



## IMPLEMENTING ENGLISH DRAMA FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents perceptions of pre-university students who have participated in a drama performance in an English course. The introduction of drama in foundation level aims at familiarizing the students with the application of English language in the real situation. Drama activity was conducted in the first semester as a preparatory stage for the upcoming public speaking course. In this study, teams of students needed to act out using English language. The study adopted a mixed method design to examine the process undergone by the students in conducting dramas. Data was gathered by means of self-reported questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with the students, and observations in the classroom, and by analyzing students' reports.*

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**Keywords:** Drama technique, English language teaching, Real-life communication, English as a second language, Language development, Strategies, Real language operation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Undeniably, undergraduates are expected to gradually improve their English language proficiency along their study duration. English courses and workshops are conducted to fulfill their needs and niche to excel in universities and workplace. However, many undergraduates are still 'stiff' in using English language. This problem may due to lack of 'real' communication practices in English classes which involves authentic language of their thoughts, feelings, appropriateness and adaptability (Chauhan, 2004). Their productions are restricted to answer designated questions with grammatically precise, but, isolated sentences. Thus, getting involved in daily conversations in English seems to be a major problem for them.

Therefore, English language teaching for undergraduates is expected to be more flexible, communicative and enriching. The undergraduates are ready to be trained with the 'real world' communication to meet the future industry needs. They should be able to show their ability in

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making choices and decisions as a preparation for their workplace. They are expected to be active players in their teams. These transferable skills are important to expose them with the real situation of their working world.

For that reason, English language teachers are struggling to provide alternatives and more refreshing strategies to attract learners' interest and facilitate their language learning process. Thus, drama assignment is an alternative way in promoting natural and real communicative development among Second Language learners. (Somasundram, 2011) states that drama is an alternative teaching tool because it gives a context for listening and meaningful language production, forcing the learners to memorize the use of language which evidently helps on other disciplines and, subtly enhances language abilities. Implementing drama in English classes as mentioned by (Wilga, 1983) in (Somasundram, 2011) enables learners to use what they are learning with pragmatic intent, something that is most difficult to learn through explanation. A part from that, by using drama techniques to teach English, the monotony of a conventional English class can be broken and the syllabus can be transformed into one which prepares learners to face their immediate world better as competent users of the English language because they get an opportunity to use the language in operation (Chauhan, 2004).

This paper discusses the findings of a study carried out to investigate undergraduates' perceptions on the implementation of drama activity in the tertiary English language course. The focus of this study is on the perceptions of learners' language development, confidence level, and teamwork skills acquired after involving drama productions.

## **1.1. Drama Contributes to Profitable English Language Development**

### **What is drama?**

2. Drama is referred to as the body of written play that is designed for stage representation (Elam, 1980). However, in the context of teaching, drama has been viewed differently. According to (Way, 1967) drama concerns the experience by the participant regardless of any functions communication to the audience. The value of drama is often credited to the fact that it allows a learner centered approach where students can operate through active contribution. This improves the learners' self-esteem. Thus drama is seen as an alternative teaching tool to help students acquiring the necessary knowledge especially the ability to communicate fluently in the target language.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Drama as a Mechanism for a Real Language Operation**

It is crucial for language instructors of higher learning to revisit their teaching strategies in imparting knowledge and skills to undergraduates so that they will grasp meaningful experience that can be transferred in their working life. Harmer suggests that "a rich classroom environment should not only expose students to language, but also give them opportunities to activate their language knowledge (...) and to study language and the way it works". (Harmer, 2007). To materialize this mission, it is believed that drama technique can be a mechanism in encouraging English language improvement in young graduates.

Teachers could help reverse the usual boring and routine language class to a vibrant and interesting language class by incorporating drama activity that motivates and contributes to students' personal development. Drama activity helps students to develop their full potential by relating the drama activities effectively as they learn the language (Arnold, 1999). This is strongly supported by (Zafeiriadou, 2009), stated that role play is one of the essential techniques of drama whereby students are required to identify with a role either a person or an object. This helps them develop as a person as they are required to understand and empathize with the role that they are assigned with. It promotes their personal development as they have to come up with their own interpretation of the roles that are given to them.

In addition to that, the proper implementation of drama technique in English classroom will help scaffold learners' cognitive, metacognitive and socioaffective skills development. This happens when a drama activity will encompass all the four-skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing into action. Learners can practise their cognitive skills maximally with the facilitation of instructors. It is hard to imagine anything else that offers to language teachers such as wide variety of types of talks, for example monologues, paired speaking, role-plays, group discussions, reporting, talking in response to other stimuli, problem-solving, developing scenarios, acting out, etc. from explaining, complaining, praising, disagreeing to exhorting, apologising and requesting – there is no language function that drama is not capable of easily encompassing (Hamilton and Mcleod, 1993).

## 2.2. Drama in ESL Classroom

The significance of drama is attributed to the fact that it allows for creation of contexts for different language uses, thus fostering students' language awareness. Hence, (Zafeiriadou, 2009) stressed that drama has a unique value as a pedagogical technique as it helps students to develop their creative thoughts and stresses language education as a creative process. However drama activities should not be mistaken by as performing plays instead it should be considered as one of the teaching tool which could help strengthen the language learning (Malachi, 2004). It is further elaborated by (Zafeiriadou, 2009) that students with the right to express their own feelings, view and explain themselves is the 'notion of 'education for being'; thus educating adolescents in a way that could help cultivate creative development.

Therefore, incorporating drama in the ESL classroom could encourage students to speak even with limited language by using non-verbal communication such as body movement and facial expressions. This provides the learners an experience of using the language for genuine communication and real life purposes by generating the need to speak. This is in line with Desialova (2009) and Barbu (2007) whereby they mention that using drama could help the learners to use the language for genuine communication and real life purposes which generates the need to speak. This results in real communication which involves generating ideas, emotion and feeling which could stimulate learners' intellect and imagination.

However, many teachers are still anxious to carry out drama in English classes due to high expectation of 'success' of the performance. Malachi (2004) argued that the key difference in using drama in ESL classroom is that the emphasis is on the learning experience and not on performance

for the audience; thus teachers should not be overly concerned about the learners' end product instead of the focus on the language that is generated while the learners prepare their presentation. Hence, drama in language classroom helps learners foster self-awareness, self-esteem, confidence and teamwork. Incorporating drama in language classroom transfers the responsibility from teacher to the learner, where it belongs (Maley and Duff, 2005). Learners will start actively cooperate with their teammates whose objectives of learner centered-learning is achieved (Fleming, 2006).

### 3. METHODS

The present study aims at investigating the perceptions of learners' language development, self-confidence, and teamwork skills. There were 120 research participants – Foundation of Engineering students – performed drama in their first semester. The drama performance was conducted with the hope that these students would build their speaking skills and enhance their self-confidence in adapting the university life. It is crucial for them to be able to communicate naturally and confidently so that they can function in academic society and perform well in their studies.

#### 3.1. Drama Assignment

The participants were given a drama assignment to be conducted in the twelfth week of semester. The duration for the drama preparation was two weeks. The drama assignment did not have a specific theme. The productions were given freedom to create a brand new story or adapt any preferable movies. Upon completing the task, the participants were required to form teams and work out on their drama through several brainstorming and rehearsal sessions.

#### 3.2. Research Participants

The participants were students of Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) and doing their foundation year in College of Foundation and General Studies (CFGS). The study was conducted in their first semester of their foundation year i.e. Trimester 1. The participants were selected based on purposive sampling method and divided into four (4) classes. Each class consists of thirty students and they needed to form a big production and worked on the drama assignment with their team mates. They were given two (2) weeks to prepare for their performance. During the drama performance, the main aspects to be evaluated are as follows:

- Storyline and message;
- Character and appreciation;
- Technique and creativity;
- Overall presentation.

### 4. FINDINGS

#### 4.1. Observation during Drama Performance

The stage performance was held on the 12<sup>th</sup> week of their semester in Admin Theatre, UNITEN. The duration of overall performance was three (3) hours. Each group was given 45 minutes to carry out their drama. The groups were freely to set up the stage with appropriate and feasible 'props' in

making their drama alive and authentic. The evaluation was based on the drama plot and values, characterization, techniques and creativity, and overall performance.

First, the strength of a performance depends on ‘what’ is to be conveyed from each group. If the group did not manage to discuss and come up with a clear objective of their intention, the story plot would also be affected. Hence, the actors were not able to translate their actual message into actions. In the end, the overall performance would be hanging, loose and dull. The titles for the dramas contested are 1) *Twilight: UNITEN Version* 2) *Snow Black and the Seven Giants* 3) *Mission Impossible* and 4) *The Missing Wave*. Out of four drama performances, only one group managed to translate intelligible messages to the audience. The drama that scored high for this aspect was *Twilight: UNITEN Version*. The storyline was about ups and downs in studying in a university with various friendship and relationship conflicts. The group demonstrated the clear situations and events in their play which really educated and entertained their spectators.

The second most crucial aspects are characters and appreciation. A drama will never be a success if the actors and actresses could not play their roles properly. Role-playing in drama activity should be taken seriously as the impact of drama does not only depend on how great the storyline is but ‘how’ it is being delivered. Thus, actors and actresses must display high confidence in expression as well as their movements. They must spend their time doing rehearsal and memorizing their lines. Among the four performances, only two dramas were capable showing the expressive actions delivery to their audience such as *Twilight: UNITEN Version* and *Mission Impossible*. The actors and actresses managed to capture the audience attention and carried their respective roles effectively which contributed to the clarity of the storylines and success of the drama as a whole.

The third aspects that should be taken into consideration are techniques and creativity in a performance. A drama performance should include several techniques uniquely decided by each team in providing outstanding stage performance. Some techniques that students can use to ‘spice up’ their drama are simulation, tableaux (still images), flashbacks / flash forwards, storytelling and role-playing (Krivkova, 2011). Based on evaluation, the dramas entitled *Twilight: UNITEN Version* and *Mission Impossible* outperformed other performances by using drama techniques like simulation, tableaux (still images), flashbacks / flash forwards as well as musical theatre. These applications indicated the creativity and high cooperation among participants during the preparation of the play.

Finally, the performance will be assessed based on overall character delivery and stage performance. These aspects include the organization of the story plot and scene changes. The smoothness of the entire drama performance seems quite critical. This element helps participants to cultivate discipline and systematic organization of their drama production. For this aspect, only one group managed to prove that they did thorough rehearsal and practices in ensuring the smoothness of their drama performance which was also the winner of the competition –*Twilight: UNITEN Version*. Additionally, all of the participants seemed to be very enthusiastic upon their performance. They made the stagecraft and costume themselves and decorated the stage according to the drama scenes. They were eager to give the best performance for the sake of their groups. This marks that they were interdependent to each other and utilized everything they had in order to

complete the task. The announced results did not matter them but the satisfaction and enjoyment in accomplishing the drama assignments truly overwhelm the students at that moment. Thus, they believed that English can be practiced daily in various ways and it should be fun!

#### 4.2. Questionnaires

Besides, the participants also responded to a survey given by the researcher in reflecting their attitude and perceptions towards English drama in a classroom. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gauge the students' perceptions on their personal language performance, self-confidence as well team working styles. These aspects are crucial to be cultivated in Foundation students as 'survival' kit in pursuing their Bachelor's programme. The students should be able to have confidence in communicating in English language and be able to active team players in accomplishing educational tasks in a university. Based on the survey conducted, the majority of students agreed that drama performance helped them in improving their spoken language. Referring to Table 1 below, 91.7% of the students felt that they were given an opportunity to communicate frequently with their team members upon the preparation for drama activity. They believed that drama could increase their fluency in English language speaking as mentioned by [Hamilton and Mcleod \(1993\)](#) in the earlier review that drama encompasses all kinds of talks and languages – to explain, complain, praise, disagree, request, etc. for learners to practice. This familiarizes them with correct pronunciation, fluency and manners.

**Table-1.** Improving Communication Skills

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Uncertain	10	8.3	8.3	8.3
	Agree	33	27.5	27.5	35.8
	Strongly agree	77	64.2	64.2	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	100.0	

A part from that, about 78.3% of the participants reported that drama helped boost their self-confidence as illustrated in Table 2. They found that onstage performance really challenged their ability in playing the roles assigned. They informed that they never have experience in acting before, but after participating the drama activity, they could express themselves better without feeling shy anymore. This is in accordance with [Zafeiriadou \(2009\)](#) theoretical perspective on drama where the weight was more on personal growth of the learners through creative self-expression and the search for personal meaning. Specifically, role play is one of the essential techniques of drama whereby students are required to identify with a role either a person or an object. He stressed that this approach helps them develop as a person as they are required to understand and empathize with the role that they are assigned with. This promotes their personal development as they have to come up with their own interpretation of the roles that are given to them ([Zafeiriadou, 2009](#)).

**Table-2.** Boosting Self-Confidence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Uncertain	26	21.7	21.7	21.7
	Agree	42	35.0	35.0	56.7

*Continue*

Strongly agree	52	43.3	43.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

The next important discovery from the current study is shown in Table 3 below. About 93.3% of the participants agreed that drama improved their social skills. They declared that drama strengthened their teamwork and friendship. Team members, according to the participants, have contributed partially in the development of their English language through drama activity. As supported by Ward (1967) who is the pioneer in drama in education movement stated that drama helps develop emotional as well as intellectual skills as well as help nurture a whole personality of the learners. This then provides opportunity for the learners to grow in their social circle (Ward, 1967).

**Table-3.** Enhancing Social Skills via Teamwork

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	.8	.8	.8
	Uncertain	7	5.8	5.8	6.7
	Agree	42	35.0	35.0	41.7
	Strongly agree	70	58.3	58.3	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	100.0	

inally, 'enjoyable experience' while undergoing the drama activity is another positive feedback from the participants. Referring to Table 4, about 93.3% of the participants admitted that they enjoyed the drama assignment very well. Most of them appreciated the activity and believed that 'it was fun and awesome'. Besides, they showed their appreciation as they were given an opportunity for participating in drama performance for that semester, 'I am happy after the performance as I have learnt many valuable things that are really useful for me and society and thank you for letting us performed the drama'. They perceived that drama let them understand the correct way of enjoying English language learning, 'when we were acting, we were really using the language and it was a great way of learning English! Thank you teacher.'

**Table-4.** Enjoyable Experience in Learning English

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	1.7	1.7	1.7
	Uncertain	6	5.0	5.0	6.7
	Agree	40	33.3	33.3	40.0
	Strongly agree	72	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	100.0	

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is obviously seen that even engineering students enjoyed drama activity which normally being suitably for 'arts' students but in language learning, 'arts' will contribute to the science of learners' thinking and behaviors. Drama activity for pre-university students can never be taboo to language instructors as it helps learners being competent in the target language. Thus, in magnetizing learners' interest in English language learning, the instructors are freely to implement any interesting teaching devices such drama, role play and theatre that will enrich learners' knowledge of language and address all the learning styles.

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