DRAMA-BASED GROUP PROJECTS IN EFL CLASSROOM

Tseng Chia-Ti

Ming Chuan Unversity, Taiwan

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the effectiveness of leaning English through a drama-based group project in an EFL class. A whole language approach was adopted and students were required to accomplish their drama project by conducting a series of collaborative and skill- integrated activities throughout the semester. Forty-seven students, aged between 18-20 with low-intermediate to intermediate level enrolled in this communicative English class. In groups, activities such as reading movie critics, writing feedbacks about the critics, introducing the movie plots, casts, etc., through presentations, choosing the plot, adapting and editing the script, and finally performing the plot were enacted in class. Reflection and Evaluation sheets were provided for each group to observe and evaluate their peers' group work. Finally, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore what students were able to learn from this drama-based language project. The results revealed students' positive feedback not only on the part of their improved language ability, but on their enhanced awareness and understanding of the pragmatic aspect of the target language use. In addition, positive comments on boosted confidence and gains from collaborative learning were also reported. Other findings, suggestions, and pedagogical implications will be discussed in the paper.*

KEY WORDS: drama-based group project, a whole language approach

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching and learning has long been geared towards developing students' communicative competence, and a whole language approach which aims at integrating and applying students' language skills in an authentic context can be effective and should be at the heart of the language classroom. In an EFL environment, where the opportunities for authentic language use is limited for learners, creating an authentic context for language use is thus essential for EFL language teachers. Using drama activities in EFL classrooms, where students are learning language structures in

concrete situations and through integrated tasks, can help students consolidate what they've learned and acquire communicative competence. Besides, drama can be fun and motivating since it is creative, collaborative, interactive, and expressive, while students assume other identities and thus were able to free themselves from the inhibition of speaking a foreign language.

In Taiwan, as most of the English classrooms are still teacher-centered and lecture-based, language is often broken down into pieces and taught in discrete manners. Much effort is still placed on explaining the structure of language and the memorization of word usages and phrases. As for the language skills, they are not treated as a whole but often are taught separately and placed with different degree of emphases. Students (and teachers) are paying more attention to reading and writing since they are the main skills to be tested. With the newly added English listening comprehension test, students are beginning to improve their listening skills, whereas speaking ability is still ignored since it is not tested in the entrance exams. As each language skill is taught separately, is test-driven and is learned in a decontextualized manner, the effectiveness of students' English learning is undermined and students are frustrated with their limited competence in actually communicating with the language after years of English learning.

In realizing the whole language approach via drama activities, this paper aims to explore the effectiveness of English learning through a drama-based group project in an EFL classroom. Project-based learning has been advocated for its effectiveness in promoting content knowledge and enhancing language proficiency. According to Stroller (2007), its many advantages also arise from increased motivation, improved learner autonomy, to enhanced learners' confidence. In continuing the success of implementing project-based learning in an ESP setting (Tseng, 2008), this study further taps into the area of using a drama-based project to enhance students' overall English learning. Specifically, this study will first report on the methods and procedures in implementing a drama-based project in an EFL class. It will then explore how students perceive the effectiveness of this project for their overall language learning, particularly in the area of enhancing their communicative abilities.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A Whole Language Approach (WLA)

A Whole Language Approach (WLA) believes that the communication of meaning is essential for any successful language activity (Goodman, 1986). For WLA, learning happens best when there is authentic use of language where all skills are used in an integrated manner, rather than in a decontexulized context where only individual skills are separately trained. Thus, in the whole language classroom, language skills are learned concurrently, and served for authentic purpose in real communication. Freeman and Freeman (1992) outlined the principles of applying WLA in ESL/EFL setting as the following: 1) lessons should proceed from whole to part; 2) lessons should be learner-centered; 3) lessons should have authentic meaning and purpose for learners; 4) lessons should include all four modes; 5) learning takes place in social interaction, and 6) both oral and written languages should be developed simultaneously. To summarize, the WLA is a holistic approach. It is holistic in the sense that it involves the whole person, the whole language, and the whole context for authentic learning (Goodman, Goodman, & Hood, 1989).

Drama in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

A number of articles outlined the benefits of incorporating drama in the language learning classroom. Its many advantages include contextulizing language that students can experience the language in concrete situations (Giebert, 2014). Drama can also be fun and motivating, and the fictional persona is often felt as a protection where learners are less afraid and embarrassed in making mistakes (Giebert, 2014). In addition, since drama activities involved learners physically and emotionally, it helped improve retention of language structures and vocabularies (O'Gara, 2008). Other advantages such as increasing students' self-confidence (Chauhan, 2004) and consequently, lowering their fear in speaking the foreign language (Giebert, 2014) was also reported. Drama activities also contribute to improving students' integrated linguistic competence when students are required to read and write scripts, and to enact on the scripts in an actual performance. Echoed with WLA, drama activities develop students' communicative ability naturally since language is activated to communicate real meaning (Harmer, 2007).

Features and Benefits of Project-based Learning

A great deal of literature work has proven the efficacy of project-based learning in promoting both language and content learning in the EFL classrooms (i.e., Beckett & Miller, 2006; Hedge, 2000; Tseng, 2008). The project-based learning proposed by Stoller (2006) included features such as having a process and product orientation, encouraging students' ownership of the project, extending over a period of time, supporting natural integration of skills, emphasizing both language and content learning, promoting both collaboration and individual work, assigning work which results in a final product, and concluding the project with students' reflection. As for the benefits of project learning, the most widely espoused advantages encompass "improved language abilities and content knowledge, authenticity of experience, motivation and creativity, ability to work collaboratively and independently, improved decision making and critical thinking abilities and enhanced self-confidence" (Stoller, 2002, pp.143-145). In other words, both cooperative learning (Crandall, 1999) and autonomous learning (Benson, 2001) are involved in students' progress towards the concrete outcome, and by nature, this process leads to enhanced motivation and authentic learning.

The context and Participants

The study was carried out in an English communicative language course in a University in Northern Taiwan. Forty-seven non-English major freshmen enrolled in this class, and their English language proficiency is from low-intermediate to intermediate level. Students have had at least 8-10 years of experience studying English when participated in this study. The class met once a week for 18 weeks, and each class lasted for three hours.

The Course/Project Design

Following the principle of WLA, this course aims to enhance students' overall English language proficiency, particularly in the area of communicative abilities. In order to have students integrate and apply all language skills in a meaningful context, a drama-based project is actualized in this course. Inheriting the advantages of project-based work, the specific aims of the drama-based project designed for this course are:

(1) To develop a context in which students can acquire useful expressions and use them in meaningful communication.

(2) To help students improve listening, speaking, reading, writing skills.

(3)   To enhance collaboration between group members.

(4)   To develop evaluation skills which foster critical thinking ability.

(5)   To help students be less anxious and more confident language learners and users.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The methods and procedures followed in the project take on the framework for project work proposed by Stoller (2002, pp.112-117). The steps and the responding themes are specified as follows:

Step1: Agree on the theme for the project

  Students were free to choose the type of films (either classic or contemporary) to work with. After discussion, students preferred contemporary films as the main themes to be explored.

Step 2: Determine the final outcome of the project.

    (1) The midterm oral presentation for two selected films

    (2) The 20-25 minute final drama performance

Step 3: Structure the project

(1)   For midterm presentation, students should work in groups to:

    A) Discuss on the selection of two films, and watch the films

    B) Read the movie critics from authentic material (i.e., rotten tomatoes).

    C) Prepare for the oral presentation for the selected films, including reporting on the cast, plots, critics, feedback and decide on the preferred film for the adaptation of their final drama play.

    (2) For final drama performance, students were instructed and advised to:

    A) Decide on the plots and modify the original script into the adapted one.

    B) Decide on the cast and edit the adapted script.

    C) Work on the accuracy, fluency, and intonation of their verbal expressions.

    D)Work on the non-verbal parts of the play such as gestures, facial expressions

      E) Prepare for the costumes, props, and background music, and etc.,

F) Rehearsal and final performance

Step 4: Prepare students for the language demands on the process of the project

    (1) Give clear instruction on how to read authentic movie reviews.

    (2) Provide clear guidelines and examples for midterm presentation.

    (3) Conduct group discussion on the selected films, monitor their understanding for

the movie reviews, and check on the language problems in their written work.

(4) Give clear instruction on the criteria being evaluated for the final drama play.

(5) Help students with language problems in editing of the original script.

(6) Supervise students' drama play practice, including their language accuracy, intonation, fluency and nonverbal expressions.

Step 5: Prepare students for the language demands on the final product of the project

(1) Give instruction on how to conduct a formal oral presentation, including outlining, preparing slides, and performing with proper eye-contact and right tone of voice.

(2) Conduct and videotape rehearsals, have students watch their own performance and reflect on the problematic areas.

Step 6: Evaluate the project

(1) Both midterm and final project were evaluated by the teacher and their peers via evaluation forms.

(2) Students and instructor evaluated their learning process and effectiveness via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

Final Drama Performances

In total, six final drama performances were enacted based on the adapted script from the original films "English Vinglish", "Intern", "How to lose a guy in 10 days", "Toy Story II ", "The Hundred-Foot Journey", and "Three Idiots". The final drama plays were all videotaped, and made into discs.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed to help students reflect upon their own learning process and outcome, and also help the researcher tap into the effectiveness of applying drama-based project in helping students' with their overall communicative abilities. Specifically, it aims to understand if the project work helps improve students' linguistic and critical thinking skills, provide students with meaningful context for actual language use, and decrease their anxiety and enhance their confidence as language learners and users. Through the 5-point likert scale questions (from 1. Strongly disagree, to 5. Strongly agree) and the follow-up semi-structured interviews, the results are analyzed and discussed in the next session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Enhancing Students' Linguistic and Critical Thinking Skills

Students' perspectives on if and how they have improved in their English and critical thinking skills through the project were examined. The frequency statistics on mean and standard deviation were illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean Distribution on Students' Perspectives regarding their Improvement in English and Critical Thinking Skills.

Item	Mean	S.D.
(1) My English listening ability has improved because of watching films.	4.46	.701
(2) My English speaking ability has improved because of oral presentation and acting on the drama play.	4.49	.742
(3) My English reading ability has improved because of reading the movie reviews from rotten tomatoes and other related sources.	4.00	.840
(4) My English writing ability has improved as I need to write feedback for midterm presentation, adapt and edit the scripts for the final play.	3.83	.857
(5) Overall, I think I have improved in all four skills of English from doing this group project.	4.37	.731
(6) Evaluating other group's presentation and performance helps me think of my own advantages and weaknesses.	4.54	.611

As displayed in Table 1, positive responses can be found on most items. In general, students perceived their ability in all four skills have improved (M=4.37). Specifically, speaking ability was perceived to have improved the most (M=4.49), followed by listening (M=4.46), reading (M=4.00), and finally writing (M=3.83).As for the part of critical thinking ability, the mean score on item six (M=4.54) reveals that students believe the evaluation of others' performance help them reflect upon their own work which helps with their own performances.

In the follow-up semi-structured interviews, some students indicated that from watching films repeatedly, their listening ability has been enhanced. Other students pointed out that practicing their lines in the play, and giving oral presentations helped greatly with their speaking. In addition, students reported that by reading authentic

movie critics, writing feedback for the selected films, and also editing the original scripts, their reading and writing skills have improved. Overall, aural abilities perceived to receive most gains; whereas reading and writing abilities were also reported to be enhanced.

It is obvious that by integrating all language skills needed for different holistic tasks, students perceived that all aspects of their language skills were improved. While being given the opportunities for evaluation, students were able reflect upon their own work and then take necessary action to work individually (i.e., practice their own dialogues) and collaboratively with their group members (i.e., discuss on the plots). Echoed from the benefits of project-based learning proposed by Stoller (2002), this project has allowed students to integrate all language skills in a purposeful final product which resulted in improving students' language skills as well as developing their critical thinking abilities. When students are given opportunities to simultaneous use all language skills in contextually meaningful, intriguing, and collaborative activities, their whole performance would outweigh the sum of its separate linguistic parts and thus enhance the overall language learning success. (Freeman and Freeman, 1992; Goodman, 1986).

Learning English in a Meaningful Context
Students' perspectives on contextualized learning through the drama project were also examined via questionnaire. The frequency statistics on mean and standard deviation were illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean Distribution on Students' Perspectives regarding Contextualized Learning

Item	Mean	S.D.
(1) Learning English from films allows me to learn useful expressions and know how they are used in real communication.	4.29	.667
(2) Performing the drama allows me to use what I learned in the movie in actual practice.	4.40	.651
(3) Learning English from films help me understand different cultures.	4.34	.684
(4) Learning English from films make me aware of different usages in English and Chinese.	4.20	.719
(5) I think I know better about how to speak English in a proper manner.	3.54	1.314

From Table 2, students believed that they have learned some useful English expressions

from the films and also acquired how these expressions are used in real context (M=4.29). They were also able to actually use these expressions in the designated role in the drama performance, which helped enhance their further understanding of these usages (M=4.40). In addition, since students chose different kinds of movies varied from Hollywood to Bollywood, they were not only learning language but also learning different culture (M=4.34). Besides, students responded positively in becoming aware of the different usages in English and in Chinese (M=4.20). It's worth noting that students' written feedback and edited scripts often contained direct translation from L1 which may syntactically and semantically fail to address their intended meaning. This part of the problem was worked on while the instructor preparing students for their project. Thus, students became more aware of the different usages between L1 and the target language. Finally, in the part of pragmatics, students' responses for item six (M=3.54) seemed to be less positive in relation to other aspects of contextual learning. It is thus suggested more work can be done in directing students' attention to the different speech acts in the films to enhance their awareness of different pragmatics used across languages and to allow better production of proper language use.

Apparently, results from the questionnaire and interviews confirmed the effectiveness of meaningful use of language in real context. The drama-based project in this study thus created the context from which language was not just mechanically practiced but was activated to communicate real meaning (Harmer, 2007). This has developed students' communicative ability in a natural and dynamic manner, using gestures, pauses, different intonation of voice, showing emotions, and through which these practical hands-on skills can all be applied in the real-life situation (Banerjee, 2014).

Enhancing Motivation, Lowering Anxiety, and Boosting Confidence
Moreover, students' perspectives on the psychological aspects such as the effect on their anxiety, self-esteem, and learning motivation via doing this project were also examined. The frequency statistics on mean and standard deviation of the survey were illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Distribution on Students' Perspectives regarding Effects on Learning Anxiety, Self-esteem and Motivation

Item	Mean	S.D.
(1) I think learning English via viewing films and performing drama is fun.	4.69	.471
(2) After doing this project, I am now not afraid to speak English in general.	4.43	.655
(3) I do not feel as anxious when I have to present publicly with English.	4.14	.772
(4) I start to speak English without thinking too much in Chinese.	3.74	1.01
(5) I am now more confident to speak English in general.	4.51	.507

From Table 3, the result indicated students perceived learning English via this project is motivating (M=4.69). Students also reported that this project has helped them not afraid to speak English in general (M=4.43), and also less anxious in making oral presentations (M=4.14). Overall, students became more confident in speaking English (M=4.51). However, students still perceive their first language overrides the target language from time to time and thus, the relative lower mean score (M=3.74) is shown, indicating students still experience strong L1 transfer while partaking the drama activities. It is thus suggested some "focus-on-form", rather than "focus-on-forms" activities can be conducted to "draw students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, pp.45-46). This will help solve students' linguistic problems as well as make aware of the differences in the structure and pragmatic aspects between two languages. Some studies have revealed that students experience highest level of anxiety as a result of speaking a foreign language (Price, 1991; Hewitt & Stepheson, 2012). In incorporating creative drama to alleviate foreign language anxiety, Sağlamel and Kayaoğlu (2013) found positive feedback from learners in gaining confidence, overcoming stage fright, and fear in speaking English. In line with Sağlamel and Kayaoğlu's study, this study further confirmed the usefulness of employing a drama-based project to help learners overcome anxiety and enhance confidence. As nearly all students found this project fun and motivating, a non-threatening situation for language production has been created. The enacting of drama play in this project has allowed students involved in "a total physical, mental, and emotional activity" (Banerjee, 2014, p.82) which help them come out of their inhibition, overcome their fear, and boost their confidence in foreign language learning.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examines the effectiveness of drama-based group projects in a whole language EFL classroom. Specifically, it aims to develop students' language skills and communicative abilities through a series of integrated drama-based activities. It is evident that by providing a meaningful and authentic context for students to work on a collaborative final project-drama play, the engaging learning process allows students to be motivated in taking initiatives to work independently and cooperative in groups. This enhances learner autonomy (Benson, 2001), promotes collaborative learning (Crandall, 1999). In building a safe and creative environment for students to freely express themselves physically and emotionally through drama activities, students demonstrated increased self-esteem, self-confidence and lowered anxiety and inhibition in language learning. With the components of comprehensible input, meaningful output, and negotiation of meaning via project work (Stoller, 2006), students have perceived (and demonstrated) all aspects of their linguistic skills are improved, their critical thinking ability is developed and their overall communicative competence is enhanced.

More drama-based projects should be incorporated in EFL classroom. As demonstrated in this study, drama-based project work activates students' interest and naturally integrates all language skills and thus develop students' communicative competence. Since this study is examined from the learners' perspective, it is suggested that future studies which include some pre- and post assessment on measuring students' actual language enhancement can be included. The methods and procedures employed in this study can be further tested in larger samples, and in different EFL context to further validate our findings.

References

Banerjee, S. (2014). Learn and Unlearn: Drama as an Effective Tool in Teaching English Language and Communication. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies 2(1)*, 79-91. Retrieved from http://www.eltsjournal.org

Beckett, G.H., & Miller, P.C. (2006). *Project-based second and foreign language education: past, present and future*. Greenwich, C.T.: Information Age

Publishing.

Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Crandall, J. (1999). Cooperative language learning and affective factors. In J. Arnold (Ed.), *Affect in Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Chauhan, V. (2004). Drama techniques for teaching English. *The Internet TESL Journal, 8*. Retrieved from http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Chauhan-Drama.html

Freeman, D. & Freeman, Y. (1992). *Whole Language for Second Language Learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Goodman, K. (1986). *What's whole in whole language*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Goodman, K., Goodman, Y., & Hood, W. (1989) *The whole language evaluation book*. Portmouth, NH:Heinemann.

Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.

Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hewitt, E, & Stephenson, J. (2012). Foreign language anxiety and oral exam performance: a replication of Phillips' MLY Study. *The Modern Language Journal, 95(3)*,1-20.

Hillyard, S. (2010). *Teaching English through Educational Drama to students with Learning Difficulties.* Ministry of Education, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Long, M. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K.de Bot, R. Ginsberg & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-culturalperspective* (pp.39-52). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Price, M.L. (1991). The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: interviews with highly anxious students. In E.K. Horwitz & D.J. Young (Eds.), *Language Anxiety* (pp.101-108). Englewood Cliffs, NJ Prientice Hall, 101-108.

O'Gara, P. (2008). To be or have not been: Learning language tenses through drama. *Issues in Educational Research, 18(2)*:156-166.

Sağlamel, H., & Kayaoğlu, M.N. (2013). Creative Drama: A Possible Way to Alleviate Foreign Language Anxiety. *RELC Journal,44(3)*, 377-394.

Stoller, F. (2002). Project Work: A Means to Promote Language and Content. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in Language Teaching: an anthology of Current Practice* (pp. 107-120). Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press.

Stoller, F. (2006). Establishing a theoretical foundation for project-based learning in second and foreign language contexts. In G. H. Beckett & P. C. Miller (Eds.), *Project-Based Second and Foreign Language education: past, present, and future* (pp. 19-40). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.

Tseng, C.T. (2008). Acquiring tour-conducting ability and enhancing Language Proficiency through a student project. *Proceedings of the 17ᵗʰ Conference on English Teaching & Learning in the Republic of China* (pp. 590-599). Taipei: Crane.