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**Dramatic Performance in Teaching Drama in EFL Contexts**

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**Abstract**

This study began with the supposition that teaching English drama through dramatic performance could enhance English literature students' knowledge of drama at university level. The research was conducted over a whole academic semester with 60 intermediate students enrolled in English drama II courses. They were divided into two groups of experimental and control groups. Throughout the treatment period, the researchers instructed the experimental group how to manage to perform the selected plays through the role playing strategy while devoting little time to reading the contents of the drama in the classroom. The participants in the control group normally surveyed the contents of the same plays with no performance. A final achievement test was administered to both groups and the results indicated a significant difference in the means of the two groups in favor of the experimental group. We can suggest that literature students perform the plays in addition to the traditional comprehension activities or analysis of characters and plot of the story.

**Introduction**

Teaching drama in EFL contexts has not been seriously investigated. Traditionally, literature teachers teach drama through surveying the drama contents, talking about the author, and characteristics of the play, characters, and plot in English drama classes. The students usually go through discussing plays without bringing characters life to while interacting in a natural and social environment. Following an experiential

approach to literature, teachers may create opportunities for literature students to perform drama in a theatrical mode in the classroom. There is little evidence on how dramatic performances can influence or enhance students' understanding of drama. It seems that teaching literature is only looked at from the perspective of the content that it offers literature students irrespective of how it is presented in classroom. This is perhaps because these courses have content orientation, and instructors show little pedagogical concern over how it should be presented. The concern over how to teach literature is probably as important as the concern over what to teach in such classes. However, unfortunately, this area of pedagogy has rarely attracted the attention of researchers due to the lack of enthusiasm of EFL teachers in running drama courses practically rather than theoretically. This may be due to the need of much time and energy as well as timely scheduled lesson plans which is somehow out of the reach in traditional approaches to teaching drama in the Iranian EFL context.

In fact, the majority of literature instructors and researchers in Iran show apathy towards pedagogical questions as they find such problems outside the scope of their field. Similarly, many applied linguists do not have any enthusiasm to deal with problems that have to do with literature as they rightly think that they lack adequate literature background. It is necessary to mention that no experimental studies were found regarding the use of dramatic performances to promote drama understanding, despite the present researchers' attempt to locate at least one. With this paucity of research, there is a felt need to take the following question into account:

Will EFL students acquire a higher understanding of a play through traditional or performance-based approach to teaching drama?

Based on the research question mentioned above, the following null-hypothesis is formulated:

H0: There will be no significant difference between EFL students' knowledge of drama scores in traditional versus performance-based approaches.

Dramatic performance in this study refers to techniques used to teach L2 drama through simulation and role playing.

## **Review of Literature**

According to Boulton (1968), "there is an enormous difference between a play and any other form of literature. A play is not really a piece of literature for reading. It is the literature that walks and talks before our eyes" (p. 3). Boulton states that the text of the play is meant to be translated into sights, sounds, and actions which occur literally and physically on stage. Robbins (1988) also stated, "dramatic activities help students investigate a subject while finding its relationship to themselves and society; moreover, they make students counter with performance of social roles they had never experienced before, with the corresponding language and communicative styles" (pp. 1-2).

Robinson (1997, pp. 223-227) suggests two approaches to the teaching of drama. First is “the ‘a’ type analytical” approach to drama/theatre texts in which the language analysis (i.e., the phonological and lexical components of language) is the matter of consideration. This analytical approach deals with language structures and language items that the teacher or the course designer must take into account. Once a literary text illustrating these structures is chosen, the teacher helps learners become aware of and practice them. This is an analytical approach to the use of drama in classroom where drama is the object of instruction. He also points to “the ‘b’ type experiential approach to drama theatre texts” as a second approach. In this approach, which is inductive, language is regarded as a tool rather than an object. Learning through the students’ experiences is the major concern, and this is acquired via their comments, responses, and expressions based on the text itself or its theme/topic. In the present study, the approach focused on the performing of the theme through role playing rather than discussing the language components of the drama.

According to Celce-Murcia (2001), it is easier for learners to be engaged in a lesson through drama than through instructions or explanations. It can be advantageous for them. Even if a learner has a mute role, they may listen attentively while silently playing the part of a tree or a river. Psychologists such as Harter (1981) have pointed out that intrinsic motivation, which refers to motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake, declines as elementary students grow older. In this case, dramatic activities can be considered as inducement to make students more involved in the learning process. Berlinger (2000) notifies the effect of dramatic performances on teaching culture by considering story-making, rehearsal, and performance as inducements to make students think consecutively, to show inner life of characters, to compare and contrast aspects of their own culture with those of the second one, and to interact with classmates, and through all this, they use their second language.

Matsuzaki-Carreira (2005) argues that by playing roles in a dramatic performance, the students may experience a deeper sense of sympathy toward each other that rarely develops from mere passive viewing and surveying the text. According to the researchers’ experiences, drama II is frequently taught through reading and surveying the textual components at the university level in Iranian contexts. The EFL students majoring in Literature are mainly required to study the selected dramas and focus on their plot, theme and the characters. They also participate in class discussion and drama reviewing processes. Textual analysis and close reading are the main concerns in such classrooms (i.e., each play is read sentence by sentence in the classroom and their meanings are clarified). Another approach to teaching drama in Iran is that the students spend no time on reading drama in the classroom; instead, they read, for example, an act or two decided by the teacher outside of class and then discuss the plot, characters, and other related elements of the play in the literature classroom. In classrooms as such, the teacher notifies some critics’ ideas and then analyzes the play accordingly while students may also take part in discussions. Drama classrooms in situations like this are usually teacher-centered in the sense that students are rarely involved in the textual meaning of drama scripts. This study is primarily fruitful for literature teachers because performing plays in drama classes leads to students’ better

understanding of drama. The findings of this study may help drama teachers encourage students to perform the plays in the classroom to the extent that they arrive at the comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) within the context rather than mere understanding of textual components.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

A pool of 90 students (n=90) majoring in English Language and Literature enrolled in Drama II at the Islamic Azad University of Shiraz was administered an intermediate IELTS (Lindeck & Sahanaya, 2002) test. The test consisted of 30 questions on listening and speaking skills. A total of 60 male and female students whose scores were around the mean were selected as the sample of the study. The mean and the standard deviation of their IELTS score was 11 and 2.13, respectively, with the range of scores being 7 to 30. They ranged in age from 18 to 24 and were all native speakers of Persian learning English as an L2. They were randomly divided into two groups, experimental group (n=30) and control group (n=30).

### ***Materials***

The materials used in this study consisted of two plays selected amongst the ones determined for the course syllabus. They were Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively. The control group was taught through conventional reading of drama contents and the experimental group was taught the same plays, but they were engaged in dramatic performance of the plays.

## **Procedure**

Before conducting the experiment, one of the researchers explained the goals and content of the study to the students. Throughout the whole semester, including 15 sessions of treatment, the control group was taught through surveying the contents of dramas while the experimental group mostly went through theatrical performances. Students were divided into five groups of six. They chose their roles for each episode of the drama. They were asked to memorize their roles out of the classroom and then get ready to perform the scenes in the classroom. Every session the whole groups would have to be ready to perform the scenes. The teacher randomly asked two or three groups to perform the scenes. In order to motivate them to participate in dramatic performances, the teacher judged their performance and ranked them according to their performance. During the performances, the teacher acted as a supervisor. The point should be mentioned that the content knowledge of the plays was emphasized as the course objective. At the end of the study period, the groups were administered an achievement test on drama II as a post-test. The test of drama II was designed by the researchers focusing on the inferencing questions and theme analysis of the plays. The test included 30 multiple-choice questions and its reliability

was calculated through KR-21 formula was 0.90. Each item was given two points to ease the calculation process. Thus the total score a student could obtain was 60. To capture some more information on task types that the achievement test might not reveal, we assessed the experimental group's attitude toward the method using retrospective think-aloud protocols (Ericson & Simon, 1980) on dramatic performances during and after the instruction.

## Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the students' performance on the post-test.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Groups on the Post-Test**

Std. Deviation	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	N	Groups
10.6912	28.5600	5.60	47.60	30	Control
12.3657	37.0267	3.80	56.00	30	Experimental

An independent samples *t*-test was performed to compare the mean scores of the two groups.

**Table 2. Independent Samples T-Test**

Sig. (2-tailed)	df	<i>t</i>	Confidence level 99%		Groups
			Upper	Lower	
.000	29	6.839	-10.9988	-5.9345	Control
					Experimental

As Table 2 indicates, there was a significant difference between the two groups with the experimental group outperforming the control group,  $t(29) = 6.839$ ,  $p < .05$ . The *t*-test analysis indicated the observed *t* value (6.839) was greater than the critical *t* (2.756). Thus the null hypothesis was rejected at the significant level ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, there was a significant difference between the two groups in learning the course of Drama II.

## Report Protocol

### *Analysis of Retrospective Think Aloud Reports*

The report protocol allowed us to examine three areas to reveal how much dramatic performance had satisfied the students' needs: classroom environment, motivation in class participation and activities.

#### *Classroom Environment*

Classroom atmosphere is a significant factor that affects students' learning in literature classrooms, and mostly depends on the teacher behavior in class. The most remarkable points mentioned by the experimental group were lack of anxiety about getting grades and also fear of making errors.

**Table 3. Classroom Environment**

Students' Opinion		Groups	
		Control	Experimental
1	I like my classroom environment.	x	+
2	I often get bored in class.	+	-
3	My concentration doesn't last in class.	+	-
4	I feel comfortable when I learn because the teacher is friendly.	x	+
5	I think studying in this class is much more enjoyable than studying in conventional drama classes.	x	+
Notes:	+ : Indicates most of the students have positive opinion		
	- : Indicates most of the students have negative opinion		
	x : Indicates most of the students have neutral opinion		

#### *Motivation in Class Participation*

The results of students' verbal could indicate that the experimental group was much more motivated than the control group. They paid more attention to what they were working on and were more active during the class whereas the control group was often silent and tended not to speak in the class.

**Table 4. Motivation in Class Participation**

Students' Opinion		Groups	
		Control	Experimental
1	I feel it is a good chance to learn English and be able to use it in real life.	x	+
2	I think my class satisfies my needs of drama understanding.	x	+
3	I feel the techniques used in class are too boring to interest my favor.	+	-
4	I have no idea about the technique which is provided in class.	x	+
5	I think it motivates me to read more	x	+
Notes:	+ : Indicates most of the students have positive opinion		
	- : Indicates most of the students have negative opinion		
	x : Indicates most of the students have neutral opinion		

***Activities in the Classroom***

The activities that students in the two groups carried out were different, so their opinions differed accordingly. As the results from students' feedback imply, students in the experimental group had a more positive opinion about teaching style, techniques encouraging them to understand the content of the plays deeply and focus on what they learned while the control group sometimes complained of the class environment and also of the activities.

**Table 5. Activities in the Classroom**

Students' Opinion		Groups	
		Control	Experimental
1	I like the teaching style, I enjoy the class with the others.	x	+
2	The teacher teaches in an interesting way.	x	+
3	What I like most is the teacher technique.	x	+
4	It should focus more on the text itself rather than on dramatic performance.	x	-
5	The class doesn't emphasize the content of the texts.	-	-
Notes:	+ : Indicates most of the students have positive opinion		
	- : Indicates most of the students have negative opinion		
	x : Indicates most of the students have neutral opinion		

According to the results obtained from students' feedback, students in the experimental group had a more positive view toward teaching style, teaching drama through dramatic performance; while, the control group was sometimes dissatisfied with the class environment and the activities.

## **Discussion**

This section discusses the results of the study; the proposed question raised earlier in the study will be referred to as follows:

Will EFL students acquire a higher understanding of a play through traditional or performance-based approach to teaching drama?

Even though students in the control group were partially successful in answering the questions, it is believed that their performance could be improved if learners were not too dependent on teacher lecturing, which aims at hammering materials into learners' minds, with little learner participation, and later asking them to recall materials on their examinations. This traditional approach, as the results of the present study suggested, is counterproductive as the experience that learners gain from the class is not extended to affect learners' life; and in fact, it vanishes into thin air by the time that examination is over.

The results of the present study revealed that though both groups were successful in answering the multiple-choice questions, the students in the experimental group yielded a better performance in taking the post-test. In other words, there was a significant difference in the gains of the control group in which the contents of the plays were solely surveyed and those of the experimental group who were mostly performed the plays lively. Accordingly, surveying and performing plays functioned differently and dramatic performance depicted a highly positive effect on students' drama understanding.

The results of this study were in line with those of previous studies investigating the role of dramatization and role playing in teaching language skills. For example, Lazaraton (1996) considers dramatization as an activity type to support students' speaking skill suggesting that role-plays can be performed by students based on prepared texts. This can be related to the motivation and self-confidence that the teaching style had developed.

Unlike traditional role rehearsals where there is often the pressure of studying the book and memorizing the content line by line, in this approach learners feel free to go back and follow the lines at their own pace. A further feature of this practice is that dramatization reduces the psychological pressure of memorizing the content in isolation. Rather, it encourages group practice, increases learners' self-confidence, and leads to self-actualization rather than pure memorization.

When the students are involved in a play by being assigned character roles, they have to present the play in traditional form, yielding to their active performance. Being



engaged in active drama, language learners can imagine themselves living in the world of the play, and this could increase their motivation. In a situation like this where learners have to rehearse the lines before performing onstage, each student in a group takes charge of one role and memorizes the lines of his or her own turn while other students in the group are responsible for other roles. This type of practice, though presumably more time-consuming, might appear traditional and less meaningful. However, it is different from the outlandish dress-rehearsal that is reminiscent of traditional approaches. One argument in support of this practice is that language learners should practice in the presence of the group members, and so it is not an individual practice, but a group enterprise, neither is it choral memorization of the lines. It is unique in as much as they practice the lines individually while other members rehearse other lines, and then they join to dramatize the play.

Another advantage of this practice is that, psychologically speaking, when learners perform the drama, more psychological effort is needed to learn and retain the content as well as to synchronize their physical performance. Following Asher's (1977, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 75) opinion on right and left brain involvement, both hemispheres of the brain might be involved in the learning process, and this would lead to more substantiation of learning material.

An important aspect of successful literature learning in an EFL context is the absence of stress. In an L1 environment, learning literature takes place in a stress-free situation, whereas second language learning often causes anxiety (Krashen, 1981). By focusing on meaning through action, rather than on meaning through transmission, the learner is said to have been liberated from a stressful condition and, thus, fully engaged in learning.

Psychologically, active involvement in drama performance gave learners a good opportunity to use language in realistic, if not real, situations as drama performance seems to satisfy the needs of drama comprehension and learning. The satisfaction is achieved through techniques that are engaging and interesting, and this stimulates literature learners to read more literary texts. Engagement in drama performance acts as reinforcement in the learning process since it increases the possibility of re-reading and eventually re-learning.

The teaching style in the drama classroom, where learners are assigned roles to perform, makes classroom activities an enjoyable experience, as revealed in students responses (see Table 4), focusing more on the dramatic performance rather than on the text itself. Learning literature in this approach is basically an active process inducing students to produce necessary content in action instead of mere memorization.

The physical and sociolinguistic condition made as a result of getting students engaged in action through performing drama in the classroom is likely to be more enjoyable for students, and so the students would not feel bored with the environment. This would as well lead to greater concentration on learning materials.

Since in this approach the literature teacher is not the sole presenter of materials, students would take an egalitarian attitude towards him/her and so the classroom would be a friendly atmosphere where optimal learning occurs. This positive social atmosphere is assumed to increase learning much more than where learners receive instruction through traditional approaches and transmission models of learning.

Therefore, the results of the study can be supported by Steimberg (1986) who argues that games enhance students' motivation and communication. The finding of this research is also similar to Baxter's (1999) viewpoint considering dramatic activities as a means of helping students understand the materials and their questions. Vygotsky (1986) believes that students become personally and fully engaged in the learning process via performing a drama text. Besides, Harter (1981) considers dramatic activities as a stimulus to make students more involved in the learning process. Thus, their views are also in line with the results of this study.

Another reason for supporting the results of the study may be the students' thinking position and creativity which, according to Tompkins (1998), are the direct results of the role playing method. Before learners act as characters, they should think about their roles and recognize the character in order to be drowned in. Moreover, they should be innovative in the way they present their roles and as Matsuzaki-Carreira (2005) approves, this will help them experience deeper sense of sympathy which rarely takes place by mere passive viewing.

## **Conclusion**

This study began with the idea that teaching drama through dramatic performance could enhance English literature students' knowledge of drama at university level. The research was conducted through a whole academic semester. Throughout this period, the participants in the experimental group were taught how to manage performing the selected plays while devoting little time to reading the contents in the classroom. The participants in the control group normally surveyed the contents of the same plays with no performance.

After administering the post-test, the results of the statistical calculations indicated a significant difference in the academic performance of the two groups ( $p < .01$ ); however, the experimental group who performed drama in the classroom had an advantage over the control group in terms of understanding the drama. In other words, drama understanding of the experimental group excelled that of the control group. This can be related to the fact that retention mostly happens during dramatization. Through dramatization, the content is presented in the form of language in action and, hence, the learners' motivation is heightened. Moreover, dramatization might activate broader parts of the brain; therefore, learning would be more effective. On the other hand, through mere lecturing just the theme of content is conveyed and the information is transferred. The use of dramatic performance makes learners' speech visible, and not merely audible, and this enhances the chances of learners' noticing, remembering, and producing different aspects of the drama scripts.

Group performance helps learners to be highly involved in the learning process and recognize mistakes which lead to greater depth of learning.

Additional information was also obtained through students' verbal reports. Regarding the style of instruction, students preferred to work through dramatic performance rather than just surveying the contents of the plays. Dramatic performance promotes students' motivation and this makes them more interested in classroom participation while students who merely and conventionally read the contents choose to sit passively on their seats. Seemingly, it is not easy to stimulate these students to take part in classroom activities.

### **Pedagogical Implications for Teaching Drama**

This study has some implications for literature instructors. Teachers should realize that student participation is of paramount importance in literature classes, especially when students are required to perform in front of their peers contrary to transmission models where learners are only passively involved. By creating opportunities for students in the classroom, literature teachers together with the students actively reconstruct the past events, and, therefore, by putting themselves in drama characters' roles, they would make a better picture of those events in mind.

Secondly, this research is beneficial to EFL learners since, by accepting roles, they will be motivated to be part of the lesson themselves and, as a result, more involved in the learning process, and this will pave the way for their deeper understanding of the plays. Emphasis in this approach is on learning through action which leads to different learner roles from those found in traditional classrooms. This leads to a cooperative approach to learning literature and successful communication as an accomplishment jointly achieved and approved. Instead of being silent and reticent in the classroom, several learners become simultaneously involved in performing drama and are supported by members of the group in facing the task.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The present research was conducted in order to investigate the effects of English literature students' dramatic performance on their drama understanding at university level. However, some limitations concerning this investigation must also be remarked for future studies. This study was restricted to dramatic performance at the cost of other abilities; therefore, researchers are recommended to take other skills into consideration. Furthermore, the effect of dramatic performance on teaching second language culture could also be considered in the future investigations.

To check students' comprehension, this study only relied on multiple-choice items. It seems essential for further investigations on dramatic performance and drama understanding to utilize several item types and techniques such as written recall, open-ended, and True/False items to further assess the understanding ability of the participants.

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