

Drama approaches across higher education in the English curriculum: students perspectives on holistic activity-based teaching

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Abstract

Drama may be a useful technique for improving pupils' language acquisition in any subject. Implementing such a strategy in an actual classroom setting could be a problem for any instructor or person. The idea behind this study was to establish whether using drama-based activities in pedagogy has any positive educational outcomes. The study used a quantitative technique, and included a specific section about students' perspective on data collection from over a thousand students. They are studying in different faculties in undergraduate courses where English is a compulsory subject. The researcher independently designed the research instrument which was used to elicit responses from learners. The data collection method uses purposive sampling in the present study. Activities that encourage language-learning skills include role-plays and extended role-plays, which are described in the research as drama elements that can be useful in teaching languages. The study's findings support the use of drama as a strategic approach and have a bigger influence on student learning results.

Key words: Drama activities, English curriculum, higher education, Pedagogy, Reflective practices, holistic approach

Introduction

Since the very beginning, teaching languages has involved problems and difficulties. The inability to exchange ideas in the same language is the cause of all the problems that confront teachers and pupils. Furthermore, since learners are not exposed to the language which is being taught in the classroom, and English is not a widely spoken language, it is impossible to utilise the language contextually. Pedagogical theories are constantly developing, advocating modifications to the strategy, process, and methodology of language education. Additionally, the dimensions of classroom instruction are always evolving, and throughout the outbreak of Coronavirus, they shifted almost entirely from being physical to being virtual, in other words online. Similar to how activity-based learning has proven successful in distance learning, it is also more productive in language education. The issue is how can learners grasp the English structures efficiently and be confident enough to utilise them in everyday situations. The pandemic's new virtual phenomena had such an influence on education that it transformed pedagogies and teaching methods almost entirely. The entire teaching and learning process has altered to this new dynamic technique, moving from offline to online or a combination of the two. However, a problem that has persisted over time and continues to this day is that pupils often lack the methods needed to enhance their linguistic competence. It is a challenge to develop and use these kinds of productive and receptive language-using abilities in unstructured contexts. The development of self-assurance, inventiveness and nonverbal abilities may all be greatly aided by theatrical or drama education and training. Additionally, it fosters a critical mind-set. and improves non-verbal skills, so that by watching and understanding drama, the message contained within the action may be understood. Thus, several dramatic elements can help pupils develop that talent within the context of classroom learning.

The complicated process of second language learning may be seen from a range of perspectives. In recent years, academics have written on, debated, and expressed their perspectives on SLA, yet no single theory can adequately capture the idea. It also makes future predictions based on hypothetical situations. The study of second language acquisition also looks closely at why some people pick up languages more quickly and proficiently than others. What is it about SLA, specifically, that influences the dissemination of theoretical ideas of the topic at hand? The learning of a second language must be explicit in including as many important variables, while also having a practical application in daily life.

Theories must define terms very precisely, such as what second language learning actually entails. Otherwise, the reader could not fully understand what the article is about, what it asserts, or maybe even gets the actual point wrong. The subject of SLA has been discussed by academics such as Noam Chomsky, Stephen Pit Corder, Robert Lado, Selinker, Stephen Krashen, Michael Long, and Vygotsky, despite the fact that each of them has a different opinion about it. These academics have put forth a lot of effort to construct their theories and ideas of SLA.

There are several fundamental ideas that are available about language learning as a process. Behaviourism is essentially focused on how people behave. In 1960 it was put forward as a theory in language learning. This method focuses on the external surroundings of person. Language acquisition, according to behaviourists, is the process of connecting stimuli and responses to establish habits. This procedure, which is seen as a teaching tool, has to be strengthened, practised, nurtured, and corrected. Behaviourists place a strong emphasis on stimulus imitation as a learning process. The main premise depends on the subject, who is a language learner, being observed, measured, and verified. The theory's guiding principles are dependent on monitoring, persistence, application, and stimulus reaction. In the current study, DIE, a hybrid of conventional and contemporary education, is discussed.

Literature Review

The review of the literature includes the studies currently accessible on various aspects of drama education practices utilised in language classes. The approach of using drama elements in the form of activities to teach the English language has different names in different places. It can also be said that there are different approaches to teach language by drama techniques. The genesis can be found in the work of Peter Slade (1956) who discussed how to use these elements in teaching. Brian Way (1967) has also carried out work in the field of developing approaches in how developmental work can be done by using various drama techniques. Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote have taken this field further forward, and worked with children extensively to establish exactly how it can be done in the classroom. The work of Heathcote works can be considered as one of the seminal works on drama in education. Heathcote and Bolton (2010) published all their classroom experiments as a book in which they discuss how this approach can be used in education.

Another pioneering work was published by Shin-Mei Kao and Cecily O'Neill (1998), in which they showcased how this approach of drama in education can be carried out in classroom pedagogy. In their published work they have supported their ideas with data and discussed important techniques that can be very useful in pedagogy. The work of Joanne Kilgour Dowdy and Sarah Kaplan (2011) is equally important as they bring to the fore the importance of drama and theatre techniques in SLA and how they can be used for educational purposes. Betty Jane Wagner (1999, 2007) has had an impact on drama as an educational tool in pedagogy. She can also claim authority in the area of education drama and its use in pedagogy. Wagner (2007) asserts:

The aim of educational drama and process drama is to create an experience through which learners can understand human interactions, emphasize the importance of other

people and internalize alternative points of view. In process drama participants encounter a situation or problem, but the dialogue and gestures they create are in response to circumstances that the group imagines or improvises. (pp. 5-6)

Furthermore, Penny McFarlane (2012) offers some assistance to instructors who wish to employ drama and theatre approaches at a basic level in language classrooms. Basically, the book incorporates values such as rage, panic, affiliation, despair, and many more through a variety of exercises and dramatic tactics.

Dramatic exercises that may be employed in actual classroom situations are covered in great detail in Alan Maley and Alan Duff's (2005) book on drama activities for Language Teachers, which is an important resource for teachers who want to improvise these techniques in classroom teaching. However, because classroom environments are diverse, teachers must adapt their activities. The basic principles of this field, known as "learning by doing", are provided in G. Lazar's (2013) book, in which she discusses actual activities based on literature and language components. It is a seminal piece that offers advice on how literature might be used in the curriculum by language teachers. Erika Piazzoli (2010) is a contemporary example of how this approach is important and can be used in the language classroom. Her approach is "through a combination of different drama strategies, students are able to engage in intercultural development and awareness, and in this respect process drama and drama in education positively influence students' attitudes towards a wider range of contexts and language skills" (Piazzoli, 2010, 400-401).

However, this approach is incomplete, because all the ideas, work, strategies, and techniques which have been discussed so far are designed and researched in different social settings, with different set of students, i.e. background competence and knowledge are not similar to the classroom where students are learning English as a second or foreign language. There is a large gap in the research, which can be fulfilled only when the curriculum developer or researcher improvises activities according to their class level or students background experience. The aim of the present study is to cater for students who don't have the prior knowledge of English or exposure at a regular level. In this regard, Sohaib Alam (2022) says:

In order to develop an effective and efficient teaching strategy model, language inquiry-based activities that aim to improve productive and receptive English language learning skills are a key pragmatic strategy that can be developed and applied in foreign language classrooms. (p. 2)

Additionally, the studies mentioned above are highly significant, accomplished by improving methodology, approach, and technique of utilizing drama and theatre approaches in language schools. Despite the fact that several studies have been conducted by academics, none of them describe how the technique may actually be used in the classroom, nor do they cover anything fresh that can provide a new perspective. And the reality is that improvisation is necessary for diverse classrooms, since what works in ESL classes may not be appropriate in an EFL environment, because it combines both conventional and contemporary teaching methods.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to evaluate, and also examine, the effectiveness of using theatre as a teaching tool in ESL/EFL courses. The study's main goal is to examine the elements of drama that may be utilized to teach English in real classrooms. It is important to analyse the appropriateness and accuracy of language used in the class environment, and incorporate real-world scenarios into instructional strategies,. The research focuses on how to use the many elements of drama to engage students in daily life dialogue, and encourage them to engage in communication. However, the techniques of using activities based on various drama elements places more of a focus on improving productive skills than receptive abilities.

Research Questions

- 1) How do drama activities promote the use of the English language in classroom pedagogy?
- 2) How can different elements of drama be improvised and used in the language classroom to enhance language proficiency?
- 3) How can the imagination of students be developed by using role play and other structured or unstructured activities?
- 4) How can students develop creativity and language skills by using these activities in the classroom?
- 5) How can the active participation of students in the language classroom be ensured by using drama activities?

Research Methods

The respondents in the current study were examined by a purposive sample technique, and the data was collected using a quantitative approach. It attempts to gather data from students in ESL/EFL lessons that don't employ theatre tactics in pedagogy. However, the reality is that pupils struggle to produce language skills in a variety of contexts. Role play, execution, and extended role play were the three drama method components that were utilised for the study. The study's core premise is that by employing these methods, both the expressive and receptive language abilities of the students can be strengthened. The study's main claim is that using theatre approaches in EFL/ESL classes would make language learning more comprehensive and engaging. The study also offers to investigate features of theatre strategies and praxis, which may enhance additional perspectives to and facilitate EFL/ESL pedagogy. The study's justification also includes using the rich history of theatre techniques and English language teaching.

The researcher created a questionnaire to gather information from undergraduate students enrolled in various courses. Since learning English is required at college level, the gap in communicative skills will be reduced if students receive enough training. The five possible responses to the questions, based on the Likert scale, were — strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. Following the performance of six theatre exercises (depending on each element) in the real classrooms, a total of thirteen questions were posed. In addition, a few demographic questions were asked in order to learn more about the responders.

1,250 students from various faculties and programs were selected as the study's intended sample size. However, owing to range of circumstances, the study was unable to be completed, and the researcher stopped collecting data after only 1,003 students had been questioned. A pilot research was conducted to evaluate the questionnaire's reliability and validity, and this was assessed using the Cronbach Alpha test. It was carried out to evaluate the research instrument's efficacy and flaws. The data gathered by the questionnaire was examined using SPSS.

Inferences and Analysis

The study's inferences involve tabulating data and analysing it using statistical methods. Following the activity session conducted by the researcher, the respondents were asked thirteen (13) questions. The questions related to different elements of drama that can be improvised in the real life classroom pedagogy. The questions (statements) also included various components of drama which are being used in language classrooms.

The questionnaire's opening claim is based on statements from role-playing games. The questionnaire's initial (1) statement, which is centred on a role-play, is shown in "Fig 1." (1). This claim is an investigation of the use of role-playing to improve

spoken English language proficiency. Does role-playing dialogue practice have an impact on students' speaking abilities?

The inquiry aims to elicit information regarding a language's receptive and productive capacities, which inspire confidence in the development of interactive competence. The figure 1 (below) is based on the statement aimed at improving productive skills.

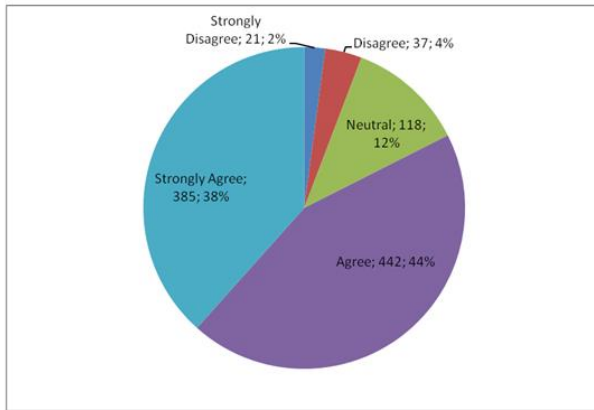


Figure 1: Role play activities improves speaking skills of the language in a real life situation

Figure 1 above displays the data collected from the respondents from various faculties who were studying at undergraduate level. 44% of the respondents agree to the questions as to whether drama activities based on role play improve their productive skill (speaking) of language during a period when they are practiced in the real life classroom. The data shows that 38% of respondents felt strongly that role play based activities improve their English language listening and speaking skills, which is a significant number. It shows that if the activities are designed and used in an effective way in classroom pedagogy, it does have a positive reflection in the students' learning results. By contrast, as the data above shows (Fig. 1), only 6% respondents (for unknown reasons) chose the options 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. When they were asked in the initial group discussion whether they like this approach or not, they were not very confident of playing these roles in front of the classroom.

The next question asked whether the drama activities based on role play improve their receptive skill (listening) of language during a period when they are practiced in the real life classroom. Almost half of the respondents say that they feel positive about improving their receptive skill (listening) of language while using these activities in the classroom.

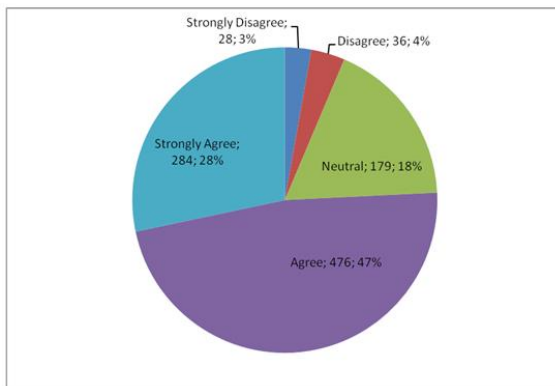


Figure 2: Role play activities improves listening skills of the language in a real life situation

Figure 2 (above) shows that 475 students stated that it improved their receptive skills (listening) of the language. Moreover, 28% students strongly agree with the idea of incorporating the activities based on role play in pedagogy to improve receptive skills. By contrast, only 7% of the students responded negatively when they were asked whether these activities helped in their overall language competency.

The next question directly concerned overall proficiency in English, because the English language is recognized as the global *lingua franca*. This question becomes very important for the present study, as it can clearly show us, with the help of data received from the respondents (Fig 3, below), that role play based activities improve the language proficiency of students. This question also becomes relevant as English language proficiency is directly related to the employability of students in the global market. As the data shown in the Fig 3 (below) the combined 'strongly agree' and 'agree' options it give a result of 73%. On the other hand, 6% students responded negatively and 21% chose the 'neutral' option.

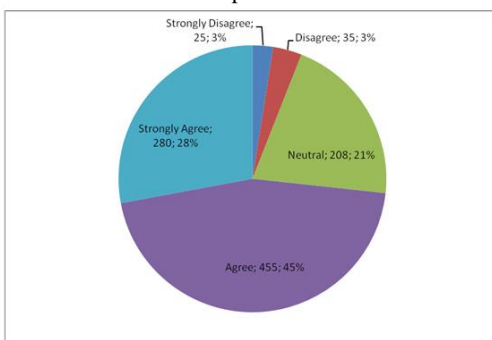


Figure 3: Activities based on role play improves overall English language proficiency

The fourth question in the questionnaire was based on the enactment which is neither structured or nor semi-structured. The first three questions already discussed were based on role play activities, whereas the fourth question addresses an important aspect of the language classroom that is prevalent in both EFL and ESL contexts. Students often feel both internally and externally hesitant while speaking or writing in the target language. When the respondents were asked whether activities based on

enactment reduce hesitation among their peers and others, they responded positively. As the data shows in Fig 4 (below), 82% students says it does help in reducing the hesitation while speaking or writing English in a real life context. By contrast, around 5% of students did not agreed with the idea of using these activities to reduce their hesitation. Around 13% students responded neutrally.

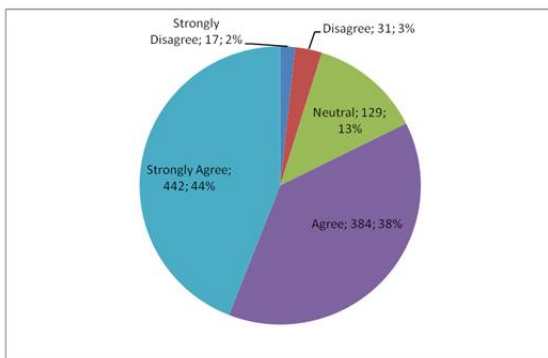


Figure 4: Enactment reduces hesitation among the students inside and outside the classroom

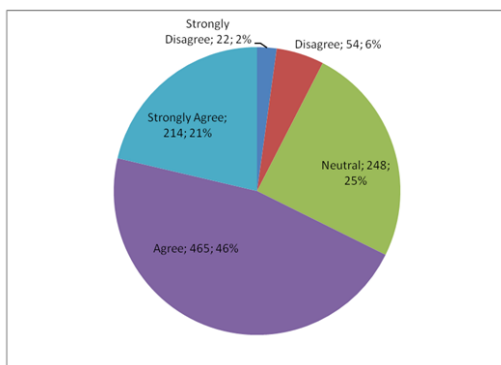


Figure 5: Activities on warm-up motivates students and gives them energy

This question also falls in the category of enactment, as it is related to activities which were used by the target students to break the ice in the beginning. The students responded positively and felt that these activities act as a catalyst in the language classroom, which gave them an opportunity for real practice before delivering the content in real life dialogues. As shown in Fig 5, 67% of students felt that warm-up activities in the language classroom provided them with the motivation to express themselves in a better way. On the other hand, a very negligible amount (around 6%) of respondents expressed themselves negatively to the statement. The proportion of students responding neutrally was 25%. It may be concluded that the data which collected clearly shows that these activities do help in maximizing the learning results of the students. As far as critical skills are concerned, in the study conducted by Natalija Valavičienė, et al. open-mindedness, honesty, empathy, inquisitiveness and flexibility are dispositions that broaden the concept of CT by providing more space for relationality and the wider context of social life. Summarising, it could be said that

CT cognitive skills are present, but dispositions are very vaguely expressed in the analysed study programmes (2020, p. 128).

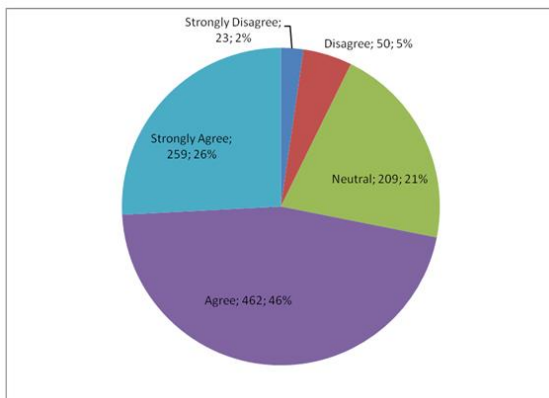


Figure 6: Activities based on drama for the language classroom are an easy way to remember vocabulary, phrases, and isolated sentences

In the language classroom, the most important aspect is to remember the sentence structures which can then be used in sharing emotions, ideas, and thoughts. These activities are designed in a way that they help students in the language classroom to rehearse isolated sentence structures. The benefit of practicing these sentence structures again and again is that they provide a measure of confidence and reduce hesitation among the students when they use these sentences in their every-day lives. As the data shows, 72% of students agreed that the use of these activities is an easy way to remember isolated sentences. It also brings to the fore the benefits of remembering and maximizing vocabulary that can be utilized in sharing ideas and thoughts. By contrast, only 7% of students disagreed (as shown in Fig. 6) with the possibility of improving their sentence structures and vocabulary by using these activities. The study conducted by H. Caskun (2015) discusses language learning extensively by using marble games in classrooms. The context of the study is different to an English language classroom, as it focuses on foreign language learning by using these games during learning. The findings of the study shows a positive learning outcome among learners who actively participate in these games.

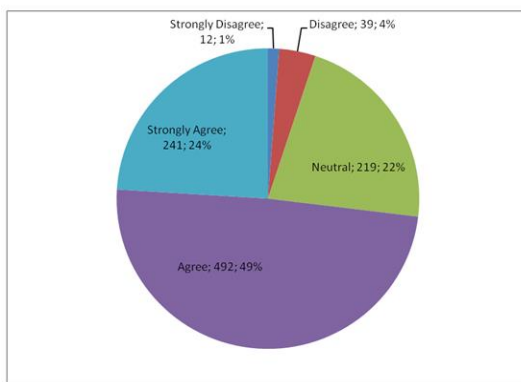


Figure 7: Activities based on drama elements enrich or initiate language learning

Drama activities which are used in language classrooms generally target the productive skills of the language learners and initiate the learning process. The problem with these activities lies in their nature, because they are not designed universally. The teacher has to improvise the activities according to their students' level and requirements. As the data in Fig. 7 shows, 73% of the respondents agreed when they were asked whether these activities helped in initiating the language learning process when used properly in the classroom.

The next question asked about interactivity among peers during classroom pedagogy. The data shows (Fig. 8) that 77% of students strongly believed that these activities in the classroom encourage them to speak and discuss various ideas. Moreover, the respondents also showed an interest in maximising the use of these activities, as they felt strongly that it would also increase their creativity level when communicating. On the other hand, 6% of students felt that these activities would not be effective during the learning process.

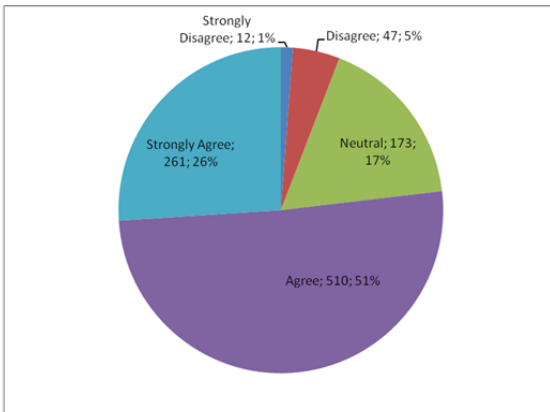


Figure 8: Activities in the classroom promote interaction among peers

Peer pressure is an important aspect in language teaching. Bearing this in mind, the next research question was a direct attempt to get an idea of what students feel about it. As the data in Fig. 9 (below) shows, 60% of students responded that they feel positive about this approach being used in the classroom teaching. However, it is interesting that 28% responded that they felt neutral about this statement. It can be concluded that somehow such activities provide some degree of peer interaction in the classroom, although 12% of students responded negatively.

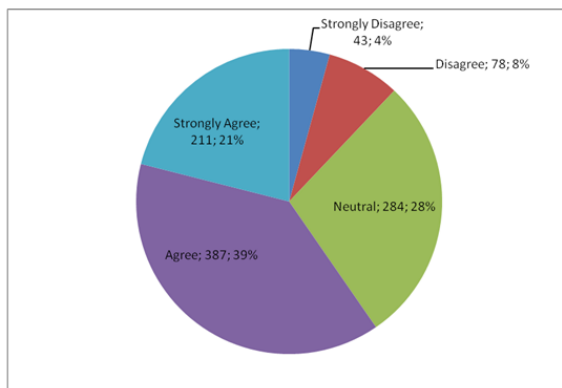


Figure 9: Drama activities are interesting to use among peers in classroom teaching

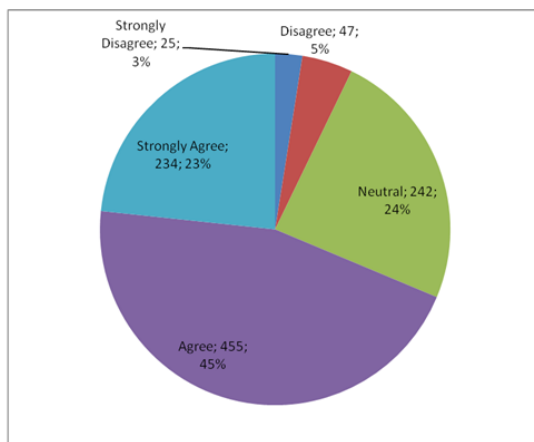


Figure 10: Activities based on drama elements motivate and promote language learning

The tenth question surveyed students about whether drama activities are helpful and motivate them to learn English. Drama activities — especially those which are designed specifically for the language classroom — are very interesting in the way that students don't have to work very hard to remember them. Using those roles and sentence structures gives students a form of practice in grammar and vocabulary that are useful in real life contexts. As one can be seen in Fig. 10 (above), the tabulation of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' is around 68%. This shows that learners have much confidence in using these activities in the classroom to enhance their knowledge and skills when learning a language. On the other hand, as shown in Fig. 10, 8% of students chose the option of 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree', and 24% remained neutral. A study carried forward by Jana Kamenicka (2021) highlights the use of videos to enhance emotions and language learning using a specific strategy of apple tree model. The result of the study supports the idea that emotional engagement of learners in the classroom leads to their better motivation, even among the introvert

ones. The above study also supports the use of drama activities which develop cognition among the learners, as well as motivation.

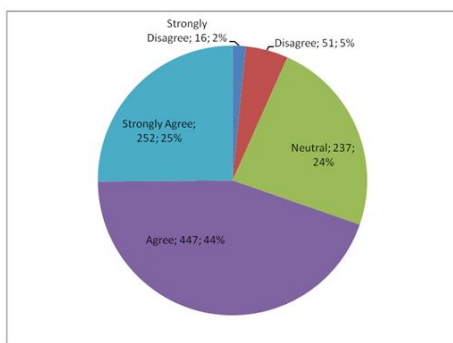


Figure 11: Drama activities promote the use of English language inside the classroom and enhance active participation

The uniqueness of drama activities lies in its unification of participation and enhanced participation among the students. They always work in pairs or small groups. It promotes the strategy of thinking as a pair and sharing your ideas and knowledge among your peers. It works in a unique way, promotes active participation, and improves the students' English skills, because they are always speaking the language while they are acting as a participant. Question number 11 asked the students for their opinions regarding the use of English in language classroom when acting a role. As the data in Fig. 11 shows, more than 69% students responded positively, and felt that these activities provided an interactive environment for them in language classrooms. However, for some unknown reason, 24% of the students remained neutral. Only 75 students responded negatively when they were being asked if these activities promote use of the English language and interactivity in the classroom.

The next question was about the students' imagination in the language learning perspective. The data shown in Fig. 12 (below) clearly demonstrates that these activities are helpful in improving the imagination of the students. When it comes to the language classroom, or English language especially, the productive skills of the language students are lagging far behind in terms of expressing themselves. As shown in Fig. 12 (below), 72% of the students stated that they felt positive about an improvement in their imagination while they were participating in these activities. 22% of the students remained neutral for some unknown reason, and only about 6% of the students responded negatively.

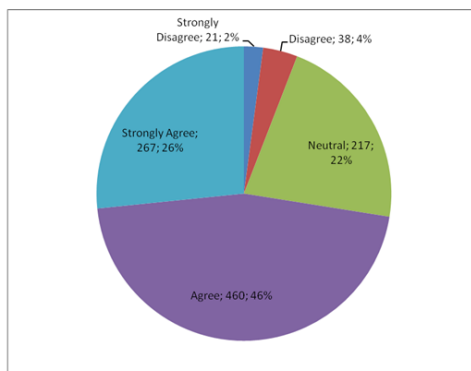


Figure 12: Drama activities improve imaginative power in the classroom.

This question is based on the activities which are not structured when being used in the language classroom. It specifically addresses how drama activities promote knowledge and maximize the imagination power of the students. The strategy of using various different drama elements and changes in language learning activities is demonstrated by Maley and Duff (2005) in their famous book *Drama techniques in language learning*.

The last question is regarding the strategy of using pair work and group work, and promoting cooperative learning culture in the language classroom. The basis of the approach of using drama in language classroom lies in the theory of think-pair-share. Activities are designed in such a way that students have to perform them in pairs or small groups. Isolated activities are reserved for the technique of extempore or public speaking roles. This stage comes after the student has grasped all the nuances of the language, and should be able to use the structures which they have practiced previously. As the data in Fig. 13 (below) shows, 755 of the students responded positively when they were asked whether drama activities promote cooperative learning.

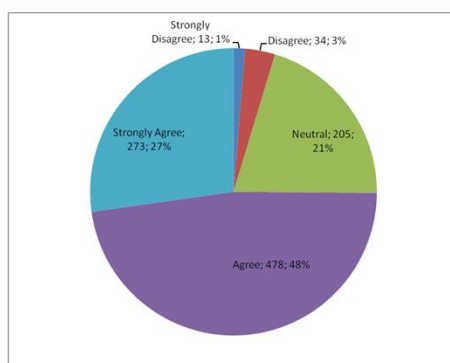


Figure 13: Strategy of using dialogues and role play enhances the pair work, group work, and promotes a culture of cooperative learning

Space for shared activity, group assignments, and a constructivist approach is limited in traditional education. Drama as a teaching method shows students how to cooperate with others for productive learning outputs. According to Figure 13, only 4.7% of the

students disagreed with this assertion, while 75% of students agreed. The majority of participants believe that theatre encourages group collaboration and collaborative learning.

Findings, Discussion, and Results

Based on the information gathered using the research tool created by the researcher, the study's results are interpreted in depth below.

- 1) It has been noted that undergraduate students lack language competency, particularly when it comes to speaking skills in unplanned real-life situations. Students struggle to articulate their thoughts and emotions, and they have poor conversational skills. The current curricula and syllabus do not foster and build proficiency in the language being learnt by the students.
- 2) The results show that the curriculum does not include drama and theatre components or exercises, which prevents it from meeting the requirements for improving English language skills, both oral and written.
- 3) Regarding the classroom discussion, it was determined that the curriculum and program do not allow for the realistic resources that students and educators may utilize to practice speech skills. The resources provided through the coursework are unable to assist pupils improve their receptive and productive abilities.
- 4) The results show that a deductive approach is preferred for teaching the English language, and that this approach does not use any communicative method which can foster learners' results and cater for employability requirements.
- 5) The syllabus should be formulated in accordance with the needs of the learners, always taking into consideration that a certain level of competence is required for employment and other needs outside the classroom.
- 6) Based on an analysis of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that while theatrical approaches can improve linguistic skills, as well as confidence and creativity, it is necessary to embrace a new method of instruction that will engage students in the process and transform them into actual stakeholders.
- 7) It may also be argued that the way teaching is carried out now does not encourage group cohesiveness or cooperative learning. Therefore, it must create a classroom that is student-centred and incorporates group work.
- 8) Learning that uses classroom activities is regrettably underemphasised, and educational theatre/drama as a method strengthens supra-segmental characteristics.
- 9) Drama activities help students enhance their nonverbal communication abilities because the curriculum does not provide opportunities for these skills to be developed or improved.
- 10) It has been noted that content developers neglect reflective practices, or actually using and putting them into practice teaching methods, and hence it can be concluded that the current teaching strategies and techniques are insufficient for fostering the development of English language skills, both oral and written.

Conclusion

Given the study's findings and discussions above, it is clear that using drama in the classroom to teach ESL/EFL is a successful strategy. Additionally, using drama-based activities in the classroom is effective in fostering students' critical thinking and creativity. It aids development of learners' non-verbal abilities in practical settings. Additionally, if the strategy is applied correctly, it can effectively improve students' academic achievement in the educational arena. The difficult part is coming up with activities that fit the students' levels and the structure of the classroom. The present study has the drawback of including only a small sample of students from ESL and EFL courses, whereas a larger sample size could be used for research to guide policy. However, the findings of the present study are in line with the studies discussed

above. Additionally, because it focuses on a limited number of theatrical approaches, it has the ability to expand in the future. It also opens the scope for future studies that will certainly be conducted on different elements of drama and theatre.

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