

Research on the Application of Drama in Education in College English Teaching Approach

Jin Li*

Nanjing Normal University Zhongbei College, Zhenjiang 212332, Jiangsu, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: Given the complexity and importance of English language teaching and learning, this research firstly points out current dilemmas of English teaching and learning in Chinese colleges. It then introduces the teaching principles and strategies of Drama in Education (DIE) and argues that DIE serves as a good strategy to integrate the four language skills in an English classroom and to benefit English instructors and language learners. To prove the value of DIE, it presents an action study conducted in the researcher's college. The participants of this action research are the researcher's students of the 1st and 2nd grades in college. The research findings show that dramatic activities help students get involved in a real dialogical situation and communicate with others. Besides, it is found that students' learning motives, language proficiencies, and creativity further improve English teaching and learning.

Keywords: Drama in Education; College language teaching; English teaching and learning

Online publication: April 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Currently, English has become the main language in international communication; intriguingly, about 80% of English users are non-native speakers. This phenomenon has turned English into the world's primary lingua franca and defined English Teaching and Learning (ELF) as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages, for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" ^[1]. Since the last century, learning English has become a nationwide activity for most college students in China. Influenced by the international trend, dramatic activities have been believed to have the potential for continuity of English learning between students at college and university levels. However, when principles and strategies of Drama in Education (DIE) have been introduced into teaching, the most common issue is the loss of focus on teaching objectives. Therefore, when planning a curriculum that integrates drama into English instruction, teachers must explicitly specify the learning objectives of each unit—whether in terms of reading comprehension, grammatical and syntactical skills, or communicative competence in English. In that way, drama in education could serve as an effective teaching tool to support and enhance the motivation for college freshmen to learn English well.

2. Problems of college English teaching and learning

Generally, most EFL learners in China have experienced the following three major problems while they are learning English: (1) examination-dominated instruction, (2) a high affective filter, and (3) an artificial learning environment ^[2]. Influenced by the requirements of the entrance examination, most EFL language learners in China usually repeat and memorize vocabulary, sentence patterns, and grammatical rules in a traditional English language classroom. This phenomenon is well-reflected in the observation made by Liu ^[3] that “the conviction that Vocabulary + Essential Structure = Language lies at the base of nearly every foreign language syllabus.”

The second problem that keeps EFL language learners in China from learning English well is a high affective filter. According to Krashen ^[4], the affective filter plays a crucial part in second language learning and acquisition. A language learner’s high affective filter, caused by high anxiety, low self-esteem, and low motivation, would impede language learning ^[5]. Overall, lots of language learners in China lack learning motivation and have an unfavorable attitude towards the English language, owing to their low self-confidence, high learning anxiety, and many meaningless tests ^[3].

The third problem is an artificial learning environment. Since English is a foreign language in China, it is hardly used in social interaction and daily communication. Under such an impoverished learning environment, students normally learn English in school but seldom practice it off campus. As a result, a great number of language learners may have trouble in speaking and listening because these two language skills are usually neglected in the English classroom. For most EFL learners in China, English is not a tool for daily communication, a means to explore the world, or a means to appreciate different cultures, but merely a subject which has to be learned in the classroom and tested in the entrance exams ^[3].

3. Meaning of Drama in Education

Given the complexity and importance of English language teaching and learning, many theories have evolved to explore effective ways to enhance English language teaching and learning, including Creative Drama, Theater in Education (TIE), and Drama in Education (DIE). DIE refers to the use of drama and theatrical techniques as a pedagogical approach in classroom settings. It encompasses various dramatic forms, including structured exercises, dramatic playing, and theater, with the goal of achieving knowledge comprehension through drama (drama for understanding). This approach integrates both subjective and objective learning experiences and involves value judgments related to relevant concepts ^[6].

The essence of DIE lies in its process-oriented, improvisational, and non-performative nature. It is facilitated by a professional instructor (teacher) and involves learners who engage in dramatic construction based on life experiences and social issues. Through artistic elements such as characters, plot, themes, dialogue, and special effects, learners explore and express their ideas creatively. Under the guidance of the instructor, learners engage in imagination and creation, reflecting both human experiences and their own perspectives on the world ^[7].

The core focus of DIE is on the learners’ “reconstruction of experience” and “spontaneous expression” ^[8]. Within an open and natural classroom atmosphere, the instructor employs structured and planned guidance, using techniques such as questioning, storytelling, and prop-based texts to stimulate learning motivation. Learners are encouraged to use various drama-based strategies, including physical movement, situational dialogues, role-playing, imitation, and games.

Overall, DIE rests on two principles of education. As for English instructors, it aims to help them develop their personal communicative ability and creative potential. As for language learners, they can learn more effectively and efficiently because they feel more relaxed and bear a more positive attitude toward learning with the aid of DIE.

4. Action research about Drama in Education

4.1. Research subjects

To prove the value of DIE, some researchers have done studies to examine their support. The experimental samples of this research are all from Zhongbei College in Zhenjiang City, Jiangsu Province. Research selected 72 students (29 male

students, 43 female students) from the 1st and 2nd grades as participants. This course is accessed in three stages and 15 weeks. Participants have been learning English for at least 6 years, possessing basic English comprehension abilities, learning motives, and a wide range of grades. They can provide good feedback on different stages of this course, which is conducive to analyzing the English language situation through dramatic activities in the classroom. In addition, it is also possible to find out whether the integration of DIE strategies and dramas into daily English teaching can make them more interested.

4.2. Research methods

4.2.1. Classroom activity design

This study selected teaching materials from Books 1 to 4 of *New Horizon College English* third versions of higher English education textbooks. The initial plan involved designing nine themes suitable for implementing educational drama strategies: heroes of our time, environmental protection, parent-child communication, career planning, tourism, and online friendships. These topics have both essential everyday communication skills and psychological conflicts that encourage reflection. The entire action research process was divided into three stages: the preliminary stage, action stage, and production stage. Students were expected to present six plays in 15 weeks in classes. Before the performance, there was a check on students' pronunciation and vocabulary as well as a discussion of cultural issues related to the plays' themes.

By incorporating simulated scenarios and dilemmas from educational drama, the designed learning activities closely relate to the core principles of drama in education (DIE) and communicative language teaching (CLT). These activities aimed to enhance students' oral expression and communication skills while fostering respect, empathy, independent thinking, and problem-solving abilities. To uphold the verification principle of action research, drama strategies—such as teacher-in-role, role-playing, scenarios, and image theatre—were repeatedly applied in two or three themes. The teaching steps of this approach follow Cecily O'Neill's process drama approaches^[9]. This approach also aimed to examine the compatibility and effectiveness of educational drama strategies within various English course topics.

In the preliminary stage, the lead teacher and students discussed and then chose the most suitable theme to perform on the stage. Students were assigned to work in pairs and in small groups to create scripts and rehearse the play. After a one-month action practice, students staged the play. After the production stage, students' four English language skills, especially their oracy skills, were reflected and evaluated through dramatic activities in the classroom. Besides, their learning motivation and attitude changed were reflected and evaluated through the three stages. An example is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Activities in the classroom (Theme example: *Heroes of Our Time*)

Activity	Content	Method
1 Input and induced output	1. Input: Reading heroes' materials (Who, When, Where, What, and How). 2. Induced output: Pair work.	Readers' Theatre 1. Reading practice: Students read the heroes' materials (1 unit/week) assigned (e.g., the job of the hero). 2. Oral practice: Students make role-play two in pair.
2 Self-monitoring learning	1. Online searching for more information: Students reading news, watching videos and interviews via "Annual People" platform. 2. Technical AI support: Students do online learning with AI support.	1. Interactive approach 2. Follow the procedures Watch the video → Learn the words → Speak the lines → Chat about the video with AI. 3. Students autonomously make oral practice by interacting with AI (Beta).
3 Collaborative script writing	1. Heroic stories learned was provided for each group's selecting to make a team-based collaborative writing into a drama dialogue script. 2. The "Heroes" stories contain qualities: The construction of heroes— <i>working ethics</i> , courage, competence, and virtue.	1. Collaborative writing. 2. Synopsis cross-group review. 3. Script ELF review.

Table 1 (Continued)

Activity	Content	Method
4 Drama contest	1. Between-group contest was presented in front of all the course participants. 2. The contest was presented for the ELF partners viewing and reviewing.	1. Referee evaluation in the contest and ELF referee evaluation. 2. Group discussion.
5 Classroom as theatre	1. Specific scenarios or scenes in script were chosen for performance in the classroom. 2. Students participated in individual interview with advanced ELF speakers and was evaluated on their oral performance.	1. Face-to-face communication and interview 2. Individual evaluation from ELF interviewer

4.2.2. Questionnaire

This research adopted a questionnaire survey method. The researchers designed a survey questionnaire to investigate the status of English teaching among college students and their understanding of drama strategies. Totally, there were 20 questions in this questionnaire. The research divides these questions into three parts: The first part (1–7) is an overview of English theme learning for students; The second part (8–16) is about the forms of English classroom dramatic activities; The third part (17–20) is about the possibility and acceptability of integrating drama strategies into the classroom. In the process of collecting questionnaire data, 72 questionnaires were distributed to students, and under the guidance of teachers, students were asked to fill out and complete them according to their actual situation. In order to ensure the reliability of the research results, this questionnaire did not include the students' grades.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Major findings of the research

Through this action research, we have found that dramatic activities have benefits for language teaching and learning. Dramatic activities provided a valuable opportunity for integrating the four language skills in the English language classroom. Moreover, drama in education (DIE) also created an atmosphere for cooperative learning.

According to the results of the questionnaire, 82.8% of participants expressed interest in English classroom activities, and over 65% of students mentioned that the difficulty of learning English comes from the fear of making pronunciation and grammar mistakes. They reported that the application of drama activities could help them overcome their fear of using English, control the tone of their voice, and improve their pronunciation through activities.

As for English learners, DIE had two main advantages. One was their improvement in oral English. The other advantage was that the participants learned to observe others' behavior, trust each other, and accept the limitations of others and themselves. As for the English teacher, drama provided a change in classroom dynamics. Drama in Education (DIE) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) enabled teachers to break free from the rigid, accumulation-based learning model advocated by traditional grammar instruction. By building the curriculum around students' needs and real-world problems, this approach could much more naturally enhance their motivation to learn English. Learning by doing, students themselves came to appreciate the value of autonomous learning and collaborative teamwork, while also unleashing the power of creativity and imagination. Most importantly, the communicative and cooperative relationship between teachers and students fostered effective methods, empowering each student to become a critical and engaged learner.

Based on our study, findings show that dramatic activities enrich and improve English teaching and learning. In addition, it implies that DIE could be a good strategy for connecting the English curriculum at college levels.

5.2. Methods to apply dramatic activities

The researcher of this study has been applying DIE in English classrooms at the college level for two years. Based on the personal teaching experiences, two different levels of using dramatic activities could be suggested.

As for the first-grade students, especially at college levels, drama undoubtedly is an effective methodology to enhance their learning motivation, for dramatic activities not only spur their interests but also lower their learning anxiety. To meet freshmen students' language proficiency, the plays used in class could be adapted from their familiar themes. As for students at the second grade level, they usually have better command of the English language and more life experiences. Consequently, in an English drama classroom, the teacher would not only require students to read out the script, but also discuss the following main points: the plot, structure, themes, characters, and languages. Take *Heroes of Our Time* for example, in the beginning, the plot would be introduced in the whole class and the script will be developed and read in small group, followed by the introduction of inspiring stories from "Annual People," a Chinese TV program in which people were awarded for their significant contribution to the society, and finally what is "hero" will be discussed in the class.

Without the push of entrance exams, students at the college level may lack the motivation or need to learn English. Under such circumstances, dramatic activities could be an effective strategy to motivate their interests and inspire students to learn English for their own sake, not for tests.

As for teachers, applying DIE in a college English classroom is demanding. In China, if teachers want to learn DIE methods, the available support is quite limited. The most common options include participating in short-term workshops or enrolling in professional development courses, such as a Master's program in teaching. Key conditions in the learning process include providing teachers with opportunities to observe demonstrations, allowing them to receive conceptual inputs in action^[10]. Additionally, teachers should have opportunities to practice, ideally in situations where they can engage in supported action.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite significant efforts in applying Drama in Education (DIE) to English-speaking instruction, certain limitations in this study remain unavoidable.

First, the research sample consists of only 72 students, and due to practical constraints, the selection was not entirely random. As a result, the sample lacks sufficient representativeness and diversity to fully reflect the perspectives of all college students. This aspect of the research requires further refinement. Second, the research duration is relatively short. Although the experiment spans nearly one semester, only six plays were conducted. A longer implementation period would allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of the method's effectiveness. Finally, due to the absence of a standardized spoken English assessment system, this research relies on the average evaluations given by both the lead teachers and the intern teachers. However, these assessments may have been influenced by subjective factors. Future research should aim to develop or adopt a more objective and reliable evaluation framework.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that DIE strategies might be a good way to minimize three major problems of English teaching and learning in China and have the potential for continuity of the English curriculum at college levels. A concrete example of an appropriate English drama class is illustrated to give language teachers some hints on how to apply dramatic activities properly for this level of students. The researcher believes that integrating drama into English language classroom activities is more suitable for learners above the beginner level, particularly junior students at college. In brief, drama for first-grade students should be treated in a simpler way, yet for second-grade students could be viewed as one of the literary subjects: being presented basically in the beginning, further being deeply explored in class, and finally being performed on stage. By the use of drama in education in the classroom space, students will not only learn language knowledge but also gain

greater delight from the entertainment.

Funding

Research Projects in Philosophy and Social Sciences of Jiangsu Provincial Colleges and Universities
(Project number : 2022SJYB2259)

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Seidlhofer B, 2011, Understanding English as a Lingua Franca, OUP, Oxford.
- [2] Li YN, 2013, DIE “Educational Drama” in China. *Artistic Criticism*, 2013(9): 49–52.
- [3] Liu YF, 2021, Rethinking Drama Art Education in Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities in the New Era. *Research in Educational Development*, 2021(03): 41.
- [4] Krashen S, 1985, The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications, Longman, London.
- [5] Baker C, 2001, Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, Multilingual Matters Ltd, Clevedon.
- [6] Bolton G, 1979, Towards a Theory of DIE, Longman, London, UK.
- [7] Flynn RM, 2019, A Dramatic Approach to Learning: Teaching in Role. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 27(1): i–ix.
- [8] O’Sullivan C, 2017, Practical Guide in Planning Drama in Education, China Renmin University Press, Beijing.
- [9] O’Neill C, 1995, Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.
- [10] Jia D, 2020, Promoting Children’s Creativity through Drama in Education. *Studies in English Language Teaching*, 8(2).

Publisher’s note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.