The Effectiveness of Using Drama-based Activities in English L2 Classroom

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to develop understanding of EFL teachers’ educational reflective practice in the context of international schools and understand how the boundaries of knowledge and practice are advanced through research. It explored the feasibility, strengths, and challenges of implementing drama-based pedagogical method in English L2 classroom in international education settings in China. Out of ethical consideration, the author must emphasize here that the research is hypothetical, and it will not be carried out using my learners.

1. Introduction

English speaking is one of the main teaching aims to develop English as a foreign language (EFL) learners’ well-rounded language ability. But speaking is usually considered of the greatest challenge and provoking learners’ anxiety compared with other language skills [1]. In my teaching experience, I have heard most students express their anxiety about speaking, no matter it is to initial a conversation privately, especially with a native speaker, or to have a public speech.

There are various reasons for English-speaking anxiety to EFL learners. I will briefly analyze the main reasons in Chinese mainland context. First, students have limited exposure to authentic English-speaking environment, so that rarely do they have opportunities to use the target language. In addition, they are afraid of making mistakes as well as getting negative feedback from their teachers. According to Zhai and Gao (2018), most students have learnt “mute English”, resulted from the difficult tasks in class and teachers’ negative feedback. Therefore, to overcome the English-speaking anxiety, developing learner’s confidence and proficiency is considered to be an enduring challenge for many English teachers [2].

Presently, I am working as an English teacher in a private international school in China. All the classes are imported from American Curriculum following California Common Core Curriculum standards. I have been working at this school for over two years, teaching English as the second language to L1 Chinese speakers in Grade 9. In fact, compared with local public schools where tend to adopt teacher-centered instructional approach in the class, all of the classes in our school are student-centered. But the problem I found in my teaching practice is that not all the students feel comfortable with communicative activities in English class. This may be due to the fact that two
thirds of the high school students were new to the school and most of them have been transferred from local public schools and accustomed to the teacher-centered learning environment [3].

Through execution of the changes, I am going to make based on educational research, I anticipate that students’ speaking anxiety will be alleviated to a large extent. It will directly result in their linguistic and emotional development, thus boost their frequency and confidence in English speaking [4].

Reflecting on my teaching experience in this school, there are several gaps need to be bridged. First, although it seems we have been provided with ample chances to use authentic learning materials, there are limited communicative activities in the textbook that we can put into practice. As Barbee [5] pointed out, when following strictly to a top-down curriculum where requires teaching for tests, teachers and students’ needs are often lack of consideration. In this regard, customized activities should be designed as supplementary materials to meet learners’ needs and thus make them feel more comfortable and easy to make connections [6].

In addition, most situations where students are able to use target English are in the classrooms where they have foreign teachers. However, rarely did they have opportunities to interact with target language rather than in the real-life settings. Students have been found that even in the group discussions and the classroom speaking activities, it is likely for them to switch into Chinese. This did not support the purpose of language acquisition which is to facilitate knowledge transfer from the learning environment to the real world. This may also result in social interaction anxiety when students study abroad [7].

Last but not least, the most frequent way of assessing students’ speaking skills is through oral presentation on a given topic. It should be noticed that the process of preparation might be monotonous and lack of interests for students on one hand. On the other hand, it raised the problem that the students’ communication skills can not be properly measured through this way. The results of the studies have revealed that after being enrolled in an intensive training program aiming for delivering an oral presentation, it did not show from the tests of fluency that the oral proficiency was improved [8].

After the reflection on my teaching experience, I have found several potential changes need to be made. But in this report, I will focus on introducing a communicative drama-based technique to my English class. My expectation is that it will help students to develop their speaking confidence, to improve their communication skills and to motivate their English study. It has been suggested by several educators that integrating drama into L2 class is effective as it is an engaging and entertaining way that can foster students’ learning motivation [9].

2. Literature Review 1: Research-Informed Practice

According to Judgate (2019), research-informed practice means the educators will be guided by research evidence when trying to make changes about pedagogical methods or trying to intervene changes that might not be effective in education context. In the teaching practice, Judgate (2019) summarized the features that a research-informed teacher should be equipped with. First but not foremost, they are willing to reflect on their teaching and question reasons about why they made certain decisions rather than repeating it unconsciously. Besides, they are willing to read accessible and valid research, ask questions about any new strategies and be aware that some of them work in a certain context does not necessarily mean that it will work in another. In addition, before implementing any new approaches, they are willing to consider how it can be accommodated to their own context [10].

To be a research-informed teacher, one should make decisions based on the awareness and willingness to broaden their horizons above their experience. It makes a teacher consider why this approach is chosen and implemented in my classrooms instead of another. When we reflect more often than not on the rationales of our decision-making in the class, it is less likely that we adopt a certain method repetitively just because it worked once, however we are reluctant to consider why it worked and if it will still work effectively when the situation changed [11].

Biesta (2007) argued that research cannot provide us with principles for action. It only can be regarded as hypotheses for specific problem-solving situations. In this regard, it needs collaboration of teachers to discuss and interpret the research, then decide how it will be useful hence inform their teaching practice. However, although in our school we have professional development training where the teachers are keen to share teaching resources, rarely did we initial discussion of research. Interestingly, Judgate (2019) supported my opinion and commented that research-informed practice in school seems driven by teachers themselves as they are more interested in expanding their knowledge than becoming professional researchers. After learning this module, I became more conscious and will be more active in the future to initiate research discussion as well as to collect more research evidence to inform my practice [12].

It is believed that to become a research-informed EFL teacher, it is vital to understand research methods in EFL
education. According to Ma (2015), research methods in this field can vary depending on the research objectives as well as the researcher’s position of paradigm, which is closely linked to ontology and epistemology. Ontology and epistemology are the two opposite viewpoints by which researchers are guided to think and interpret the world. Ontology refers to the nature of existence, whereas epistemology questions the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (Brooke, 2013). Positivism proposed realist ontology, believing that the world exists regardless of human’s standpoint. Methods used in positivist research usually are questionnaires, experiments, structural equation modeling, etc. On the contrary, interpretivism is the interpretive paradigm commonly used in social science area. For researchers within this paradigm, it is vital to take into account the process as well as the result. As Brook (2013) pointed out that researchers in this field feel free to common on each other’s research targeting on interpretation instead of facts. The methods implemented in interpretivism are usually small-scale, such as case studies [13].

In EFL education settings, it is widely agreed that action research (AR) is a particularly effective research method within interpretivist paradigm. Edge (2001) stated the reason might be that it underpins the diversity of individuals and their distinct learning processes in data analysis. The purpose of AR is to solve a specific problem in EFL classroom settings. According to Ahmadian & Tavakoli (2001), AR is considered to be more credible because it can reveal the dynamics and the complex nature of the L2 classrooms. It also intends to explore all the potential changes that can be made in the teaching and learning process. Based on this point, Brooke (2013) argued that in an AR project, it is difficult to make anticipated improvements due to the reason that one change has been made might affect other elements of the context, which will trigger more investigation needs. On the other hand. However, it has been found that the teachers benefit from AR since the subsequent responses of learners can facilitate teachers to achieve better understanding towards their contexts and thus gain better personal teaching methodology [14].

It is not hard to conclude that action research is a very important resource to be informed in practice, especially for EFL teachers, as it narrows down the learning and teaching problems in the EFL classrooms rather than in the general social learning settings. In addition, the research process adopted trial and error investigation, so that other teachers can avoid making similar mistakes in their practice with consciousness. However, it should bear in mind that the teachers also need to be aware the social and cultural differences between different research evidence and their own contexts. There is no need to doubt that a research-informed teacher should make consistent change to see if the methods taken are effective [15].

3. Literature Review 2: Benefits and Challenges of Drama in EFL Learning

During my literature review in this field, the benefits of using drama as a communicative teaching technique in L2 classroom have been investigated and reached a broad agreement in the research. I found the following aspects of the benefits have been explored and reinforced many times in previous studies. They also provide the important evidence as well as potential exploratory aspects to my education research. First, drama is an integration of four key language skills, among which intensive listening and spontaneous verbal response are of greater importance (Maley & Duff, 2005). Reflecting on my teaching practice, most of the students did better and hence feel more confident in reading and writing in comparison with listening and speaking. That is why, from my point of view, much emphasis should be put on those two skills. Second, as a meaning-based, learner-centered method, drama offers the opportunities to do different communicative practice through various roles in different social contexts. It thus motivates students and develops their confidence and fluency in speaking English (Ronke, 2005). In my opinion, drama-based classroom can create an experimental, stress-free, and supportive environment for students to learn and practice before they have to encounter the real-life situations [16].

Furthermore, it also can meet individual’s different learning needs, therefore maximize students’ participation and involvement in the EFL classroom context (Maley & Duff, 2005; Ronke, 2005; Dailey, 2009). It should also be noticed that based on students’ diverse learning styles, some of the L2 learners are not active in speaking activities, however, are proved to be learning by listening. This is where, as Lam (1997) pointed out, it is imperative for teachers to provide authentic language as learning materials to listen. There is no doubt that the drama-based techniques should be adopted to my class. But to become more research informed, I must raise up my concerns and investigate to what extent the pedagogical methods worked in other research can be effectively adopted in my context [17].

Based on my current teaching experience, rarely can I find any systematic activities that I can directly use in a drama-based classroom, so I have to create the supplementary materials by myself.

In this case, the first concern raised here is: What kind of learning resources can be used in a drama-based Eng-
lish class? In the previous studies, some of the educators argued that modern texts are considered to be more suitable resources as they created opportunities for learners to access the contextualized language as well as the understanding in social and cultural aspects of the target language (Zafeiriadou & Einstein, 2009). However, I would argue that it is necessary that the scenarios should be carefully chosen, especially for adolescence. It shouldn’t involve any negative or violent behavioral mode. For example, in role-play activities, although students can play any roles rather than themselves, not all of the situations can be useful in the class. For example, in Barbee (2016)’s study, the setting he chose for a drama-based college English class was a “Zombie Outbreak”, which appears to be inappropriate for secondary school students from my perspective. It may trigger some uncomfortable feelings of some students since it seems inevitable to involve horrified and violent elements. Also, the setting is too fictional for students to make connections with their life experience. 

It has been proposed by some experienced teachers that the roles played by the learners and the learners themselves should have some similar obstacles to cope with in drama-based activities, so that the students can achieve their goals by overcoming the difficulties both in the play and in language study experience (Smith, 1984). For example, in Athiemoolam (2004)’s study, he gave an example of role-play activity in which a student was accused of cheating on a quiz. The student has to defend himself/herself and prove he/she is innocent in the office with the proctor teacher and the principal played by other two students. From my evaluation, it is an effective context created for L2 students, because students will find it is not difficult to put themselves into the actor’s shoes. Its effectiveness can also be verified by Katz (2002)’s measurements as it enables students to explore their emotions, imagination, opinions, and relationships in a contextualized speaking activity. Kodotchigova (2001) supported this point by noting that the resources for role play can be scenarios of family scenes, school life, and afterschool incidents that from TV shows, movies and daily interactions experienced or observed by students.

Teacher’s role also needs to be taken into account in a drama-based activity. Athiemoolam (2004) emphasized in his study that it is essential to consider students’ English level of proficiency when carrying out the drama-based activities in EFL classroom, especially in less structured speaking tasks. There are two main challenges I discovered in the previous studies. The first is that if the task is too challenging and students are not prepared with basic expression, they are more likely to switch back into their mother tongue during the speaking activities (Sehriban, 2013). Another challenge is that through the observation of a drama-based classroom where the teacher was with minimal relevant teaching experience, the class tended to be out of control in unstructured activities, such as improvisation or some drama games. The researchers found that even according to students’ report the learning process has been enjoyable, the teachers still reflected that the situation added extra stress to them, and they were hard to be convinced that the class has been under guidance and control, so that they would give up using the same activities again.

In fact, those findings were identical with my teaching context. Reflecting on the speaking activities I had in my classroom with the students, they were very easy to switch out of English and went back to the climate where the whole class started to speak in Chinese. In this regard, the new vocabulary and phrases should be taught based on students’ language level. It is also imperative to provide students with explicit context description and detailed concrete information (Kodotchigova, 2001). In Barbee (2016)’s study, he provided an effective method to integrate vocabulary teaching with drama activities. In each scenario of the role-play activities, students were required to use the given words and phrases. The findings of another research also in favor of this viewpoint. It reported that the students felt more secure and confident after learning new vocabulary and practice of the target language before drama-based activities (Hismanoglu & Colak, 1990). To better guide the activities, Hismanoglu and Colak (1990) also pointed that teachers can also take a role in a scenario. It is a challenge to any teachers in the classroom because the teachers have to take many roles simultaneously under this circumstance. They have to work as an observer who pays close attention to students’ performance as well as being involved in the performance as an actor, which can be quite challenging.

4. A Brief Description of Process to Undertake

After being informed by the research related to the pedagogical change I indented to make, I have been ready to make decisions in my practice. In order to motivate my students to improve their speaking skills, I decided to implement drama-based communicative activities in my class.

Before our class, I will conduct an online survey to investigate students’ interests in a list of authentic TV shows. Based on their answers, I will choose a 5-minute scene that closely related to students’ daily life from the one they feel most attractive. I will play the clip in the beginning of the class to hook their attention before teaching and immerse the learners into an English-speaking
environment. Then, I will start teaching the vocabulary and phrases that I anticipated that are new or unfamiliar to them based on their language competence [23].

Thirdly, I will handout the script worksheets to each group, and give them ample time to have group discussion. This stage has been highly valued by many researchers as it contributes significantly to foster students’ self-esteem, teamwork spirit as well as group interaction skills (Athiemoolan, 2004; Madonna & Kelly, 2006). The goal set for students on this stage is to practice the new vocabulary, to read the script and to analyze the characters in group discussion. The time should be enough for the shy students to start being active in the discussion. During the process, I will walk around and monitor the class in order to give support to students who need help [24].

Then I will let them decide which role they want to portray by inviting them to a whole class discussion. At the same time, I will write the cast on the board. After making sure that everyone has been assigned a role, I will acknowledge the students that the evaluation of this drama performance will focus on the meaning and fluency [25].

To support them finally perform on the stage comfortably and confidently, I will model a role on the stage and tell them how postures, gestures, and body movements can ease stage the nervousness and assist the performance and teach how the voice can be projected on the stage. Then I will give the students more time to rehearse with the group. When they get ready, I will invite them to approach the center of the class. Before the show begins, I will emphasize that during the performance they are expected to be audience when they don’t perform, which means they should quietly listen and do not make any distractions to the actors [26].

5. Anticipated Impact to This Change

After reviewing the literature in this field, I found it is a shared notion that using drama as a pedagogical way in EFL class can boost students’ speaking confidence, instill their motivation of learning and maximize participation in the communicative activities (Madonna & Kelly, 2006; Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2001) also made the assumption that under this circumstance where students become motivated, they will learn more effectively. Therefore, I anticipated that students will be highly motivated when they find themselves in a situation where they know how to express their ideas. But I should be aware that it only can happen based on the success of the first few steps of my teaching plan. Students should be empowered with the ability to acquire the new vocabulary and can deliver the language on the script fluently.

Another achievement I can assume is the transfer of control and responsibility from teacher to students. It can be seen from my teaching plan that a lot of group discussion and rehearsal will be initiated in the classroom which allows students to experiment speaking target language in a real way. But as Neelands (1992) claimed that they do not have to take the real consequence or worry about being judged about making mistakes. Nevertheless, it takes time to create a supportive atmosphere regarding the variety of learner’s individual personality and learning styles [27].

Furthermore, since it constantly demands learner’s creativity and imagination, drama can develop their thinking skills. Katz (2000) listed other thinking skills can be trained through drama-based activities, such as inventing, deducing, sequencing, and clarifying. Sehriban (2013) further explored other skills that requires students to use. They must be aware of other’s body movement, listen to their peers carefully, make quick reaction, and sustain eye contact.

However, I have to admit that there are some unpredictable situations that I did not find any related research as evidence. For example, there is no research targeting on how to group students in a drama-based activity. But there is a possibility according to my previous experience in speaking class where one group or two are far less active or engaged compared with other groups. It may negatively influence the learning atmosphere in the class. If I encounter this kind of situation in my class, I will let students exchange roles or adopt dynamic group strategy in my class.

6. Conclusions

Before doing this research, I was very confident that drama is an effective approach to English class, and students will feel excited about it since much of research supported its benefits. However, when I read deeper, I found that the contexts where research has been conducted are distinct from mine, and in most of the settings, the students’ speaking proficiency was higher than my G9 students. For example, in multilingual environment such as Singapore, students are expected to have English-medium schooling, so limit L1 use in classroom discussion is not an issue. But in bilingual contexts as in my practice, it is a concern that when the students are too excited, they will easily switch back to Chinese. As it is contagious, the classroom learning atmosphere will soon be ruined. However, there is no research addressing the solutions of these issues in bilingual contexts.

Interestingly, there was few research that criticize drama-based approach, but it was very difficult to use in the classroom to form climate in a school. First, hardly can I find a systematic assessment measurements or standards for drama-based tasks. Therefore, it will bring practical
difficulties to teachers and demotivate students who care much about their grades. Second, it requests highly qualified teacher who should be an experienced teacher as well as an actor. So, in much of the research, the drama teacher was assigned to schools as facilitator to make sure the process of the study can be smooth. Due to the lack of the prominent teachers, it arouses another problem that it is hard to discuss the decision-making process with peers collaboratively.

From my point of view, undoubtedly, drama is an effective teaching method in English classroom. It is interesting and entertaining at the appearance. Intrinsically, it provides experimental opportunities for L2 learners to apply real-life communication to a secure and stress-free environment where learners’ confidence can be built. If I have chance in the future, I will conduct this research into practice, and I will use action research as research method.

As to ethical consideration, I have to stress here that the anonymity of the school and the students has been ensured. The research is hypothesis, and more investigation will be needed.

References


