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English Oral Skills Training through Theater Performance in an EFL Setting

Abstract

We examined the use of dramatic/theater presentation for teaching oral skills to 37 Taiwanese EFL undergraduate students, with the main goal being to determine whether such strategies and performance experiences positively support oral skills in terms of motivation and achievement. Data were collected via performance evaluations, observations, a seminar, individual interviews, and a questionnaire. Results indicate significant increases in learner motivation and oral English achievement. Students were actively engaged and willing to put significant time and effort into the project. However, the process strongly affected some students in terms of performance-related stress.

Keywords: *drama-based strategies, theater performance, English oral skills, university EFL students, Taiwan.*

Introduction

The use of theater performance for English oral training was primarily inspired by Heathcote's (1991) drama in education theory. Her work has triggered many efforts to apply drama to various content areas (cf., e.g., Hesten, 1994; Johnson, 1994; Kanita, 1995; Kato, 1993; Rouse, 1992; Shillingford, 1994). In her comprehensive review of research on the link between drama and language arts, Wagner (1998) asserts that "drama is powerful because its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning exciting, challenging, relevant to real life concerns, and enjoyable" (p. 9). Evidence supporting the use of drama techniques for language

learning has been accumulated by, among others, Burke and O'Sullivan (200), Butterfield (1989), Chauhan (2004), Coleman (2005), Holden (1981), Kao and O'Neill (1998), Maley and Duff (1978), Via (1987), and Wessels (1987). Davis (1985) and Miccoli (2003) gathered specific data on the use of drama for oral skills training and Maley and Duff (1978) stated that drama enables students to take advantage of their experiences and personalities as resources for oral English production.

In addition, drama activities are effective for both language teachers and students because they involve self-expression and risk to psychological well-being when trying to communicate, which can result in significant improvement in language learning outcomes (Smith, 1984). Drama refers not only to performance, but also to the process of language learning. Dougill (1994) asserts that drama performance requires students to devote extensive time and energy to learning objectives and achieving realistic English learning goals. Nine reasons were given for using drama activities for language learning: motivation, familiar activities, confidence, group dynamics, different learning styles, language personalization, language-in-context, cross-curricular content, and what she calls the "place of a lesson" (Philips, 1999).

In Taiwan, oral-oriented language training via drama has not received a great deal of research attention (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate (a) the effectiveness of drama techniques for teaching oral skills to a group of Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students, and (b) how drama techniques and theater performance can motivate oral English learning.

Methodology

Participants and Settings

The study participants were 37 students (11 male, 26 female) who performed on stage. The majority (94.6%) of them were between the ages of 21 and 25. Since drama-related language learning activities are primarily based on students' individual personalities rather than strict interpretations of plays (Maley & Duff, 1978), the instructor took control of writing the initial scripts and revising them during the project. Another project goal was to help students become familiar with various aspects of contemporary theater, including performance, production, and English language content. A 90-minute final performance consisted of a 10-minute opening, a 25-minute performance of a short play entitled *Cabaret*, a 10-minute performance of "Sing, Sing, Sing" (from *Little Shop of Horrors*), a 20-minute performance of a short play entitled *Creatures on the Rainbow*, and a 25-minute performance of a short play entitled *Star Restaurant*.

Data Collection and Analysis

A rubric for scoring drama/theatre performance evaluation from the Ohio Department of Education was used to score the individual student's drama performance by the instructor and three student directors. Evaluation parameters included physical performance, imagination, improvisation, characterization, engagement, technique, communication of meaning, and overall performance. Each item was scored according to the range of 0 (poor) to 3 (excellent); the highest possible score was 24. Of the 37 participants, 12 played multiple roles; therefore each evaluator completed 49 pre – and post-evaluation forms.

In terms of performance self-perceptions, the participants were asked to give responses to a 40-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. Topics included background information, teacher-student and student-student interaction, learning motivation, learning achievement, and self-reflections on performance. Cronbach's alpha of .87 indicated high questionnaire validity. Mean, standard deviation, and percentages were calculated, and a paired sample t-test was conducted to compare the means of pre – and post-performance evaluations. A one-way ANOVA was used to compare mean differences between males and females (significant at $p < 0.05$). Other data included rehearsal and final performance observations, a post-performance conference, individual interviews, and content analysis of a post-performance seminar.

Procedure

The focus during the fall semester was on recruitment, basic theater knowledge, and training. During recruitment the instructor held a simulated audition, with the students given play scripts for rehearsal in advance. In an attempt to support the participants' best interests; great effort was put into placing individuals in their most suitable roles. To increase the sense of full and personal involvement in the learning process, the students were allowed to make modifications to their characters within the dramatic texts. It was assumed that doing so helped trigger their awareness of both language competences and acting abilities. During the spring semester the emphasis was on training and rehearsals, with the participants encouraged to immerse themselves in the story, characters, plots, and author viewpoints and attitudes, while also making personal and creative efforts to enact the text. The instructor made observations, videotaped and photographed the participants during all the phases of the production process; this information was used later to analyze how theater performance enhanced (or failed to enhance) oral English skills development. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with ten students. A post-performance seminar was organized to let students share

their experiences, give suggestions for the next year’s class, and to understand their conceptual changes during the performance preparation process.

Findings

Theater Performance Evaluation

As shown in Table 1, a significant difference was found between the pre – and post-evaluation scores given by the instructor ($t=-11.622, p=0.000$) and student directors ($t=-4.375, p=0.000$); in both cases, the post-evaluation scores ($M=8.43, M= 14.91$) were significantly higher than the pre-evaluation scores ($M=16.26, M=17.17$) (Table 2).

Table 1. Results from Paired Sample t-tests of Theater Performance Evaluation Data

	Paired Differences						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of Differ- ence					
				Lower	Upper				
Instructor’s pre- and post-evalu- ations	-7.826	4.567	.673	-9.182	-6.470	-11.622	45	.000	
Student directors’ pre- and post- evaluations	-2.261	3.505	.517	-3.302	-1.220	-4.375	45	.000	

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Theater Performance Evaluation

		Mean	N	SD	Std. Error Mean
Instructor	Pre-evaluation	8.43	46	4.097	.604
	Post-evaluation	16.26	46	4.809	.709
Student directors	Pre-evaluation	14.91	46	3.800	.560
	Post-test evaluation	17.17	46	2.644	.390

Questionnaire Responses

As shown in Table 3, the majority of the students responded positively ($M =3.91$) to items in this category, indicating a positive impact of theater performance on student-student interaction ($M = 4.11$), especially in terms of learning to respect others ($M = 4.00$). The responses also indicated that the students viewed col-

laboration as key to a successful performance ($M = 3.97$). In addition, most of the students perceived themselves as actively participating in team meetings and discussions throughout the project ($M=3.95$).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Self-Perceived Teacher-Student and Student-Student Interaction Levels ($n=37$)

	N	Mean	SD
Participated in meetings and discussions.	37	3.95	.780
Provided assistance when needed.	37	3.89	.699
Enjoyed working with teammates.	37	3.95	.575
Learned to deal with individual differences.	37	3.89	.658
Learned to respect one another.	37	4.00	.782
<i>Learned to accept</i> strengths and shortcomings.	37	3.89	.737
Understood the importance of collaboration.	37	3.97	.726
Enhanced interpersonal skills.	37	3.73	.871
Became more caring and learned to show appreciation.	37	3.81	.776
Positive impact on teacher-student interaction.	37	3.86	.751
Positive impact on student-student interaction	37	4.11	.737

Regarding the motivation to improve their oral English, the results shown in Table 4 suggest that most of the students ($M=3.97$) put in a great deal of time and effort to understand the play scripts. In addition, their responses in this area indicate self-perceptions that the performance project made them work hard on pronunciation skills ($M=3.95$) and increased their oral English learning motivation ($M=3.86$). However, some students clearly struggled with and/or contemplated abandoning the final performance due to the perceived difficulty of acting on stage ($M=3.84$).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Self-perceived Motivation to Improve Oral English ($n=37$)

	N	Mean	SD
Motivated me to work hard on pronunciation.	37	3.95	.664
Motivated me to put time and effort into comprehending scripts.	37	3.97	.866
I contemplated abandoning the performance.	37	3.84	.688
I tried to overcome problems by using a dictionary, asking for assistance, etc.	37	3.84	.800
The project increased my motivation to improve my oral English.	37	3.86	.713

As shown in Table 5, the students responded positively to the questionnaire items on learning achievement ($M=3.85$). They expressed an especially strong opinion that the theater performance helped them increase their creative imagination ($M=4.11$) and body control ($M=3.95$). In addition, the participants clearly believed that the process not only improved their own oral English abilities ($M=3.92$), but also encouraged greater use of English among their classmates ($M=3.89$).

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Self-perceived Level of Oral English Learning Achievement ($n=37$)

	N	Mean	SD
Improved my oral English.	37	3.92	.640
Improved my listening comprehension.	37	3.70	.878
Improved my reading comprehension.	37	3.84	.764
Encouraged greater use of English.	37	3.89	.658
Improved body control.	37	3.95	.815
I was encouraged to speak English.	37	3.76	.925
Increased my confidence in oral English.	37	3.84	.800
Helped me understand my English strengths and weaknesses.	37	3.86	.751
Increased my language learning potential.	37	3.84	.602
Increased my creative imagination.	37	4.11	.614
Helped me gain a sense of achievement.	37	3.76	.796

Table 6 presents a summary of the performance reflection findings, which had the highest average rating (3.97), indicating strong participant satisfaction with the overall project ($M=4.27$). The majority expressed a willingness to spend time preparing for the final performance and learning from their teammates' acting efforts ($M=4.14$), as well as their feeling that performance success made it worth the effort ($M=4.0$).

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Self-perceived Level of Performance Reflection ($n=37$)

	N	Mean	SD
There was sufficient time for the project.	37	3.92	.862
The script suited my English ability.	37	3.81	.701
I fully participated in the preparation process.	37	3.84	.764
I learned from my teammates' acting skills.	37	4.14	.713
The theater performance was challenging.	37	3.84	.866

	N	Mean	SD
I willingly spent time preparing for the performance.	37	4.14	.673
I was nervous on stage during the performance.	37	4.00	.913
The instructor provided prompt assistance.	37	4.05	.848
The success of the performance made it worth the effort.	37	4.00	.667
The performance was not as scary as I thought.	37	3.95	.664
I was very satisfied with my performance.	37	4.00	.745
Overall, I was satisfied with the project.	37	4.27	.652
I would love to participate in theater performance again if given the chance to do so.	37	3.95	.815

Observation, Documentation, and Instructor Reflection

The results indicate that many students struggled at the post-training stage; according to the attendance records, only a few students can be said to have participated consistently. However, according to the instructor's observations, during the second half of the spring semester the students expressed a much more positive attitude toward performance training, and most participants showed increased collaboration and participation in rehearsals; this was especially true during the final two weeks leading up to the final performance. This result underscores the need for good time management for such a long and complex project.

We learned how difficult it was to give all students prompt and practical assistance, especially in terms of conflicts among students. Accordingly, we suggest that teachers directly teach students skills for conflict management and collaboration/cooperation in addition to language skills. Finally, we found that doing action research enhanced self-esteem and professional development.

Individual Interviews

After the project had been completed, the instructor arranged interviews with 8 participating students on various aspects of their performance experiences. Eleven comments were repeated by multiple students:

We learned the importance of a clear voice and expressive body movement. (7)

I tried very hard to improve my pronunciation. (6)

I really enjoyed this English performance experience. (5)

I realized the importance of collaborative work. (5)

This experience helped me develop oral fluency. (5)

It enhanced my confidence in expressing myself through English performance. (4)

I became more interested in learning English. (4)

I became more confident in performing in public. (3)

I am more aware of the relationship between sound and meaning. (3)

After-Performance Seminar

Maximum benefits of collaboration were not achieved during this project—the students did not cooperate well and occasionally argued over who had put more effort in the production. This underscores the importance of student-student and instructor-student relationships in such a long-term project. While progress was slowed down by different emotional reactions at the preparation stage, no students withdrew from the project due to emotional clashes. They eventually learned how to deal with emotional intensity in order not to let it wrongly influence their behaviors. However, some students were very appreciative of the class and believed that they had made progress in their oral English through the preparation and performance process.

Conclusion

The results indicate that the performance project was successful in terms of increasing the participants' motivations and oral English achievement, as well as their knowledge of theater production and acting skills. The results of the statistical analysis of the participants' questionnaire responses indicate that theater performance has the potential to enhance Taiwanese students' oral English abilities. This finding is also supported by the combination of observations, documentation, interviews, and the post-performance seminar. The participating students generally felt that the success of their performance was worth the effort, and that they benefited from the project in terms of their oral English skills. The prospect of performing on stage encouraged the students to cooperate with each other. The process affected some students emotionally due to the performance-related stress, but they overcame their problems and did not drop out.

Future research plans include determining optimum parameters for theater performance in terms of EFL instruction. An effort will also be made to determine differences in needs and achievements among learners at different proficiency levels, between male and female learners, and across other common variables.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Rubric for Scoring Drama/Theatre Performance Evaluation

CRITERIA	EMERGING (0 Points)	TYPICAL (1 Point each)	ABOVE AVERAGE (2 Points each)	SUPERIOR (3 Points each)
Physical Performance	Uses limited physical movement in performance. Voice sometimes difficult to hear or understand.	Vocal performance is audible and clear. Occasionally uses body and movement to enhance character.	Uses whole body and voice in performance, consistently uses voice and body to enhance character.	Consistently commits voice and whole body to create a detailed and realistic performance, shows advanced physical coordination and vocal control.
Imagination	Only with considerable assistance invents dramatic situations, original ideas, and unusual solutions	With moderate assistance invents dramatic situations, original ideas, and unusual solutions	With minimum assistance invents dramatic situations, original ideas, and unusual solutions	Without assistance, independently invents dramatic situations, original ideas, and unusual solutions
Improvisation	Spontaneously creates an ineffective improvisation as compared to those students of the same age or experience	Spontaneously creates an acceptable improvisation that is typical of students of the same age or experience	Spontaneously creates an effective improvisation that is advanced for students of the same age or experience	Spontaneously creates a highly effective improvisation that is extremely advanced for students of the same age or experience
Characterization	The character lacks clarity, is underdeveloped, and/or not very believable	The character has some clarity, is partially developed, and/or is somewhat believable	The character is generally clear, developed, and believable	The character is exceptionally clear, well-developed, and believable
Engagement	Performs with little energy, focus, and/or commitment	Performs with some energy, focus, and commitment	Performs with energy, focus and commitment	Performs with unusual energy, intensity, focus, and commitment

CRITERIA	EMERGING (0 Points)	TYPICAL (1 Point each)	ABOVE AVERAGE (2 Points each)	SUPERIOR (3 Points each)
Technique	Technique is typical of students of a younger age or of less training	Technique is typical of students of the same age or training	Technique is advanced compared to students of the same age or training	Technique is superior compared to students of the same age or training
Communication of Meaning	Rarely uses voice, facial expression, gesture, and body movement effectively to communicate meaning	Sometimes uses voice, facial expression, gesture, and body movement effectively to communicate meaning	Generally uses voice, facial expression, gesture, and body movement effectively to communicate meaning	Consistently uses voice, facial expression, gesture, and body movement effectively to communicate meaning
Overall Performance	Performance is typical of students of a younger age or students with less training	Performance is typical when compared with students of the same age or training	Performance is advanced when compared with students of the same age or training	Performance is superior when compared with students of the same age or training
Emerging Total Points	_____	_____	_____	_____
Typical Total Points	_____	_____	_____	_____
Above Average Total Points	_____	_____	_____	_____
Superior Total Points	_____	_____	_____	_____
Total Points	_____	_____	_____	_____