

*Using Drama-Based Projects in EFL Classroom: A Whole-Language  
Approach to Learning Language*

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**Abstract**

Drama activities in foreign language classrooms provide great opportunities for students to activate all language skills in a contextualized situation. By meaningfully integrating all language skills in a socially interactive context, a whole language approach was thus adopted in the current study. Specifically, this paper explores the process of implementing drama-based projects in an EFL classroom and examines its effectiveness in language learning from learners' perspective. Thirty-six EFL learners, aged from 22 to 50, with mixed English proficiency enrolled in this class. In groups, activities such as watching films, reading movie critics, writing feedbacks in reaction to the critics, giving oral presentation for the selected movies, choosing movie plots, adapting and editing the script, and finally performing the plots were enacted in their group projects throughout the class for a semester. 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, from students' perspective, on what they perceived as the most gains from the drama-based language projects. The results revealed students' positive feedback not only on the part of their improved linguistic ability, but on their enhanced awareness of the pragmatic aspect of the target language use. In addition, positive responses such as boosted confidence, enhanced motivation and learner autonomy, and gains from cooperative learning were also reported. Other findings, suggestions, and pedagogical implications will be discussed in the paper.

Key words: drama-based activities, a whole language approach

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## **Introduction**

The concept of communicative competence, according to Hymes (1972), should be viewed as “the overall underlying knowledge and ability for language which the speaker-listener possesses” (p.13). It entails the language user not only can produce the grammatically correct utterance but he/she needs to use it in an appropriate context. 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. Applying drama activities in EFL classroom, where students are learning language structures in concrete situations and through integrated tasks, can help students fully contextualize the language use, consolidate what they’ve learned, and thus help acquire communicative competence. In addition, 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 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 discretely and placed with different degree of emphases. Reading and writing are still the main skills to be tested in the exams, resulting in the lack of training in oral abilities in language classrooms. With the newly added English listening comprehension test in the university entrance exams, the training of listening skills is beginning to receive attention in the classroom, yet its effectiveness is diluted due to limited authentic input in the EFL context. As each language skill is taught separately, is test-driven and is learned in a decontextualized manner, the effectiveness of students’ English learning is often undermined and students are frustrated by 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 process of implementing drama-based group projects in an EFL classroom and examine its effectiveness in language learning from learners’ perspective. Project-based learning has been advocated for its effectiveness in promoting content knowledge and enhancing language proficiency. According to Stoller (2007), its many

advantages also arise from increased motivation, improved learner autonomy to enhanced learners' confidence. In continuing the success of implementing the project-based learning in an ESP setting, and in raising pragmatic awareness (Tseng, 2007, 2013), this study further taps into the area of using drama-based projects to enhance students' overall English learning. Specifically, from students' perspective, it intends to find answers to the following questions:

- 1) Does the project help promote students' general English language abilities? If so, which aspect(s) of English language skills do students perceive to have improved?
- 2) Do students perceive the activities designed in the project engage them in the natural use of English language and promote their awareness in the pragmatic aspect of language use (proper use of language)?
- 3) Do students perceive themselves as less inhibited in communicating with English? If so, how have they been benefited from the project?

## **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 decontextualized context where only individual skills are separately trained. Thus, in the whole language classroom, language learning should encompass all four language skills in an integrated manner (Goodman, 1986). The principles of the WLA, when applied in ESL/EFL setting, can be summarized by Freeman and Freeman (1992) as follows:

- (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) Learning should take place in social interactions.
- (5) Both oral and written language should be developed simultaneously
- (6) Lessons should include all four modes of language skills. Learning should involve the whole person, embracing learners' first and second language and identity.

To summarize, the WLA is a holistic approach. It treats language as a whole, and stresses that language is meaningless when teaching only the isolated parts (pronunciation, spelling, grammar, etc.). Language learning begins with the whole which all skills are simultaneously activated in contextually meaningful, purposeful, and collaborative activities. Language teaching in WLA takes students as the core. It emphasizes the importance that activities should take care of students' needs and interests, which allows students to be less inhibited and more confident to bring out their full potentials in language learning. Thus, WLA is whole and 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**

Holden (1981) defines drama as any activity which asks the student to portray him/herself in an imaginary situation, or to portray another person in an imaginary situation. In accordance with this definition, drama can be applied to any format of "let's pretend" situation in the language classroom, including role-play, and provides an opportunity for students to express him/herself through verbal and non-verbal expressions.

A number of articles outline the benefits of incorporating drama in the language learning classroom. Its many advantages include contextualizing language by letting students experience the language in concrete situations, making learning holistic and memorable (Giebert, 2014). Drama can also be fun and motivating, and the fictional persona is often felt as a protection where learners are less afraid in making mistakes (Giebert, 2014). In addition, it is reported that while drama activities involved learners physically and emotionally, it helped improve retention of language structures and vocabularies (O'Gara, 2008; Kao & O'Neill, 1998). Other advantages such as increasing students' self-confidence (Chauhan, 2004; Culham, 2002) and social competence as a result of collaborative learning were 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. In other words, drama activities develop students' communicative ability naturally, which all language skills are activated to communicate real meaning (Hammer, 2007).

## **Features and Benefits of Project-based Learning**

A great deal of literature work has proven the usefulness and efficacy of project-based learning in promoting both language and content learning in the EFL classrooms (Becket, 2005; Beckett & Miller, 2006; Haines, 1989; Hedge, 2000; Tseng, 2007, 2013). The project-based learning proposed by Stoller (2007, p.143) included features such as having a process and product orientation, encouraging students' ownership of the project, extending over a period of time, encouraging the natural integration of skills, maintaining a commitment to both language and content learning, encouraging both collaboration and individual work, assigning work which results in a final product, and concluding the project with students' reflection on the process and product of their project.

As for the benefits of project-based learning, Stoller reported that the most widely espoused advantages included "improved language abilities, 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" (2002, pp.143-145). In addition, project-based learning is student-centered. The teacher acts as a facilitator and advisor rather than dominates the class. Students are encouraged to take on their own learning responsibilities to work with their team members. At the same time, each student also needs to independently accomplish their own negotiated tasks. 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 encourages the ownership of the project among students.

## **The Study**

### **The context**

The study was carried out in an English drama course in a technological University in Northern Taiwan. Thirty-five students enrolled in this class were from School of Continuing Education and were all majored in AFL (Applied Foreign Languages). The class met once a week for 18 weeks, and each class lasted for two hours.

### **Participants**

Thirty-six participants were all adult Taiwanese learners aged from 22 to 50 years old. Sixteen were males and twenty were females. Some of the students never took any

proficiency test, and for those who did, the scores indicate students' proficiency level varied from low-intermediate (i.e., TOEIC410) to high-intermediate (i.e., TOEIC 880). Students have had at least 8-10 years of experience studying English when participated in this study.

### **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, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the 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 among group members.
- (4) To develop evaluation skills which foster critical thinking abilities.
- (5) To enhance pragmatic awareness which students learn proper use of expressions in context
- (6) 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 of sequence of activities for project work proposed by Stoller (1997, pp.112-117). The steps and the responding themes are specified as follows:

Steps	Agenda	Objectives
1	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 as a class and in groups, students all preferred the contemporary films as the main themes to be explored.
2	Determine the final outcome of the project	<p>(1). <b>The midterm presentation</b> for two selected films encompasses reporting on the casts, movie plots, movie reviews, and their own feedbacks. Students chose the preferred film for the adaptation of their own final drama play.</p> <p>(2). <b>The final drama-play</b> includes adapting the original film scripts into a 20-25 minute drama play. Thus, deciding on the plots, modifying and editing the script, choosing the cast, working on the background scenes were all inclusive for the final performance.</p>
3	Structure the project	<p>(1) For <b>midterm presentation</b>, students work in groups to:</p> <p>A.) Discuss on the selection of two films, and closely watch the films.</p> <p>B.) Read the movie critics from authentic material (i.e., rotten tomatoes).</p> <p>C.) Prepare for the oral presentation for the selected films, including reporting on the cast, plots, critics, feedback, and finally decide on the preferred film for the adaptation of their final drama play.</p> <p>(2) For <b>final drama performance</b>, students were instructed and advised on how to:</p> <p>A.) Decide on the plots and modify and adapt the original script.</p> <p>B.) Decide on the cast, and edit the adapted script.</p> <p>C.) Work on the accuracy, fluency, and intonation of their verbal expressions.</p> <p>D.) Work on the non-verbal parts of the play such as gestures and facial expressions.</p> <p>E.) Prepare for the costumes, props, and background music, and etc.,</p> <p>F.) Rehearsal, self-evaluation and final performance</p>
4	Prepare	(1). Give clear instruction on how to read authentic movie

	students for the language demands on the <i>process</i> of the project	<p>reviews such as rotten tomatoes.</p> <p>(2). Provide clear guidelines and examples for midterm presentation.</p> <p>(3). Conduct group discussion on the selected films, monitor their understanding for the movie reviews and, and check on students' language problems in their written work.</p> <p>(4). Give clear instruction on the criteria being evaluated for the final drama play.</p> <p>(5). Help students edit original script, and work on the language problems.</p> <p>(6). Supervise students' drama play practice, including their language accuracy, intonation, fluency, and nonverbal expressions.</p>
5	Prepare students for the language demands on the <i>final product</i> of the project	<p>(1). Give instruction on how to conduct a formal oral presentation, including outlining and preparing slides, proofreading, and performing with proper eye-contact and right tone of voice.</p> <p>(2). The adapted scripts were monitored for repeated editing and adjustment for final play.</p> <p>(3). Conduct and videotape rehearsals. Have students watch their own performance and reflect on their strength and problematic areas.</p>
6	Evaluate the project	<p>(1). Both midterm and final project were evaluated by the teacher and their peers via evaluation forms.</p> <p>(2). Students and instructor evaluated their learning process and effectiveness via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.</p>

### **Final Drama Performances**

In total, there were six final drama performances acting on the adapted script from the original films "English Vinglish", "Click", "How to lose a guy in 10 days", "Terminal, Hair Spray", and "Three Idiots". The final drama plays were all filmed, recorded, 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 pragmatic awareness, and decrease their anxiety and enhance their confidence as language learners and users. Through the 5-point likert scale questions (1. Strongly disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neutral, 4. Agree. 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.	4.47	.696
(2). My English speaking ability has improved because of oral presentation and acting on the drama play.	4.50	.737
(3). My English reading ability has improved because of reading the movie reviews from rotten tomatoes and other related sources.	4.00	.828
(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	.845
(5). Overall, I think I have improved in all four skills of English from this group project.	4.39	.728
(6). Evaluating other group's presentation and performance helps me think of my own advantages and weaknesses.	4.75	.439

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=4.39). Specifically, speaking ability was perceived to have improved the most (M=4.50), followed by

listening (M=4.47), 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=4.75) reveals that students strongly believe the evaluation of others' performance help them reflect upon their own strength and problems, which helps with their 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 skills. 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.

Regarding critical thinking abilities, students pointed out that from watching their own taped rehearsals, they became aware of their own problems in word pronunciation, intonation, and the fluency of their utterances. They were then able to work on these problems with the help from either more linguistic advanced peers in the group or from their instructor. In addition, students reported while given the opportunities to evaluate their peers' work through provided evaluation forms, they were more focused in evaluating their peers' work and in giving constructive comments. And in turn, these observations would work as guidelines when they work on their own project in the final drama play.

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., working on their own pronunciations in their lines) and collaboratively with their group members (i.e., discuss on the plots, help or get help with the language problems). Echoed from the benefits of project-based learning proposed by Stoller (2002), this project has allowed students to integrate all language skills to accomplish 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, purposeful, intriguing, and collaborative activities, their whole performance would outweigh the sum of its separate linguistic parts and thus enhance the overall language learning success. (Carrasquillo, 1993; 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 language learning

Item	Mean	S.D.
(1). I have learned some useful English expressions from watching the Films.	4.31	.668
(2). Learning English from films allows me to learn how different English expressions are used in real communication.	4.33	.676
(3). Performing the drama allows me to use what I've learned from the movie in actual practice.	4.25	.649
(4). Learning English from films help me understand different cultures.	4.53	.654
(5). Learning English from films make me aware of different usages in English and Chinese.	4.39	.645
(6). I think I know better about how to speak English in a more proper manner.	3.56	1.297

From Table 2, students believed that they have picked up some useful English expressions from the films (M=4.31), and have learned how to use them in real context (M=4.33). They were also able to actually use these expressions in the designated role in the drama performance (M=4.25), which helped enhance their understanding of these usages. 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=4.53). Besides, students responded positively in becoming aware of the different usages in English and in Chinese (M=4.39). It's worth noting that students' written feedback for movies contained direct translation from Chinese (L1) which syntactically and semantically failed 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 mother tongue and the target language.

Finally, in the part of pragmatics (proper usages in context), students' responses for item six (M=3.56) seemed to be less positive in relation to other aspects of contextual

learning. From the semi-structured interviews, some students revealed that when it came to different speech acts such as the proper ways to make request or refusals, they were still not very certain in performing these acts properly in English. It is thus suggested more work can be done in directing students' attention to different speech acts displayed 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**

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 from watching films and performing drama is fun.	4.69	.467
(2). After doing this project, I am now not afraid to speak English in general.	4.44	.652
(3). I do not feel as anxious when I have to present publicly with English in class.	4.17	.775
(4). I start to speak English without thinking too much in Chinese.	3.72	1.003
(5). I am now more confident to speak English in general.	4.50	.561

From Table 3, the result indicated that students believed learning English via this project is motivating (M=4.69). It was also found that this project has helped them be less afraid to speak English in general (M=4.44), and less anxious in doing oral

presentations (M=4.17). Overall, students became more confident in speaking English (M=4.50) after doing the project. However, it is obvious that students still perceive their first language overrides the target language from time to time and thus, the relative lower mean score (M=3.72) is shown, indicating students still experience strong L1 transfer while partaking activities in this project.

In fact, from students' production of written and spoken tasks, students' interlanguage displayed a great deal of literal translation from their first language. This often leads to problematic language which linguistically and/or pragmatically fails to address students' intended meaning. In this regard, 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). That is, teachers' feedback on linguistic elements will mainly focus on the problematic elements which interfere with meaning. In addition, differences in pragmatics such as varied ways to address different speech acts can also be introduced, particularly in students' edited drama script. This will help solve students' linguistic problems as well as make aware of the differences in the pragmatic aspects between the two languages.

Many learners experience anxiety and distress when learning a new language (Price, 1991; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012). Studies have revealed that students experience higher levels of anxiety as a result of speaking a foreign language. (Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Young, 1991). By 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 drama project fun, motivating, and self and group empowering, a non-threatening situation for language production has been created. The enacting of play, according to Banerjee (2014, p.82), allows "a healthy release of emotions of the learners in a safe setting which can work to relieve the tension of learning in a second language". Thus, this project work 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 (Skehan, 1998), 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, self-confidence (Stoller, 2006) and lowered anxiety and inhibition in language learning. With the components of "comprehensible input, meaningful output, and negotiation of meaning" via project work (Stoller, 2007, p.143), 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 this study demonstrates, the project work activates students' interest and naturally integrate 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 the findings in this study.

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