



DOI: 10.22559/folklor.945

Folklor/edebiyat, cilt:25, sayı: 97-1, 2019/1

## **The Use of Drama in Overcoming Anxiety in English as a Foreign Language Class: An Action Research**

Yabancı Dil Sınıfı Olarak İngilizcede Kaygıyı Gidermede Dramanın Kullanımı:  
Bir Eylem Araştırması

**Çelen Dimililer\***

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### **Abstract**

One of the purposes of foreign language teaching is to help students to be communicatively competent so that they can use the language both in and outside the class. Traditional English as a foreign language (EFL) classes are limited in giving the opportunity to the students to use the language effectively in order to develop fluency. There are many graduated students who are unable to speak in public or engage in real communication as they lack confidence in using the language. They can understand the language that is spoken around them, but in practice they fail to use the language they have learned effectively. The impetus for this study raised when such shortcomings were detected in an undergraduate class called Literary Terminology. Eight junior students who were studying in English Language and Literature (ELL) Department of a private university in north Cyprus participated in the study. Drama activities were incorporated into the course as an intervention which lasted sixteen weeks. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with all the participants to be analyzed qualitatively. The qualitative analysis revealed that a great majority of the participants benefited from the intervention in terms of speaking anxiety, personal development and socialization.

**Keywords:** *English as a foreign language, tertiary education, drama, fluency, social and personal development*

### **Öz**

Yabancı dil öğretiminin amaçlarından biri, öğrencilerin o yabancı dili hem sınıf içinde hem de dışında kullanabilmeleri için etkili iletişim adına yetkin olmalarını sağlamaktır. Yabancı dil olarak geleneksel İngilizce (EFL) sınıfları, öğrencilerin yabancı dili akıcı olarak kullanmalarını geliştirmek için dili etkin kullanma fırsatını vermede sınırlıdır. Toplumumuzda pek çok yabancı dil eğitimi almalarına rağmen o yabancı dilde konuşamayan ya da dili kullanma konusunda güvensizlik gösteren ve dolayısı ile gerçek

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iletişim içine giremeyen pek çok üniversite mezunu birey bulunmaktadır. Bu bireyler çevrelerinde konuşulan dili anlayabilmekte ancak pratikte öğrendikleri dili etkili bir şekilde kullanamamaktadırlar. Yabancı dil öğretiminde karşılaşılan bu zorluklar uzun yıllardan beri yaşanmaktadır ve gerek öğretmenler gerekse de araştırmacılar tarafından farklı farklı yöntemler denenmektedir. Okulda okutulan İngilizce'nin kitap İngilizcesi olduğu, gerçek hayatta kullanılan İngilizce'nin farklı olduğu ve İngilizce'nin sınıf ortamında öğrenilemeyeceği gibi fikirler İngilizce öğretmenlerinin sıklıkla karşılaştığı şikayetlerden bazılarıdır. Görüldüğü üzere öğrencilerin günlük hayatta kullanılan İngilizce'ye ilgileri kitap İngilizce'sine kıyasla daha fazladır. Günlük İngilizce'yi sınıfa getirmek yabancı dil olarak İngilizce'yi öğrenen öğrencilerin İngilizce konuşma becerilerini geliştirmek ve akıcı konuşmalarına katkıda bulunması açısından drama aktiviteleri değerli bir araç olabilmektedir. Bu çalışmanın başlangıç ivmesi, Edebi Terminoloji adı verilen bir lisans sınıfında bu tür eksiklikler tespit edildiğinde ortaya çıkmıştır. Çalışmaya, kuzey Kıbrıs'ta özel bir üniversitenin İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı (ELL) Bölümü'nde eğitim gören sekiz genç öğrenci katılmıştır. Drama etkinlikleri, on altı hafta süren bir çalışma olarak ders planına dahil edilmiştir. Veriler, nitel olarak analiz edilmek üzere tüm katılımcılar ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Nitel analiz, katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğunun konuşma kaygısı, kişisel gelişim ve sosyalleşme açısından drama aktivitelerinden yararlandığını ortaya koymuştur.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, yüksek öğretim, drama, akıcılık, sosyal ve kişisel gelişim*

## **Introduction**

One of the most important contributions drama can make to the classroom is to help overcome learners' shyness and hesitation to speak in the target language. Putting on the role of "being another person" can help get rid of shyness and encourage greater communicative ability, and thus fluency. Risk taking is a very important aspect of learning a language. If a student is afraid to make mistakes, this will hold them back. When learners start to take risks, and express themselves imperfectly, greater results can be obtained. Confidence is an important part of language learning, and drama is a great way to help students in this regard (Chalmers, 2007, p.5). Incidentally, the teacher too benefits in a similar way from adopting roles (Wajnryb, 1992).

Another aspect to drama in the classroom is the way it facilitates implicit language learning. This is picking a language up without conscious effort. The script must be read and understood, and learners will read and digest this with great care as they will put a considerable personal investment in performing in front of others. The students can also write their own dialogues and stage directions, or, more usefully, can redraft scripts to suit their personal, cultural and environmental situations. As their book's title suggests, grammar, spelling and punctuation can be taught and learnt unconsciously through drama. Resources can be created faster with learner participation than by just the teacher; prompts can be written

to be stuck on walls; lists of word to be used in performance can be drawn up; words can be grouped according to word endings etc; words for use in dialogues can be looked up in dictionaries. The fact that the language is to be performed will motivate the learners greatly (Pound, Hughes, 2007). According to VanPatten and Williams (2015) implicit learning is “input processing without such an intention.”. With drama in the classroom, this is facilitated well. When peers are rehearsing their lines, putting up parts of scripts on walls etc. there is a language rich environment, and learners will pick up language without seeming to be in a situation of formal instruction. Also, part of this is spectacle, noise, silence, and so on (Lazar, 1993), which are an integral part of all language. Drama can reflect this aspect of language effectively.

Furthermore, learners of language can have the chance to express ideas and emotions in situations of real communication. This can be seen as real life communication insofar as in the context of drama the emotion or the idea precedes the language employed to express it (Richards, Rogers, 1986). This is the reverse of traditional language teaching practice in which the language is first presented to learners who then use it to express pre-selected ideas. Drama can also reflect real life in that it means learners play and interact with each other (Pound, Hughes, 2008). Fun is a big element in learning. As Holt (1983) puts it, “The spirit behind such games should be a spirit of joy, foolishness, exuberance, like the spirit behind all good games, including the game of finding out how the world works, which we call education.” Drama in the classroom can provide all of these things.

Moreover, drama in the classroom is a bonding activity, with learners forming close relationships which can enhance learning of the cooperative sort. Another beneficial result of drama in the classroom in this respect is the matter of sharing. An atmosphere of “I had to learn this the hard way; I don’t see why so and so should get anything from it,” is not a good learning atmosphere. Drama helps build far better relationships than this, “common humanity,” (Byram, Fleming) and when learners share, all will benefit.

Drama also helps learners to have a positive attitude to the target language in general. As Rinvolucri (1984, p6) puts it, “[drama can produce] an evolution of feeling towards the target language...” This is very important in relation to motivation. A positive feeling towards the language can be the key in mastering it (p142).

### **Background of the study**

This action research was planned by the two researchers but conducted by the first researcher who was the lecturer of the course called Literary Terminology. The course is a three credit course offered as a compulsory course for junior English Language and

Literature (ELL) students. The course is offered in the third year, second semester. Three class hours are allocated for it. The researcher has taught the course for several years and experienced some challenges related to speaking concerning the course. The major problem with the course was that as the title of the course suggests, the course content is literature, and was based on written tasks in lieu with the course outline of the course. Based on the lecturer's experience, it can be said that students find the course difficult and boring due to the fact that written tasks are very demanding and not interactive. In order to overcome the above mentioned challenges, the course is redesigned and script writing, acting out and staging of selected plays are added to the course outline in the hope that students will be more active in class, work collaboratively, communicate more in English and thus experience joy of learning.

### **Aim of the study**

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of a six week drama intervention with an experimental group of eight junior English Language and Literature students. In order to accomplish the aim of the study the following research question is posed: What are the perspectives of undergraduate ELL students on the impact of drama – acting out - staging on their language development?

### **Participants**

Eight junior students who were taking Literary Terminology during the first term of 2015-16 academic year consisted in the participants of this research study. All of them were ELL students. Five of them were male and three of them were female. The age range was 19-23. None of them was native speakers of English. Four were Turkish Cypriots with Turkish as their mother-tongue and one from Saudi Arabia and three from Turkmenistan.

### **Materials and procedure**

With regard to materials, the graded readers of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth* were used. One class hour was allocated to drama activities each week. The students were assigned to read *The Merchant of Venice* at home. When they come to class, we had a discussion on the most influential scenes of the play. We agreed that Shylock's court scene and Portia's casket scene were more interesting than the others. Then, we had a discussion on the characters of the play so that the students shared the roles. As there were only eight students in class, we did not divide them into two but had all of them in one group. As a group, they were asked to develop a script covering Shylock's court scene and Portia's casket scene. In doing so, they were free to add additional scenes to relate these two scenes. Through

script writing the students practised collaborative writing. An English only approach was adopted throughout all class, which meant that they were not allowed to speak Turkish with each other. The script writing took one class hour but they were unable to finish the script. They were told to complete it by next class. The next class was allocated to reading aloud, intonation and pronunciation practice of the script. Then, they were ready to stage the play in class in the third class hour for drama.

The other material used in this intervention was *Macbeth*. The same procedure as that of *The Merchant of Venice* was applied. Duncan's murder scene and the witches' scene were identified to be developed into a script. Once the roles were assigned, they were ready for collaborative writing. Following collaborative writing, they read aloud and practised acting out and then staged the play in class.

### **Data collection procedures**

The data were collected through in-depth individual interviews with eight students who underwent the intervention. Semi structured interview questions were posed to the students during the interviews. They were asked questions about the advantages and disadvantages of the intervention in general and the effects of drama on their English language development in particular. Each interview lasted about fifteen minutes and took place in the lecturer's office. The interviews were recorded to be transcribed.

### **Ethical issues**

Before the intervention the participants were told about the nature of the intervention. Their performance was going to be marked. They were thus told that their participation was optional and that if they did not want to participate, they would be given some other task, such as writing an essay or giving a presentation. All participants were told that they would take place in the study with their pseudonyms, and all participant interviews were recorded upon their consent.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was performed to analyse the data gathered from the interviews. The data were coded and sorted under certain categories. A detailed examination of these categories revealed the emerging themes.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study suggested that the incorporation of drama had positive impacts on the participants' overall oral competence, social and personal development. More specifically, through the intervention, the participants who underwent the drama experience demonstrated improvements in their speaking skills, better social skills and improved self-

confidence. It seemed that the intervention significantly affected the participants' language development along with social and personal development. The emerging themes and their frequency distribution were illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Frequency distribution of the themes emerged from the interviews

Themes	n	Total number of participants	%
Developed speaking skills	6	8	70
Improved social skills	4	8	50
Improved self-confidence	3	8	40

As Table 1 illustrated, more than half of the participants reported that they believed their speaking skills improved. With regard to developed speaking skills, Ali, for instance, stated that *“I sometimes have difficulty in remembering the word I want to say while speaking. It does not come to my mind. At that time I feel angry because I am not fluent but when we were doing drama because we memorized the answers it was like I was speaking fluently and I like it”*. Another participant who was called Burak said, *“I am not good at vocabulary. For this reason, I cannot speak good enough. This activity was useful because now I think I can speak better if I prepare my answers.”* As noted by another participant, drama *“helped with pronunciation and intonation which were not taught before”*.

With regard to social skills, four participants reported that their social skills improved. Ahmet told that *“I have very good friends in this class but not everyone is my friend. With these activities we had to mix with the ones whom we do not usually mix and that was good.”* Another noted *“I liked writing the script with my friends and sharing ideas and helping each other. I do not like writing at all but this was really good and helped.”* Cansu said that *“It was fun working together and helping each other. We learned a lot from each other.”*

The other theme emerged from the interview data was improved self-confidence. Banu noted that *“These activities are really useful for shy students like me. When I do not have to, I prefer not to speak. I just listen. In these activities everyone has to speak. I was not much into it first but later I changed my mind.”* Ceyda mentioned that *“I like it when the class is told by the teacher and when we do activities it is like waste of time but these activities were*

*really useful. I do not usually talk in class because I make mistakes but I liked participating in drama.”*

### **Discussion**

This present study examined qualitative aspects of drama on undergraduate EFL learners. The findings indicated significant improvements in the participants' oral competence, social and personal development. The finding that personal development was fostered went in line with the finding of Atamturk, Dimililer and Atamturk (2017). The participants of this research study practised collaborative script writing and noted that drama enhanced social relations, which confirmed Dimililer's (2017) finding. One of the main strengths of teaching language through drama is that it is learner centered. This means that learners take responsibility for their own learning. In a very traditional classroom, the teacher is firmly in control, and imparts knowledge to students. This has long been seen by many as an unsatisfactory approach. The idea that the teacher has "control of knowledge" (Collins, 2014) is widely seen as outdated. As Jolliffe (2007) points out, it is the interaction of learners with a teacher who fosters in them a sense of independence that leads to effective learning through interpersonal skills. An excellent teacher can facilitate a "relationship driven classroom" (Marlowe, 2013). This learner centered approach is at the heart of teaching through drama. The teacher facilitates the learning experience, but relinquishes a lot of control, allowing the learners to take control of their own learning experiences. The fact that students express their feelings also overcomes a problem that John Haycraft (1978) points out, namely that learners are often demotivated in the language classroom because the teacher is "not interested as them as people." With drama in the classroom the learners can express their personalities, and the teacher and the fellow learners can share and celebrate each others' personalities. Through drama learners can express their own ideas, not just those of the playwright, and develop themes and concepts in ways relevant to their own lives (Chalmers, 2013). This also helps to bridge the divide between the classroom and the outside world, as real life situation and emotions are acted out.

### **Conclusion**

Using drama activities such as script writing, acting out and staging in EFL classes has many advantages. EFL learners may sometimes feel intimidated due to low proficiency levels or at times this inhibition is because of their own personality. Drama enables learners to be someone else, which is quite beneficial. In addition, drama enables learners to work collaboratively, which learners find fun. Since learners are more active, they have to communicate in the target language more and thus practise speaking more.

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