy facilitates critical societal examination, experiential learning, and proactive social engagement. In the United Kingdom, drama education has long been integral to the curriculum, a tradition bolstered by the nation's rich theatrical heritage, exemplified by figures such as Shakespeare. Brian Cox (1991), a prominent British educator, asserts that drama instruction holds significant value for both linguistic and cultural education.

Drama, as an artistic medium, encapsulates social conflicts through performative representation. The dynamic narratives and sophisticated dialogue inherent in dramatic texts render them ideal for fostering aesthetic appreciation and enhancing listening and speaking skills. In China, dramatic texts constitute approximately 16% of tertiary English textbooks. Despite this prevalence, pedagogical approaches remain inconsistent: some instructors focus solely on contextual and linguistic analysis, while others omit dramatic texts entirely. This paper contends that leveraging the distinctive features of drama can stimulate cognitive engagement, motivate learners, and promote active participation. Techniques such as dramatic reading, plot

analysis, and role-playing can invigorate classroom dynamics while substantially improving students' integrated language skills.

Developing Students' Reading Proficiency Through Dramatic Texts

Drama emphasizes the artistry of speech, utilizing dialogue, monologue, asides, intonation shifts, and tonal variation to delineate character, advance narrative, convey themes, and evoke emotional responses. Dramatic reading constitutes an artistic linguistic activity, necessitating mastery of foundational skills such as accurate pronunciation, expressive intonation, rhythmic control, and strategic pausing.

In spoken English, speaker intent and emotion are conveyed through prosodic features, including pitch variation, tempo, pauses, and intonation. Intonation, in particular, serves critical attitudinal, semantic, and syntactic functions (Cruttenden, 1997). Misapplication may result in miscommunication or discord. For instance, the utterance "You are very kind, indeed" conveys genuine appreciation with a falling tone but implies sarcasm with a rising tone. A practical illustration involves an Indian waitress in London whose service elicited complaints due to her habitual use of a falling tone (suggesting a command) rather than a rising tone (appropriate for inquiries) when offering gravy (Gumperz, 1982).

Character-Centric Line Analysis

Individuals exhibit distinct linguistic patterns shaped by occupation, age, experience, and social standing. Dramatic dialogue must reflect these idiosyncrasies. In *The \$99,000 Answer*, Ralph's lines epitomize the desperation of a social outsider craving validation. His nocturnal loitering beneath a streetlamp, hoping for recognition, underscores his absurdity. Consider his exchange with his wife:

Ralph: Well, Alice, I've finally learned a lesson. This house is full of nothing but jealous people.

Alice: What are you talking about?

Ralph: Not one person in this house—not one—was waiting downstairs to congratulate me!

This dialogue encapsulates Ralph's vanity, resentment, and comedic delusion, illustrating how linguistic analysis can deepen textual comprehension.

Enhancing Listening and Speaking Skills via Dramatic Texts

Students often develop unique interpretations of dramatic works and exhibit strong communicative intent. Instructors should capitalize on this by integrating listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks.

Preparatory Text Engagement

Narrating prepared content effectively improves oral proficiency (Bygate, 2001). Pre-class materials—including lexical, syntactic, and contextual resources—should be provided to stimulate interest and facilitate independent insight generation.

Facilitating Student Expression

Post-preparation, students should engage in guided discussions. Thought-provoking questions encourage textual analysis and oral articulation, while debates on divergent interpretations foster critical thinking and linguistic agility.

Deepening Comprehension Through Performance and Practice

Lev Vygotsky (1978) underscores the constructivist value of performance in drama pedagogy, positing that it enhances cognition, creativity, and evaluative judgment. Jerome Bruner (1990) similarly emphasizes the role of physical and linguistic coordination in meaning-making.

The Arts Council England (1992) advocates for drama instruction that integrates literary and performative elements, while Andy Kempe (1996) likens drama classrooms to laboratories for textual analysis and workshops for performance refinement. Classroom performances need not be elaborate; even modest enactments yield pedagogical benefits.

For instance, in *Look Back in Anger*, protagonist Jimmy Porter's diatribes reflect his working-class intellectualism and societal disillusionment. His reference to "Lady Bracknell" and "cucumber sandwiches" satirizes bourgeois affectation—a nuance discernible only through performance.

To optimize classroom performance, the following strategies are proposed:

(1) Select scenes with obvious conflicts for performance. This helps students experience characters' emotions, understand internal and external conflicts, and recognize how dramatists use techniques to intensify drama—fostering a holistic grasp of content and form.

(2) Encourage improvisation. Improvisation reflects students' spontaneous responses, shaped by their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. It reveals their initial impressions, enabling targeted guidance to deepen understanding.

(3) Remove stage directions from a scene, have students perform based solely on dialogue, and compare two groups' interpretations. This highlights the importance of stage directions, stimulates imagination and creativity, and reveals differing understandings.

(4) Conversely, provide only stage directions and ask students to create lines for characters (after they grasp the overall plot). This enhances language expression and reflects their understanding of characters and story.

(5) Teachers should participate in performances—not to showcase skills, but to act as equals, reducing students' anxiety, helping them unlock potential, and subtly conveying mature interpretations to reduce resistance.

(6) Integrate screen adaptations of dramas into teaching to enhance intuitive understanding and critical awareness.

(7) Encourage students to film performances. This preserves fleeting moments, allowing them to review and refine their acting. Teaching practice shows these methods boost students' interest in drama performance and deepen their understanding of texts.

Conclusion

Gavin Bolton (1992) observes that drama communicates through both character and performative elements (e.g., sound, space, and movement). Performance-based pedagogy thus enriches students' engagement, distinguishing drama from other literary forms.

Krashen and Terrell (1983) identify low anxiety, high motivation, and self-confidence as key facilitators of language acquisition. Drama uniquely fosters these conditions, making it an indispensable pedagogical tool. Traditional approaches to dramatic texts undermine their cultural and linguistic potential.

Effective drama instruction demands flexibility. Educators must adapt strategies to learner diversity, fostering active participation through multimodal engagement. By harnessing drama's immersive potential, instructors can cultivate imaginative, autonomous learners equipped to navigate a dramatized world.

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