DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH DRAMA-BASED PROJECTS IN AN EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines student perceptions on the effectiveness of developing communicative competence through drama-based group projects in an EFL class in Taiwan. A whole language approach was adopted and students were required to accomplish their drama projects by conducting a series of collaborative and skill- integrated activities throughout the semester. Forty non-English major University freshmen, with intermediate English proficiency enrolled in this class. In groups, activities such as watching movie, reading movie reviews, introducing the movie plots and casts, providing feedback through presentations, choosing the plot, adapting and editing the script, and finally performing the plot were enacted in class. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceived effectiveness on their overall language learning through the drama-based projects. 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 proper use of target language. In addition, positive comments on boosted confidence and gains from collaborative learning were also reported.*

KEYWORDS: Communicative Competence, Student Perceptions, 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 usually not treated as a whole but often are taught separately and placed with different degree of emphases. More emphases have still been placed on reading and writing since these are the main skills to be tested on major exams. With the lately added English listening comprehension test, students have started to improve their listening skills, whereas speaking ability is still largely 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 students' perceived effectiveness on their gains in communicative competence in the target language 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 integrated tasks and 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

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).

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).

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 STUDY

The context

The study was carried out in a general English course with non-English major students in a University from Northern Taiwan. Forty students enrolled in this class. The class met once a week for 18 weeks, and each class lasted for three hours.

Participants

Forty enrolled students were college freshmen. The enrolled students have had 9-12 years of experience studying English when participated in this study. As for students' English language proficiency level, the scores indicated it varied from low-intermediate (i.e., TOEIC 440) to intermediate (i.e., TOEIC 710). Thus, most students have intermediate level of language proficiency.

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 (i.e., 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). Midterm project: ***midterm oral presentation*** for the selected film

(2). Final Project: 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 the film and watch the film closely

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

D.) Prepare for the oral presentation for the selected film, including reporting on the cast, plots, critics, feedback and decide on the preferred plots 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.) Rehearse and conduct final performance.

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

(1). Give class lecture on how to read authentic movie reviews.

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

(3). Conduct group discussion on the selected film, monitor students' 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 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 class lecture on how to conduct a formal oral presentation, including outlining, preparing slides, and related verbal and non-verbal presentation skills.

(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 "The Intern", "English Vinglish", "My Big Fat Greek Weeding", "Terminal", "The Proposal", and "The Devil Wears Prada". The final drama plays were all videotaped.

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 understand 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 communicative 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' Overall Linguistic Skills

Students' perspectives on if and how they have improved in their overall linguistic 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 Overall Linguistic Skills

Item	Mean	S.D.
(1) My English listening ability has improved because of watching films.	4.41	.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.	3.82	.837
(5). Overall, I think I have improved in all four skills of English from doing this group project.	4.48	.721
(6). Evaluating other group's presentation and performance helps me think of my own advantages and weaknesses.	4.20	.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=4.48). Specifically, speaking ability was perceived to have improved the most (M=4.49), followed by listening (M=4.41), reading (M=4.00), and finally writing (M=3.82).As for the part of critical thinking ability, the mean score on item six (M=4.20) revealed that students believed 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 was 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 gains in all aspects of their language skills. 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 abilities in critically review others' work. 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 and Using 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.	4.28	.676
(2). Performing the drama allows me to use what I learned in the movie in actual practice.	4.41	.651
(3). Learning English from films help me understand different cultures.	4.33	.672
(4). Learning English from films make me aware of different usages in English and Chinese.	4.21	.719
(5). I think I know better about how to interact naturally and properly in a conversation	4.00	1.214

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=4.28). 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=4.41). In addition, since students chose different kinds of movies varied from Hollywood to Bollywood, they were not only learning language but also learning different cultures (M=4.33). Besides, students responded positively in becoming aware of the different usages in English and in Chinese (M=4.21). 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 their L1 and the target language. Finally, regarding the self-perceived gains in the ability to interact naturally and properly in a conversation, students' positive responses (M=4.00) indicated their authentic learning from films were able to be transformed in their daily use of target language in the proper manner.

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).

Affective Benefits: Enhanced Motivation, Lowered Anxiety, and Boosted Confidence

Moreover, students' perspectives on the affective 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 interesting.	4.70	.451
(2). After doing this project, I am now not afraid to speak English in general.	4.46	.653
(3). I do not feel as anxious when I have to present publicly with English.	4.12	.772
(4). I start to speak English without thinking too much in Chinese.	3.54	1.01
(5). I am now more confident to speak English in general.	4.56	.507

From Table 3, the result indicated students perceived learning English via this project is

motivating (M=4.70). Students also reported that this project helped them not afraid to speak English in general (M=4.46), and also less anxious in making oral presentations (M=4.12). Overall, students became more confident in speaking English (M=4.56). However, students did perceive their first language overrides the target language from time to time and thus, the relatively lower mean score (M=3.54) is shown, indicating students still experience strong L1 transfer while partaking the drama activities. Since the syntax between Chinese and English is quite different, students are bound to make linguistic errors in their work. 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 would 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 drama-based projects to help learners overcome anxiety and enhance confidence. As nearly all students found this project interesting and motivating, a non-threatening situation for language production was created. The enacting of drama play in this project thus allowed students involved in "a total physical, mental, and emotional activity" (Banerjee, 2014, p.82) which helped 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 an EFL classroom. Specifically, it aims to develop students' language skills and communicative competence through a series of integrated activities and a final drama project. 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 cooperatively in groups. This enhances learner autonomy (Benson, 2001), and 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, and self-confidence, and lowered anxiety and inhibition in language learning. With the components of comprehensible

input, meaningful output, and negotiation of meaning through project work (Stoller, 2006), students have perceived 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 different samples (i.e., students with different proficiency levels) and/or in different EFL context to further validate the findings from this study.

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