

# Enhancing EFL Students' English Competency Through Drama: A Case Study in a Primary School in China

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## Abstract

Drama courses are widely set up in K-12 education in Western countries, and drama in education promotes both language acquisition and drama acting in the West. Therefore, in the current K-12 education curriculum in China, the practice of offering English drama courses is in line with the needs of students' core competencies development. Drawing on the participants' interview narratives, classroom observations and journals, based upon the case in a foreign language primary school in Guangzhou, China, this study examines how the drama course is carried out and how the students' English competency is enhanced through the drama course. The enquiry revealed that the drama course had helped promote both students' language competency and drama acting capacity. These findings will be discussed with suggestions for making setting up drama courses in other schools and cities in China possible.

**Keywords:** primary student, drama in education, English language competency, core competencies

## 1. Introduction

Drama courses have attracted the attention of many teachers and educators in Western countries, especially in Europe and the United States, and their significance and values are generally recognized. Drama teaching (drama in education) makes a balance between language acquisition and drama acting, providing natural, confident, and free platform through the systematic process of "improvisation-presentation-knowledge expression-reflection" (Wang et al., 2016).

In 2016, China's Ministry of Education put forward the concept of students' core competencies and put forward eighteen specific categories for the development of core competencies in the 21st century (Lin, 2016). Based on the core competencies concept, the foreign language academia put forward the concept of core competencies in EFL learning, namely, language ability, critical thinking ability, cultural awareness and learning capacity. Drama courses are undoubtedly a proper platform to highlight and cultivate these abilities and qualities. In recent years, some primary and middle schools in China, particularly in cities where quality education is highlighted, have begun to offer English drama classes.

This study, drawing on the participants' interview narratives, classroom observations and journals, based upon the case in a foreign language school (G School) in Guangzhou, China, examines how the drama course is carried out and how the students' English competency is enhanced through the drama course.

So the research aims to answer the question: How do drama courses promote primary students' English competency in the educational context of China? To be specific, the research answers the following questions:

- 1) How are English dramas taught in primary schools in China?
- 2). How is students' English competency enhanced through learning drama?

## 2. Literature Review

Linguists and English teaching experts point out that language learning should be situated in the context. Language teachers need to create scenarios, set certain language input and output tasks, and help students achieve the purpose of language learning by completing a series of tasks. Moreover, language as a whole has important social functions, regulates people's thoughts to a certain extent, and is an important medium for

promoting human development (Goodman, 1986).

Drama, originating from the ancient Greek, means action or play. Drama teaching (drama in education) refers to the application of drama to teaching, learning the knowledge of various subjects through the situation of drama, in other words, incorporating comedy elements into education and teaching, through the form of drama education or subject knowledge teaching. According to Holden (1981), educational drama or drama in education is applying drama in teaching and learning subject knowledge via drama. Educational drama incorporates acting, thinking and expressing feelings in teaching process, even with the learners' development of cognitive competence, language competence and the interactive ability. Gabriella (2014) noted that drama teaching made the interdisciplinary connections and relations among several disciplines (theatre, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, philosophy and linguistics).

Drama is contextual, and it creates a social world within the target language in authentic interactions. Communicational context, social language or drama and active participation are considered indispensable factors of drama and language (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). These factors influence the effectiveness of drama presentation and the efficiency of language learning. Apart from that, Stinson (2007) quoted that there were three approaches to teaching drama: text interpretation and performance, improvisation and role-plays, and drama presentation. These approaches show the different stages in drama course from learning to creating; however, under these three simple processes of drama teaching, the activities and techniques used in actual drama teaching would be more specific. According to Sehriban (2013), in order to achieve communicative purpose, teachers can provide nine types of drama activities, "drama and language games, role play, improvisation, simulation, mime, skits, frozen image building, scriptwriting, and readers' theatre", into foreign language classroom.

In Europe and the United States, drama teaching is extensively implemented in schools and universities. Based on Dewey's (1916) theory of "learning by doing", the drama curriculum provides students with a lot of opportunities to learn in practice. The concept of "drama teaching" was proposed by Ms. Heathcourt of the United Kingdom in the 1960s. In the following decades, drama teaching received more and more attention. Drama teaching involves not only primary and secondary school teaching, but also is in the university curriculum. Students' English competency together with their drama acting, intercultural awareness and communicative skills can be extensively improved (quoted from Wang, 2016). In the past decade, more and more K-12 schools in China have set up drama courses or drama clubs. At the same time, the bottom-up practice has also been advocated by the administration. Drama teaching helps develop creativity, problem-solving competence, communication and empathy as well as positive attitude like self-trust and confidence (Kavakli, 2016; Holden, 1981).

Due to the fact that research on drama teaching in China is not abundant enough, the schools which offer drama classes are exploring and trying to find a suitable approach for the social and educational context in China. In many schools, both the school and teachers, particularly EFL teachers are in urgent need of professional training upon pedagogical approaches, theoretical basis and drama selection etc. And the EFL teachers are also in need of cooperation with teachers in other subjects, such as Arts, Theatrical performance, Psychology, etc.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Site and Participants*

I chose G Primary School as my research site out of three reasons. First, I had built up trustworthy relationship with the school administration and EFL teachers, which is considered very important in qualitative research (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Chen, 2004). Second, G Primary School is a well-known school in the district, in which the students excel in many ways among students in the city and it's known for the students' English proficiency. Moreover, the students have more access and more exposure to socio-cultural norms of English culture (such as English drama) among its peer schools in the district as it features foreign language learning. Thus, the teachers are confronted with great challenge and pressure when facing the students and parents.

The school originally set up the drama course for the third and fourth graders as an optional extracurricular subject every Thursday afternoon in 2016. And in this year the first drama contest of the school was held as well in order to encourage all the students to perform on the stage, which was in line with the concept of the school-to cultivate students with international awareness through various activities. At the end of the semester, questionnaires were distributed to the students on their interest, gains and their suggestions on drama teaching. 89% of the participating students were in favor of the course, while 8% found it interesting but demanding, and 3% felt they couldn't overcome nervousness and thought of giving up. The drama teaching team, almost all the EFL teachers in the school, studied on teaching pedagogy, selecting drama scripts and discussed on teaching practice for the whole winter in the same year. And a new revised teaching curriculum was set up then next

semester, with adapted scripts and more focus on details of lines, feelings and acting.

With the preliminary trial for a whole year, the school officially incorporated English drama teaching into its curriculum in 2017 and the drama course became a school-based subject for students from the first graders to the sixth graders. With course evaluation and consultancy from drama teaching experts and professors, discreet and serious selection of dramas and scripts together with repeated research on teaching pedagogy and learning from other schools and symposiums on dramas, the school took the initiative of teaching English drama to primary students.

In this research, the student participants were sixth graders from the school, who had learned English for over five years. The drama teaching reform was mandatory for the teachers. As the consequence of the reform, teachers had a greatly increased workload. The teacher participant Miss Carol had been in the teaching profession for over ten years and the vice principal, Miss Lee had been in the EFL teaching profession for thirteen years and initiated the drama course together with the school administration. In addition, Miss Carol was the English team leader of Grade six, and head teacher of the student participants. With strict scrutiny, the dramas were selectively chosen, and the scripts were adapted to simple but original language for the students with the guidance of foreign teachers from North America.

### 3.2 Data Collection

We observed the participating class from Sep. 3<sup>th</sup>, 2017 to 6<sup>th</sup>, May 2018, which covered two semesters, including the classes in the classroom and in the school auditorium, together with the final drama show held by the Education Group (which manages eight affiliated schools, and G School is one of them) in the Grand Auditorium. The data collected include interview narratives of the participating teacher, the vice principal of G School, journals from students and the classroom observation notes and pictures together with videotapes. And certificates of honor and awards as well as school documents were provided for triangulation. There were 45 students in the participating class. We took class observation notes, made interviews with the teacher for 65 minutes and with the vice principal for 40 minutes, and collected 42 journals from the students.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) was adopted in the data analysis of the research. The classroom observation notes, the interview narratives, the students' journals together with the teachers' teaching plan etc. were transcribed word-to-word manually and sent back to the participants for double-check for accuracy. Then the analysis was conducted with constant reference back to the research questions and the correlation between enhancement of English competency and participation in drama was therefore manifested through the coding and analysis.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

### 4.1 Teaching Practice of English Drama Course in the School

So far, the drama course has been carried out for four semesters. In terms of the course, the curriculum, curriculum-based teaching materials, and the evaluation system have all been developed. As far as the drama teaching team is concerned, the teachers have undergone transformational development in their teaching pedagogy and beliefs. As Miss Carol explained in her interview,

*I had been teaching English for over ten years and started to feel bored. I was in need of either taking a break and going to study in the university for a MA degree, or giving myself some other challenges. Then we had the drama course. To be honest, it's the first time I'm so close to "art". I'm not an artistic person, but I want to take the challenge. I'm totally changed in these two years. Teaching drama is also a way of learning. I am learning with the kids. As you said, learning by doing, right? In this class I can really apply what I know and enjoy the beauty of the language instead of simply teaching the students to do the exams.*

As far as English learning is concerned, the drama curriculum allows students to gain a deeper understanding of the use of appropriate English in specific contexts, and to understand the Western culture, history and customs. From the cognition of words, sentences to the performance proficiency, the practice begins with the imitation of particular scenes in classics.

The curriculum incorporates ten selected classical dramas, *The Ugly Duckling*, *A Little Princess*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Sound of Music*, *Cinderella*, *Wizard of OZ*, *Mulan*, and *The Mousetrap*. The participating class adopted *The Mousetrap* as the major drama for the semester, which though was a little difficult for all the students to understand but intriguing. Teaching reference books included *Beginning Shakespeare*, *Beginning Drama* etc.

The course for the first semester mainly consists of the following sections: an introduction to drama, basic elements of drama, learning and practicing the drama step by step intertwined with assessment in midterm, a drama show as the final evaluation of the course for the semester. It starts by answering what drama is, accompanied with introduction to the classics. The following table is a demonstration of the first class to the sixth graders in the school.

Table 1. Case: English drama, Grade 6, Lesson 1 scene 1 in *The Mousetrap-Blizzard Night*

Teaching content	Teaching content: experience the theatrical process of a man coming home on a blizzard night.
Teaching objectives	Knowledge-learn the English expressions about blizzard and weather; Skills- group brainstorming, personal performance practice; Attitude-arouse students' interest in drama and love to perform in English.
Teaching focus	To recreate life scenarios with appropriate English and props.
Teaching procedures	<p>Part I: arousing interest (2.5 minutes) The teacher describes a scenario of hot weather, and then a touch of coolness, followed by imagining snow coming from the sky. Hot weather → A touch of coolness → snow(Prepare a snowy video in case some students haven't seen snow before)→ What's the snow like?</p> <p>Part II: Theatrical issues (2.5 minutes)</p> <p>Part III: Brainstorming (10 minutes)</p> <p>In a panel discussion, students brainstorm on how to use the resources in classroom to perform coming home and entering the door on a snowy day.</p> <p>Part IV: Line design (10 minutes) Part V: Performance practice (10 minutes) Each group rehearses briefly according to their own plan or the teacher's plan. Choose the best group to perform on stage.</p> <p>Part VI: Summary (5 minutes)</p> <p>If conditions permit, in addition to action and lines, there can also be: 1. Lighting (cold light, such as Blue-ray) 2. Sound (Blizzard sound)</p>

Based upon this class, Student A wrote in his journal,

*Miss Carol is amazing! Compared with my classmates, I'm not good at English, especially in spoken English. I'm a shy boy. The moment Miss Carol asked me to stand on the stage and show how I feel when I come back home on a dark night with heavy snow, I was both nervous and surprised. Why me? Would my classmates laugh at me if I look stupid? I didn't have time to wonder, so unconsciously I did what I thought would be proper. But Miss Carol asked me to tell if I could do something further to show the snow was really heavy. I stomped my feet and dusted my shoulders before I pretended opening the door. And Miss Carol said wonderful! Wow! Yay! Though I only said: "Oh, so cold out here" with body language, I received praise with my performance, though it was short. Maybe next time I can do better.*

Through this class, the students developed an interest in drama and confidence in learning and performing. They learned to appropriately express snowy weather and their feelings, learned how to do group brainstorming, practiced stage performance in person and make decisions and peer evaluation.

#### 4.2 Enhancement of Students' Language Competency Through Drama Acting

Classroom observation and students' journals showed that drama course, as a new form of learning English and promoting students' comprehensive competence, was largely welcomed by the participating students. This very well illustrated the theory of "learning by doing" and "learning by observing" (Dewey, 1916).

##### 4.2.1 Improved Language Proficiency

Results showed that students' final exam scores in English in G School substantially surpassed the other schools, though they didn't learn the textbooks which were important for the final exam as required by the local Bureau of Education. Besides, students in G School won the first prize in the grand English competence contest held in the district, including competition on drama, speech, movie dubbing, storytelling and news listening and

reporting, which never happened in the previous three years when only the traditional English course was offered.

As the teacher Miss Carol said,

*Year after year, we teachers are pushed by the evaluation criteria and students' final scores are just like nightmares, especially over the first few years when I began to teach. I couldn't think of any creative or "abnormal" idea that doesn't get along with the exam and scores. Otherwise, I'm asking for trouble myself. This year it's different. Though I don't have the talent of performing, it makes me alive when my students and I could stand on stage and perform a show using the language I love. Besides, they are making a step forward and have got a good result in the final. This is what I want-just do what's right, and good fortune will eventually come. This is so like me as a person.*

Students in drama class are also encouraged to freely express themselves, no matter how well they could use the language. As Student B said,

*I find for the first time as far as I could remember that English learning could be so fun and relaxing for us. We could express ourselves freely in the way as we understand the roles in the drama. We don't have to use English as supposed in the textbook. I feel I am really talking and being myself. I don't think of exams in the drama class, but I think I learn a lot as well. I'm energetic, you know. I have a lot of body language and I'm alive. My teacher said I could be a comedian or musical actor in the future. Who knows? I love the drama class.*

It's manifested that the drama Course performed better than traditional English classes in promoting students' English competence. Drama often starts with warm-up activities that involve body movement and engagement in a certain mood or context, and it's more appealing and challenging to students. As an important intermediary of English language learning, it provides space for students to develop their language proficiency and acting skills as well. Besides, teachers' professional development was accordingly promoted and two school-based research projects were approved to support the further study on drama teaching.

#### 4.2.2 Enhanced Cultural Awareness and Acting Capacity

Through the drama course, the students associated the textbook and story with the real world, and eventually with themselves. Drama, in a certain time and space, provides room for students to appreciate and understand the cultural background of the setting of the story, and thus provides an opportunity for the students to cultivate their intercultural awareness throughout the whole process. In addition, with immersion in the drama class for two semesters, the students have all developed the skills of acting, either in or out of class. Miss Carol explained,

*The Mousetrap wasn't my choice first, I preferred Pocahontas. However, a large number of the students in my class are fans of Christie Agatha. These students love adventure and challenge and like reading detective novels. What attract them the most, according to some students, are the intriguing plots, yet meanwhile the exotic setting and background of the stories make them obsessed as well. And what's important is that three years ago, they had watched the Drama Night of G University, in which The Mousetrap turned out to be the best and had won the best award in performance, actor and actress. So when we were selecting the drama last year, almost all of them proposed The Mousetrap. That's how The Mousetrap became the one for us. Ethan was chosen to play the Detective, Sergeant Trotter, as he was considered to be talented in acting. All of them had a role in the play, of course, and they amazed me, you know. I'm so proud of them. They did a great job.*

Miss Carol's accounts demonstrated that the students had developed an interest in the novel and drama played by college students, and chose the play The Mousetrap accordingly out of the previous experience.

Student C wrote,

*I think the drama The Mousetrap will stay in my memory forever, the plot, the roles, the stage, Mr. and Mrs. Ralston, the detective Sergeant, Miss Molly, everyone and everything. What I was impressed the most is the beautiful British setting which is very different from the Chinese style. And the British accent that Miss Carol let us imitate is also very nice and elegant. I love imitating British accent now instead of American accent, because I love British Dramas. I think someday I could go to watch dramas in London with my friends. But to be an actor is too challenging, I guess Ethan can have a try. As for me, I can learn English well and study business in North America.*

From the student's narration, it's clear that offering the drama course could help bring out the potential and talent of the students. What is more, the students' cultural awareness and acting capacity are nurtured in an imperceptible manner.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined how the drama course is carried out in a Chinese primary school and how the students' English competency is enhanced through the drama course. As teacher educators, we were greatly encouraged to see that drama teaching has become a popular and important subject in the Chinese K-12 education, and has promoted the students' English competency, at least in the participating school in the enquiry. However, we did find that the participants faced challenges in teaching and learning drama for a lack of professional background, as well as professional guidance as drama teaching talents are still in great need in mainland China. In our view, teachers need more teaching and research support from the administration, such as professional training, guidance from professionals, cooperation with teachers from other subjects, such as arts, dancing, music, psychology etc. Meanwhile, they need to be encouraged to view themselves as explorers and pioneers of drama teaching in the profession. With a more vigilant and interactive platform, the teaching of drama in China can be gradually improved in a benign and sustainable way.

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**Appendix I Interview questions (for teacher)**

- 1). Could you share your life story? Anything related to your career, your life?
- 2). When and how did you get to know about dramas? Do you watch dramas? What's your favorite one?
- 3). For teaching the drama *The Mousetrap*, what do you think is the most challenging for you? And what is the difficulty for the students?
- 4). How do you evaluate students in the English Drama Course?
- 5). Do you think learning drama helps promote students' English competency? If yes, in what ways?
- 6). Do you have any suggestions on how to teach English drama more effectively?

**Appendix II Interview questions (for school leaders)**

- 1) What is the main purpose of applying English Drama Course in our school?
- 2) What is the curriculum and textbooks/ teaching materials of the English Drama Course?
- 3) What is the course design of the Drama Course?
- 4) What achievements do you expect from the students in the English Drama Course?
- 5) Are there any obstacles for the implementation of the course?
- 6) Do you have any suggestions for other schools on applying the English Drama Course?

**Appendix III Journal instructions (for students)**

Please write a journal on your experience of taking the drama class based on the following questions.

- 1). Do you like learning English? How do you study English at school and in your spare time?
- 2). Do you like your English Drama course? What's your favorite drama? Why?
- 3). Do you think learning drama help you improve your English level? In what ways?
- 4). Do you have any difficulties in learning drama? What's the most difficult part?
- 5). Do you have any suggestions on your English drama classes?

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