

## Drama-Based Approach in English Language Teaching

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### Abstract

The present study investigates the benefits of implementing drama techniques in English language teaching. It also focuses on the means and strategies of creating a learner-centered classroom to enhance English as Foreign Language learners' communication skills. Two dramatic techniques used in the research are *exploiting a scripted play* and *improvisation*. Teacher-researcher conducted a qualitative research method through a case study of First-Year Master Students of English Literature and Civilization studying English as a foreign language in Dr. Moulat Tahar University of Saida, Algeria. The present study reveals the positive impact of teaching English through drama on student's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. It sheds light on the method of putting learners in authentic situations to help them discover their hidden creativity and overcome their fears. In addition to promoting their sense of collaboration, including discussion, negotiation, and performance.

*Keywords:* Drama, exploiting a scripted play, improvisation, learner-centered method, teaching English as a foreign language

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## Introduction

One of the significant roles a teacher of English may perform is to teach literature in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context as a means of learning. Teachers must be aware of the various benefits a literary text may provide in the language classroom if it is well- explored. Reading literature enables students to identify, analyze, interpret and describe the critical ideas, values, and themes that appear in the text. It also helps to understand the way these ideas and themes inform and affect culture and society of both now and the past, the fact that develops students' character and emotional maturity. In this context, Hill (1986) notes, "one of the main benefits of literature is that it acts as a stimulus that ignites interest and motivates the student by involving them on a personal, emotional level." (p. 9)

Exploring literary texts in English Language Teaching (ELT) provides an opportunity to put language into context whereby grammar rules, phrases, vocabulary already learned can be explored, and at the same time, new words are discovered. As a result, student's ability to read in English improves with a good understanding and reflection over texts from different perspectives. On the other hand, student's perception of the world around them matures through which they gain insight and develop a sense of toleration. When students are involved personally and emotionally, they become motivated and interested in their learning process. This, in turn, contributes to their personal and cognitive development. Moreover, one of the fundamental aims of using literary texts in the language classroom is to make students transcend the boundaries of a teacher-centered classroom and become autonomous learners.

Encouraging students to read literary texts in the language classroom promotes the psycholinguistic aspect of language learning as it focuses on form and discourse processing skills and improves vocabulary expansion and reading skills (Hall, 2005). Literature in language teaching does not only improve the linguistic skills, but also encourages the communicative skills for it provides learners with genuine and enjoyable materials. In his article entitled *The Role of Literature and Culture in English Language Teaching*, Cruz (2010) states, "literature enhances ELT through elements such as authentic material, language in use, and aesthetic representation of the spoken language, as well as language and cultural enrichment." (p. 1)

Of all other forms of literature, drama can be the shorter path that leads the teacher towards the goal of developing student's receptive and productive skills, mainly communication skills. "Drama provides an authentic arena for natural language use in real situations with an emphasis on reciprocal, synchronized, unpredictable audience interactions." (Beatty, 2015, p. 30) For this reason, the present study emphasizes the following research questions:

- Can drama be used as a learning instrument of the English language?
- To what extent the use of drama techniques helps students overcome their fears of communicating their ideas in front of an audience.

## In Search of a Learner-Centered Classroom

New methods of teaching English often accentuate the development of learner's psycholinguistic and communicative skills. EFL learners usually fear the challenge of speaking formally in front of an audience. Nevertheless, teachers can help reduce such fears by maintaining a friendly atmosphere in the class, encouraging students to engage in peers

communicative tasks and then in increasingly more prominent groups. “Students can also practice presenting information, answering questions, and holding group discussions” (Dwi Astuti, 2016, p. 53). Implementing literature in the language classroom and mainly “drama texts promotes a learner-centered classroom practice, which enables learners to perceive, think, act and interact during the learning process instead of being passive receivers of knowledge”. (Fleming, 2006, p. 97)

According to the American Psychological Association (1997), the learning process is based on a set of principles, which entails:

- Learning is influenced by social interactions and interpersonal relations.
- What and how much is learned is influenced by the learner’s motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual’s emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking.
- Successful learners can reflect on how they think, learn, and set practical learning or performance goals.
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The set of principles stated above show how the teacher-student and student-student interpersonal relations and interactions highly contribute in creating a practical learning atmosphere that largely depends on creativity and active learning.

### Literature Review

Throughout history, as Landy (1982) notes, drama occurred when a community would gather for a ceremonial purpose: to assure a good hunt, an ample rainfall, or a long life to a new leader. The dramatic elements included chanting, dancing, storytelling, and dressing up in the costumes and masks of gods or animals. However, in the developmental history of a human being, drama becomes a natural means of learning. In the same vein, Thompson and Evans (2005) point out that drama is a multi-sensory tool, which combines listening, speaking, thinking, exploration and use of the immediate environment, and the development of physical control.

When drama is used as a teaching method in the sense of being part of the eclectic approach to language teaching, it can become a central aid in acquiring communicative competence (Davies, 1990). According to Sariçoban (2004),

Drama raises the students’ awareness of the target language and culture. Learners should make use of drama to improve their comprehension of life experiences, reflect on particular circumstances and make sense of their extra linguistic world in a deeper way. (p. 15)

On the other hand, Dwi Astuti (2016) views that a drama-oriented language classroom allows frequent classroom presentations and discussions, which enable teachers to diagnose and remedy problems. Practicing oral presentations in these ways can lessen students’ anxieties while, helping them to learn the subject matter of the lesson. Kao, Carlin and Hsu (2011) reported that:

During the process of building the drama context, EFL learners had the chance to evaluate and practice their listening and speaking skills critically. They claimed that

drama is a tool with the potential to engage English FL learners and promote their oral proficiency. (p. 501)

Accordingly, Susan Holden (1982) suggests the following five-point plan for integrating drama activities into the lesson:

- The teacher presents the idea, theme, or problem to the students, organizing any preliminary work ensuring that the students know precisely what to do.
- Students discuss in groups what and exactly how they will do the task.
- Students experiment in groups with various interpretations until they are satisfied with one.
- Students may show their interpretation or solution to another group.
- Students may also discuss their solutions in groups or with the rest of the class. This discussion can serve as a form of assessment for the students of their work.

Drama is a specific action to make the learning process more active, exciting, communicative, and contextual. Drama techniques refer to all those strategies that accompany a dramatic discourse to help a better understanding and a better performance of a text. Acting is a way of learning by experience and “Drama techniques integrate body, mind, and emotions and motivate students to use their personalities and experiences as resources for language production” (Maley & Duff, 1978, p. 6-7). In the language classroom, the teacher can apply different drama techniques such as role-played, simulation, mime, improvisation, frozen image building, and scripted plays.

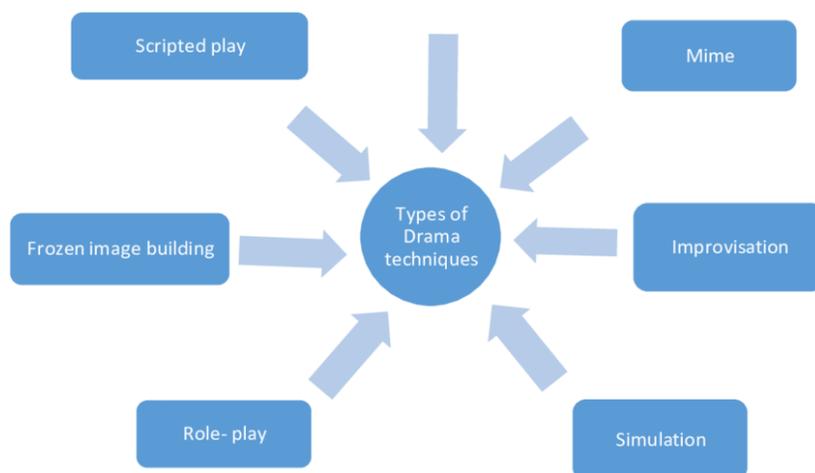


Figure 1. Drama Techniques for EFL Learning (adopted from Mosaddaq & Tahani, 2021, p. 677)

Most importantly, drama techniques are valuable means to strengthen students' active involvement in the learning process. It involves excitement, fun, and laughter into the language classroom and encourages cooperation and collaboration in a creative context. Undertaking this method, puts students into real-life discourse models that will assimilate through imitation and performance.

## Research Methodology

### *Participants of the Study*

Participants of the study were twenty students of First-Year Master of English Literature and Civilization studying English as a foreign language at the department of English Language and Literature, Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida, Algeria. The period conducted for the research study was three weeks (two sessions per week). Students were divided into four groups, five students in each group playing different functions according to the type of the task assigned.

### *Instruments of the Study*

The dramatic text used in the present research study was -scene one- from *Riders to the Sea* (1905), a play written by the famous Irish playwright J.M Synge. It is a one-act play with one setting and soft stage directions the fact, which encourages the participants to work on the play easily. The dramatic text was selected because of its specific and symbolic language, which increased students challenge to perform it.

## Research Procedure

Drama can be easily implemented in the English language syllabus because of its relevance. It creates a “chance to increase awareness of paralinguistic features, linguistic accessibility, intrinsic interest, practicability in terms of lesson time, student numbers and space, and the possibility of using other dramatic activities in the future, thereby providing continuity” (Davies, 1990, p. 89). “Regularly conducted activities (i.e., drama/theater training and performance) have the potency to desensitize students’ speaking anxiety by allowing them to constantly explore and experience the target language in various meaningful, realistic contexts.” (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson & Soler, 2002, p. 75)

Nevertheless, before maintaining any drama activity in the language classroom, the teacher has to be well prepared before the lesson gets underway. Lesson objectives have to be settled beforehand, and the text should be selected according to students linguistic competencies and interests. Applying drama in the language classroom can be achieved through different drama activities such as *exploiting a scripted play* and improvisation.

### *Exploiting a Scripted Play*

Before deciding on the selected script, the teacher has to check the accessibility of the language in terms of its relevance to the learners’ needs and interest. “To extract the most out of a play, work on it should be approached in stages. Text (script) analysis, rehearsal, and performance”. (Davies, 1990, p. 94)

The task was achieved over three weeks (two sessions a week). Students were arranged in the form of groups where the teacher functions as a facilitator. As an initial step, students were asked to read the first scene of the play *Riders to the Sea* carefully to familiarize themselves with the text by reading it at least three times. The teacher then discussed the text with the class in the form of debate before assigning the roles. Language in the selected play was poetic with a strong emphasis on the Irish dialect, therefore, the teacher asked students to read it aloud as a kind of rehearsal. The teacher’s aim was to draw students attention to the importance of the language used in the play commenting on different devices such as mood, register, diction, and physical atmosphere.

In the second week, students were eager to start performing the play. As a first step, students were divided into groups of five, two groups were meant to perform the first part of the scene, and the remaining two groups chose the second. The teacher asked students to discuss the setting and characters in detail, select their roles, and start rehearse the play. At this step, a rehearsal is crucial for a better mastering of the language, mainly in terms of intonation (paralanguage) and non-verbal language (body language). After two weeks of working on the scripted play, students reached the last stage of the lesson, which is --performance. Directly after that, a small discussion was held to comment and evaluate the way students performed.

### ***Major Findings***

Dealing with drama in an EFL context was a big challenge for the teacher. In addition to the complexity of text and performance techniques, Algerian students lacked the potential to be exposed to a theatre context; this fact comes back to socio-cultural reasons. However, using theatre as a means to learn the English language and discover its aesthetic values helped students transcend their fears of expressing themselves in front of an audience. Students were highly involved in the task throughout its three stages, showing a great interest in performing their roles and communicating their ideas. After achieving the objectives of the lesson, students were no more passive learners. They could overcome their hesitation to intervene in class discussion, communicating with their peers, and enjoying team working.

### ***Improvisation***

Improvisation is another salient drama technique that can be used in English teaching, in which learners are presented to a situation and challenged to respond to it. Students can create their script and agree on developing its idea and shaping its structure, but without any speech construction, the acting must be spontaneous and improvised. "Thoughts and feelings are emphasized in improvisation, in which learners create people and relationships by acting out situations using speech and movement, but without a preconceived plan" (Davies, 1990, p. 94). What is enjoyed in this drama activity is that students are free of being dependent upon a script that should be memorized.

The task was achieved over three weeks (two sessions per week). After being exposed to drama text studying its norms and techniques in the former activity, students now were required to write and produce their script that should be performed in an improvised way. The topic can be an imitation of the original script *Riders to the Sea* or an imaginary ending of the play. The activity helped students focus on the register, vocabulary in context, and fluency, in addition to their collaboration and creativity.

Students worked in groups where the teacher played the role of a facilitator and supervisor only. At first, the teacher read the first scene of the play. After that, students were divided into four groups of five students functioning as different members: a reader of the text, a writer of the script, a dictionary checker for vocabulary, an editor (revision and correction), and a script designer (acting and body language).

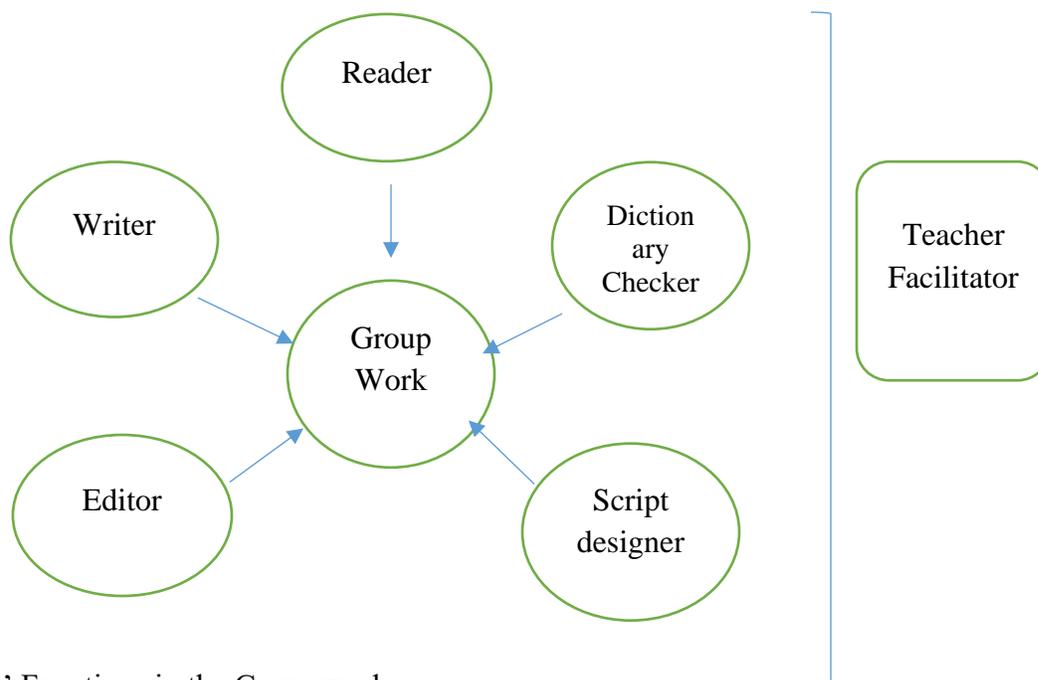


Figure 2. Students’ Functions in the Group work

Since students were going to think of different endings, the teacher asked them to provide a story that involved several characters so that all students could act out those characters. As a final step of the lesson, students started rehearsals for better and more convenient acting and performed their improvised plays.

**Major Findings**

In the initial steps of the lesson, students showed a great sense of collaboration to formulate their creative idea of the improvised play. Later and during the day of performance, some students were anxious because there was no script to rely on while acting. Nonetheless, once students began their performance of the improvised plays, their anxiety decreased, and they could create a wonderful sense of cooperation and creativity that sometimes lead to funny situations and humor. The fact that reduced stress and heightened motivation. The overall aim of this type of teamwork is to evolve students’ communication skills through working together, sharing ideas and decision-making, and organizing dramatic statements.

The following table represents significant achievements of both applied drama activities in the case study:

Table 1. *Learning Achievements*

Participants	Achievements
Twenty (20) Master Students of English Literature & Civilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading aloud the dramatic text.</li> <li>• Writing the script.</li> <li>• Communicating verbal and non-verbal language during performance.</li> <li>• Listening to one another.</li> </ul>

- |  |                                                                                                                        |
|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving self-esteem, critical thinking, and autonomous learning.</li> </ul> |
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### Results Discussion

Using drama as a learning instrument to teach the English language displays the mutual relationship between cognitive and affective aspects of language learning relating thinking with feelings. By experiencing the language through operation, learners will be practicing the target language and para-language aspects of communication bringing together both mind and body. The extra linguistic world of drama also helps students discover new cultures and new people allowing more tolerance and understanding of life. Moreover, classroom presentations and group discussions promote oral proficiency and enable teachers to be closer to their students for a better diagnosing of problems. When students communicate their ideas and express their opinions and feelings without any hesitation, they learn how to solve problems and develop their self-confidence, which leads to greater adaptability in life.

### Conclusion

Drama techniques can be used as practical learning tools in ELT if they are well structured and explored. Drama takes the learner beyond the matrix of the learning environment to reach the horizon of creativity and universality. Putting learners inside authentic situations unveil their hidden creativity and allow them to transcend their fears of expressing themselves in front of others. Drama in ELT puts language into context; it gives learners the experience of success in real-life situations, and supplies them with confidence to deal with the world outside the classroom. In other words, if a drama activity is appropriately done, it creates a learner-centered classroom where the learner rather than the language or the teacher is at the center of the learning process. Dramatic activities provide EFL learners with paralinguistic practices and lead them towards fluency, maturity, motivation, physical involvement, in addition to interpersonal relations. Sharing the classroom responsibility with learners showing them their function as a major pole of the learning environment helps them improve themselves as individuals and make them enjoy and appreciate their learning process. Eventually, the whole study was a good opportunity for the teacher-researcher to draw his students' attention to the artistic and aesthetic appreciation of theatre.

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