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Exploring the Use of Drama-Based Activities as a Learning Tool in English Oral Proficiency Development among Students from Non-Malay-Medium Nation Schools: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

Transitioning from Non-Malay-medium national schools to Malay-medium or English-medium secondary schools proved to be a struggle for many students due to the negligence in developing audio-lingual skills of the second language (L2) throughout the six-years of primary education. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of drama-based activities as a language learning strategy on L2 oral proficiency among the students aged between 12 to 13 years old from Non-Malay-Medium National School. Over a period of five weeks, pre-intervention interviews (on the first week), intervention (over the span of three weeks with two hours per week), and post-intervention interviews (on the fifth week) were carried out. The content of the intervention was adapted from Trinity College London's Grade 4 Communication Skills syllabus. The instruments used for data collection included: (1) pre-determined pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments, (2) classroom observation speaking assessments and (3) oral proficiency assessment rubric adapted from Cambridge English speaking assessment of Common European Framework of Reference Level B1 and a published drama assessment tool focusing on elements such as Grammar and Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Discourse Management, and Task Completion. The results of the post-intervention oral proficiency assessment showed that there was an overall improvement especially in discourse management and task completion.

Keywords: Drama-Based Activities, English Oral Proficiency, Learning Tools, Non-Malay Nation School, Secondary School

Introduction

A language is held on a global status when its purpose is recognized in every country (Crystal, 2003). That being said, English has been given a unique status among all known languages, labeled with

terms such as 'lingua franca' (Smit, 2010), 'Global Language'(Crystal, 2003), 'International English' or 'Global English' (Francis & Ryan, 1998) as it is recognized as the language of business, science, technology, education, the Internet, entertainment, as well as sport (Crystal, 2003; De Costa, 2009; Francis & Ryan, 1998; Nunan, 2000; Smit, 2010). The importance of English does not affect only the exchange of information in different fields on a worldwide platform, but it affects also the livelihood and job opportunities of the fresh graduates in Malaysia. Poor command of English is listed as one of the top five reasons unemployment rate among fresh graduates is rising in Malaysia skills (Balakrishnan, 2017a; Balakrishnan, 2017b; Malaysia Kini, 2017; Malay Mail Online, 2016; Jobstreet Malaysia, 2015).

Malaysia's education system can be divided into preschool education, primary education, secondary education, post-secondary education and tertiary education. Different mediums of instructions are used all throughout the different levels of education system. For example, Malaysia's public primary schools can be classified based on the medium of instruction: (1) Malay-medium National Schools (*Sekolah Kebangsaan, SK*) and (2) Non-Malay-medium National Schools (*Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan, SJK*). At primary education level, non-language subjects such as Science, Mathematics, Geography and History, though having the same syllabus, the lessons are conducted using different mediums depending on which National Schools the students attend.

Although Bahasa Malaysia and English are compulsory subjects in all schools, both languages are treated as Foreign Language whereby the language acquisition occurs only during the few hours of lessons per week. Both languages are taught only the grammar structures and rules of the languages, focusing on honing students' reading and writing skills in order to fulfill the academic requirements. Hence, students are lacking in performing other language components such as listening and speaking due to limited practical usage at this stage. Students struggle to cope with their academic when they enter secondary education due to the shift to using English and Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instructions.

Although the fluency of the target language may increase overtime as the students enter secondary education level, one's English oral language skills in the early primary education years are critical to one's English reading comprehension and academic achievement in many years to come (August & Shanahan, 2008; Hoff, 2013; Snow & Dickinson, 1991). Speaking skill is, however, often neglected in language program by language teachers despite the fact that the lack of focus in the said skill causes anxiety and lack of confidence in language learners (Bada, Genc, & Ozkan, 2011). To promote the development of oral skills among students of primary education level, ESL teachers should engage in different language teaching methods and strategies in the oral language practice to help the students to thrive in the oral aspect of the target language (Greenfader, Brouillette, & Farkas, 2015).

Drama has emerged as an effective method that provides involvement of both the teachers and students during the learning process and presenting the target language to the learners in "an interactive, communicative and contextualized way" (Mattevi, 2005, as cited by Albalawi, 2014). Although the use of drama has become increasingly common in the educational contexts and has been proven to be a valuable L2 teaching strategy (Albalawi, 2014; Greenfader et al., 2015; Javid, 2013; Kalidas, 2014; Papadopoulos, 2014; Rew & Moon, 2013), teachers are skeptical of this

innovative strategy due to concerns such as losing control of the class, noise level, time constraint, and being unable to achieve their learning objectives as well as learning outcomes (Kalidas, 2014). However, they fail to realize that clearly-structured activities allows the students to not only enjoy the learning process but at the same time develop their creativity, reasoning, and interpersonal skills (Kalidas, 2014).

Studies have been conducted in Malaysia, though limited, on the effectiveness of applying drama as a learning tool in relation to confidence level and creative thinking among the students, however, the participants were secondary students and undergraduates of which different research methodology were employed (Abdullah & Ady Mukhtarudin, 2010; Kalidas, 2014; M. Nawi, 2014; Nordin, Sharif, Fong, Mansor, & Zakaria, 2012). There are limited quantitative researches and studies conducted on primary students here in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

This study aimed to explore the effectiveness of applying drama-based activities as a learning tool in developing L2 proficiency level among students aged between 12 to 13 years old from Non-Malay-Medium National School. The following research question of the study was addressed to explore the effectiveness of applying drama-based activities as a learning tool in developing L2 proficiency level:

- 1) What are the changes in students' oral proficiency after undergoing through English lessons incorporated with drama-based activities as a language learning strategy?

Literature Review

The term "drama" can refer to both theater and drama as the techniques used are borrowed from both fields. However, these complementary disciplines are at the same time distinctive from one another. Theater techniques are product-oriented focusing on scripted language and a final-staged performance produced by the learners to complete the language learning experience, whereas drama techniques refer to group-oriented activities emphasizing on communication, negotiation of meaning using a more natural and authentic speech (Galante & Thomson, 2017). The activities developed for the drama-based teaching approach aimed to enhance and promote fluency in communication. Drama-based activities make learning lively and more meaningful for students as they will be engaging and interacting with one another (Iamsaard & Kerdpol, 2015; Tengku Dato Paris, Zainal, & Yussof, 2012).

The use of drama as means of language teaching across the syllabus is known as Drama-In-Education (D.I.E) (Tengku Dato Paris et al., 2012). Students' participation in drama-based activities allows learners to (1) expand their awareness of language usage, (2) look at the reality from the perspective of fantasy, and (3) search for meanings through actions, resonating the statement of McCaslin (1990) claiming that understanding and attitudes are the main objectives rather than playmaking or the characters from the playmaking, as the focus is on the process, not the product (Tengku Dato Paris et al., 2012).

Speaking or oral skills is among the four language skills that include listening, reading, as well as writing. There are a few perspectives on oral skills, and the most common is the three components of oral skills which are accuracy, fluency, and complexity (Nzanana, 2016). Another perspective on oral skills is by assessing comprehensibility, accentedness, fluency and intelligibility separately or as a combination (Galante & Thomson, 2017; Gardner, 1985; Nzanana, 2016). In this study, oral proficiency will be assessed based on Grammar and Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Discourse

Management, and Task Completion (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2011; Wen, 2015).

Grammar and Vocabulary refers to the ability to control the language structure in terms of grammatical forms and a variety words required for the task. (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2011; Wen, 2015). Pronunciation refers to the intelligibility of the individual spoken words and intonation as well as pacing in which the speech act is performed (K, 2013; University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2011). Discourse Management refers to the fluency of speech which can be further interpreted by the coherence and cohesion of speech (K, 2013; University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2011). Coherence is defined as the clear and logical elaboration of speech, whereas cohesion is defined as the unified and structural organization of the speech elaboration (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2011). Task completion refers to the completion of task with appropriate responses and elaboration (Wen, 2015).

There are a few studies conducted by fellow researchers that drama as a simulation tool in an ESL classroom shows positive results in students' oral proficiency (Galante & Thomson, 2017; Iamsaard & Kerdpol, 2015; Javid, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2014). A quantitative research on the effectiveness of simulation in developing oral skills was conducted by Javid (2013) among 18 faculty members and 88 freshman students from the College of Pharmacy in Taif, Saudi Arabia. The group of participants were divided equally into experimental and control groups. Both groups have shown reasonable progress in their oral communication proficiency as presented in their pre- and post-interventions. A similar research is conducted by Galante and Thomson (2017) in a private language institute in São Paulo, Brazil to investigate the effectiveness of drama-based English as Foreign Language program in the development of oral fluency, comprehensibility and accentedness among the learners. The participants are divided into controlled and experimental groups. Although the results showed no significant relationships statistically, descriptive statistics suggested that there was an improvement in oral fluency over time. Iamsaard and Kerdpol (2015) conducted similar study on 26 eleventh graders who enrolled in Language-Social program at Thungsaliachanupatham School, Thailand. The posttest results showed that the participants produced higher English communicative speaking ability after the intervention which is the dramatic activities used in the study. Papadopoulos (2014) also conducted a similar experimental research on a group of 15 fifth graders from Larissa, Greece over a period of eight months. Students from the experimental group achieved better performance in speaking skills as compared to the control group.

These studies have proven that the application of drama-based teaching approach has significant results on students' L2 oral proficiency. Though the drama approach in L2 teaching and learning is gaining positive favors among L2 educators and researchers, however, it has yet to be embraced and applied by L2 educators in the context of Malaysia.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research adopted the systematic design of Grounded Theory Research Design that aims to explore the common experiences as experienced by individuals to develop a theory and that focuses on collecting data through interview (Creswell, 2012). Purposive sampling technique was employed in this study. Six school students aged between 12 to 13 years old from Non-Malay Medium National School were selected for the intervention and pre- and post- intervention interview sessions.

The method required for this study included the implementation of drama-based English syllabus, classroom observations, and speaking assessment sessions with the selected students. The group of participants met for two 2-hour lessons each week over a period of three weeks, which made up to a total of 6 hours of learning. This program followed a communicative and task-based approach of language teaching and learning.. To assess the changes in students' oral proficiency, a speaking assessment session was administered pre- and post- intervention for all the participants. The speaking tasks that were included for speaking assessment purpose were an adaptation of Trinity College London's (2009) Grade 4 Communication Skills assessment. The speaking tasks included persuasion, verbal summary and public speaking.

Data Collection Phases	
Data Collection Phases	Instruments
Pre- Intervention Interview Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre- intervention speaking assessment
Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drama-based activities incorporated lesson plans • Classroom speaking assessment
Post- Intervention Interview Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post- intervention speaking assessment

Table 1: An Overview of Data Collection Instruments

To assess the second language oral proficiency, an oral proficiency assessment rubric was adapted from Cambridge English speaking assessment of Common European Framework of Reference Level B1 and Wen's (2015) drama assessment tool focusing on elements such as Grammar and Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Discourse Management, and Task Completion (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2011; Wen, 2015).

Table 2: An Overview of the Data Analysis Methods

Data Types	Data Analysis Methods	
Speaking Assessment	Oral	proficiency assessment rubric
Post-Lesson Recorded Videos	Oral	proficiency assessment rubric

Speaking Assessment

The speaking tasks that were included for speaking assessment purpose are an adaptation of Trinity College London's (2009) Grade 4 Communication Skills assessment. The speaking tasks included persuasion, verbal summary and public speaking.

The persuasion task requires the participant to attempt to persuade the interviewer to lend them an object. The persuasion task is categorized as an interactive task where the element of role play is involved. The interviewer will interact accordingly with the participant throughout the task. Successful interactive engagement between the interviewer and the participants is emphasized. The verbal summary task requires the participants to summarize verbally a passage read aloud by the interviewer at a moderate pace. Participants may take notes and will be given a few moments to review their notes before giving a verbal summary of the content. A successful task completion requires the participants to engage in careful and selective listening skills. The length of an effective verbal summary varies.

The public speaking task requires the participants to give a talk on the topic stated. Prior to the assessment, participants were given the time to prepare for the talk. Such instruction was to avoid the memorization of speech. Emphasis is on the style of delivery which should be fluent and relaxed, demonstrating some form of personal engagement with the interviewer.

Triangulation and Trustworthiness of Data Collection and Data Analysis

To increase the trustworthiness of the research, the data collected were triangulated with methodological triangulation and investigator triangulation. Methodological triangulation refers to the usage of multiple qualitative data collection methods to investigate the research questions, whereas investigator triangulation refers to the involvement of difference investigator in the data analysis process (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2002).

Due to nature of qualitative research where there is no clear method to develop the collected data, there are criticism on the lack of objectivity and generalizability during and after the course of the research, as stated by Phillimore and Goodson (2004) (International Hospitality Research Centre Switzerland, 2016). However, these doubts may be lessened through the aspect of trustworthiness (International Hospitality Research Centre Switzerland, 2016).

There are several ways to overcome the issues of trustworthiness of the research suggested by International Hospitality Research Centre Switzerland (2016) and Shenton (2004):

- 1) Examining findings of previous researches to assess the degree of congruence of the results of the current as compared to those of the previous research findings.
- 2) Adopting a well-established research method by incorporating the correct operational measures for the concepts of the study that had been utilized by previous comparable researches.
- 3) Incorporating triangulation during the course of data collection and analysis by using different methods to collect data to increase the validity of the study.
- 4) Frequent debriefing sessions between the researcher and his or her experienced academic superiors offering wider perspectives to the researcher.

Results

Participants' oral proficiency was assessed based on their pre-intervention speaking performance, post-intervention speaking performance, as well as in-class speaking performance via the video observation.

Overall, participants' oral proficiency showed improvement in the post-intervention interview speaking assessment as compared to pre-intervention interview speaking assessment, especially from the aspects of Task Completion, Discourse Management and Grammar and Vocabulary.

The video observation of the participants' speaking performance during the intervention also showed improvement in Task Completion, Discourse Management and Grammar and Vocabulary. The video observation of the participants' speaking performance during the intervention also showed improvement in Task Completion, Discourse Management and Grammar and Vocabulary.

Pre-Intervention Interview Speaking Assessment Analysis

From the pre-intervention oral proficiency assessment, participant TG002 scored the highest (85%) among the three participants. His speech was intelligible and generally fluent showing continuation of thoughts. Though there was little hesitation in his speech and minor grammatical and structural errors, he was a little challenged by the verbal summary task due to omission of some of details. His interaction with the interlocutor was interactive and showed engagement with the interlocutor.

Though participant TG001 did not perform as well as participant TG002 and just managed to score a total of 56.7%, he was able to express his overall ideas with obvious grammatical and structural errors showing some level of interaction and engagement with the interlocutor. He struggled in task completion for all three speaking tasks due to misunderstanding of the instruction as well as lacking in vocabulary knowledge to properly elaborate his points.

Participant TG006 scored the lowest (45%) among the participants. His speech showed obvious hesitation and could sometimes be classified as short responses and phrases. He struggled in expressing himself with elaborated sentences due to lacking in vocabulary knowledge. There were obvious grammatical and structural errors in his speech as well. He struggled in task completion for all three speaking tasks due to his limitation in expressing himself in English. His interaction and engagement with the interlocutor was passive and needed the interlocutor to prompt further.

Post-Intervention Interview Speaking Assessment Analysis

From the post-intervention oral proficiency assessment, participant TG002 scored the highest (88.3%) among the three participants. There were more elaborations during task performance and his thoughts were more organized. Although the verbal summary task was still little challenging for him, he was able to complete the task providing most of the details of the article. His interaction with the interlocutor was very interactive and showed engagement with the interlocutor.

Participant TG001 scored a total of 70% for his post-intervention oral proficiency assessment. Though there were still noticeable grammatical and structural errors as well as some hesitations in his speech, but there were also more elaboration during the speaking tasks. His interaction with the interlocutor was more lively showing engagement with the interlocutor.

Participant TG006 scored a total of 58.3% for post-intervention oral proficiency assessment. Although he struggled to express himself fluently, but he was generally able to complete the speaking tasks with noticeable grammatical and structural errors in his speech. There were some hesitations in speech due to limited vocabulary for proper expressions. However, there were also noticeable elaborations in his speech even though his interaction with the interlocutor was generally passive requiring some prompting from the interlocutor from time to time.

Video Observation Speaking Assessment Analysis

From the oral proficiency assessment during intervention, participant TG002 scored the highest (85%) among the three participants. He was able to elaborate on the decisions his group made during the group activity. His interaction with his peers and the teacher showed engagement with the listeners.

Both participant TG001 and TG006 scored 65% for their oral proficiency assessment during intervention. Though both participants achieved similar score, participant TG006 showed more active participation in discussion with his peers during the group activity. His speech showed hesitations but there was a continuation in his thoughts and expression.

Participant TG001 took part in the sharing session about their memorable experience. Though he was able to elaborate on his past experience, he omitted the grammatical correctness in speech describing his experience using present tense. This error however did not affect his speech fluency despite some hesitations.

Discussion

Findings from the pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments as well as video observation of the intervention confirmed the positive changes in students' oral proficiency motivation after undergoing through drama as a language learning strategy. Previous studies on similar grounds also have proven the effectiveness of the usage drama or drama-based activities in ESL classroom to improve students' oral proficiency based on different oral proficiency assessment rubrics with overlapping factors. A recent experimental study among 12 participants of diverse backgrounds by Guzel (2017) aimed to prove that learning English through drama provides meaning to the overall language learning process. The drama technique emphasized in his study was script-based and improvisational drama as it is considered as a student-centered teaching methodology due to the collaborative nature of this learning method (Guzel, 2017). In his study, Guzel (2017) took into consideration of the learners' motivation and reactions towards the technique other than analyzing the development of their oral proficiency. There were positively significance changes in participants'

oral proficiency and attitudes towards educational drama. It was observed that participants showed higher level of confidence and motivation after undergoing the intervention. The oral proficiency assessment rubric with 10-point scale adapted by Guzel (2017) looked into five factors of the spoken language proficiency, namely: (i) Comprehensibility / pronunciation / clarity of speech, (ii) Vocabulary, (iii) Grammar, (iv) Content, and (v) Fluency.

Fauzan (2014) conducted a classroom action research among a group of university students from English Department of Widyagama Mahakam University to investigate the effectiveness of the improvisation technique towards students' speaking ability. The oral proficiency assessment rubric adapted in his study included the following factors: (i) Pronunciation, (ii) Grammatical Accuracy, (iii) Vocabulary, (iv) Relevance of content or ideas, (v) Fluency, and (vi) Manner of expression, with a 5-point scale. Fauzan's (2014) study concluded that the implementation of improvisations can in fact improve the speaking ability of the learners noting on the positive changes of the participants in confidence level, less hesitation and forging a positive attitude towards speaking English.

Benabadji (2007) conducted an experimental research with aim to verify the extent of which the role-playing technique can contribute to the improvement of students' oral fluency in the target language among a group of adult learners from a private foreign languages school in Oran. Although the researcher did discussed on the other elements of drama activities such as language games, mime and simulation, role-play was emphasized in the study. Benabadji (2007) argued that role-play promotes creative thinking as well as development of new language and behavioral skills. Citing Tompkins (1998), role-play or simulation presents the opportunities to the learners to explore and act out different roles that could be representing actual roles in real life, hence, expanding the range of language functions of the learners (Benabadji, 2007). The language factors that were assessed in his study included (i) Continuous Delivery, (ii) Hesitation, (iii) Rich Vocabulary, and (iv) Pronunciation.

In comparison to the oral proficiency assessment rubric used in the current study which was adapted from University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (2011) and Wen (2015), the various oral proficiency assessment rubrics used by researchers shared similarities in terms of the factors that were to be assessed during the speaking tests prior to the intervention as well as after the intervention. The positive changes observed in the participants' oral proficiency assessment after the intervention is due to several factors. During the intervention, the participants were allowed to express themselves freely in English through the participation of the drama-based activities in the classroom. This provided them a safe and stress-free environment to practice their speaking skills. With the opportunity to practice speaking in a stress-free learning environment, their confidence level to communicate in English increased. These positive changes in their confidence level led to higher motivation to express themselves in English along with the encouragement from the teacher. Fluency of the spoken language increased, though slightly, as a result. Although there were some errors with the grammatical and structural elements in the spoken language, the overall meanings were overall comprehensible by the listeners. Hence, it can be concluded that the implementation of drama-based activities in English lessons as a language learning strategy brings positive changes in students' oral proficiency.

Limitations

There were a few limitations encountered during the course of this research. First of all, due to limited resources, a digital voice recorder and a phone video recorder were used to record the interview sessions, and the same phone video recorder was also used to record the intervention English lessons. However, there were occurrences of technical error during video recording of during intervention and post-intervention interview sessions. Although the data from the interview sessions were salvaged by the digital voice recorder, the loss of valuable data is irreplaceable. There should be at least three recording equipment to record the session to prevent the loss of valuable data for analysis purpose.

Secondly, due to time constraints and limited human resources, the researcher's role in this qualitative research was of participant-as-observer where the researcher was fully engaged with the participants during intervention other than administering the pre- and post- intervention interview sessions. It was noted by the investigator that there was a sense a familiarity between the participants with the researcher during the video observation analysis. The sense of familiarity with the researcher had some effects on participants' classroom engagement. They became more relaxed and inattentive at times throughout the lessons. Another factor contributed to their inattentiveness could be that the lessons were conducted during afternoon and on the weekends. The lessons were scheduled as such for the convenience of the students and parents as they are busy during weekdays and are generally more flexible during the weekends.

Lastly, the room chosen to conduct the intervention was spacious and comfortable for the participants; however, with an additional tripod for video recording purpose set up in the room, it took up some space. Due to the nature of the classroom teaching which required the teacher to walk around occasionally to monitor participant's work, the camera view was occasionally blocked for a brief moment. The evaluation process may be unprecise as the investigator wasn't able to identify the participants. Another tripod could be set up elsewhere in the classroom to assure that the activities in the classroom were well-captured from all angles.

Directions for Further Study

The results of this study suggest the possibility of expanding the research setting and sampling for further study. A wider scope of sampling may serve as a better generalization and development of the language learning theory on the usage of drama-based activities as a learning strategy in English oral proficiency development.

Further study can also be conducted on participants of different education levels to compare the effectiveness of the usage of drama-based activities as a learning strategy in English oral proficiency development. The administration of intervention sessions could also be extended to a longer period of time for a more significant result in terms of participants' oral proficiency performance.

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