

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE USE OF DRAMA IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore students' perspectives on the use of drama in English language learning and to identify the challenges encountered during its implementation. Employing a qualitative research design, the study was carried out in the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh. Five students who had participated in drama-based English classes were purposively selected as participants. Data were gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals. Thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the data. The results indicate that students generally view drama activities positively, highlighting their contribution to improving speaking proficiency, enhancing motivation, promoting active participation, and offering a contextual and enjoyable learning environment. Despite these benefits, several challenges were reported, including performance anxiety, insufficient rehearsal time, and difficulties in memorizing scripts. These issues were addressed through collaborative learning, peer discussions, extended practice, and self-reflection. The study concludes that drama-based learning is an effective pedagogical strategy for promoting communicative and meaningful English learning. Therefore, its integration into foreign language education, particularly in higher education is strongly encouraged.

Keywords: Drama Method, Language Learning, Students Perspectives, Challenge

INTRODUCTION

English language learning at the tertiary level requires innovative teaching methods to help students effectively develop their language skills. One increasingly adopted method is drama, which emphasizes the use of dialogue, expression, and interaction in language instruction. According to Maley and Duff (2018), drama-based methods can enhance students' communication skills by creating a more enjoyable and interactive learning environment. This approach allows students to practice English in more natural contexts, thereby improving their speaking abilities and building their confidence.

Drama offers opportunities for students to develop speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills simultaneously. Stinson and Winston (2012) highlight that integrating drama into language learning can increase student engagement and deepen their understanding of language structures. In addition, drama helps students cultivate critical thinking and creativity skills essential to the process of foreign language acquisition. Similarly, Sam (1990) found that the use of drama creates a more dynamic and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, thereby

enhancing students' motivation, which is a crucial factor for active participation in communicative tasks.

Previous studies have also illustrated the pedagogical value of drama techniques such as role-play, improvisation, and simulations. Role-play allows students to explore social and cultural aspects of English use (Wessels, 1987), while improvisation fosters fluency, creativity, and spontaneous language production (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). Drama-based activities also blend with project-based learning, where students design and perform scripts collaboratively, thereby strengthening teamwork and communication skills (Fleming, 2011). Furthermore, drama activities improve expressive delivery, pronunciation, and intonation (Even, 2008), reduce speaking anxiety by providing defined contexts (Stinson & Winston, 2012), and increase learners' self-confidence (Smith & Jones, 2022; Rahman, 2023). Digital tools have further extended drama's application, enabling students to record performances, share online, and engage in peer analysis, which reinforces reflective practice (Piazzoli, 2018).

Despite its advantages, implementing drama in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms presents challenges. Learners may feel embarrassed or self-conscious about performing in a foreign language (Harland, 2020), while limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge may hinder authentic dialogue (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). Practical barriers such as insufficient time for rehearsal (Fleming, 2006), lack of resources (Winston, 2012), and teachers' limited experience with drama techniques (Even, 2008) also reduce its effectiveness. Furthermore, not all learners benefit equally, as drama may align better with certain learning styles than others (Gardner, 1993).

In Indonesia, the integration of drama into English language teaching remains relatively uncommon compared to more conventional methods such as lectures and written exercises. Astuti (2019) observed that many students still struggle with spoken English due to lack of confidence and limited opportunities for real-life practice. This indicates that drama can provide more authentic and motivating contexts for language learning. Although international studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of drama in enhancing language proficiency and learner engagement, research that specifically investigates students' perspectives in Indonesian higher education is still limited.

Considering both the potential and the challenges of drama-based learning, this study aims to explore students' perspectives on the use of drama in English language learning. Understanding students' experiences and perceptions can offer deeper insights into the effectiveness of drama as a tool for enhancing language proficiency. In this regard, this study could provide valuable insights for educators and curriculum designers to develop more engaging and effective strategies for teaching English through drama in Indonesian higher education contexts. Specifically, this research seeks to answer two key questions: (1) What are students' perspectives on the use of drama in English language learning? and (2) What challenges and obstacles do students face in applying drama-based methods in English language learning?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore students' perspectives on the use of drama in English language learning and the challenges faced during its implementation. A qualitative methodology was chosen as it allows for a deep exploration of

participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their natural learning environment (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This research was conducted at English Education Department, Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, involving five students who had previously participated in courses that integrated drama into language learning. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that only those with direct experience using drama in the classroom were included, enabling rich, informed insights into both its effectiveness and the challenges encountered (Patton, 2002).

Data were collected using three instruments: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted to gather students' views on drama related to the benefits and difficulties of drama-based learning, while classroom observations were carried out to examine student engagement, interaction patterns, and the overall implementation of drama in practice (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, document analysis involved reviewing students' reflective journals and written assignments related to drama activities to support data triangulation (Bowen, 2009). This combination of methods ensured a comprehensive understanding of how drama was experienced from multiple angles.

Thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the data. This involved transcribing interview and observation data, generating initial codes, and identifying recurring patterns and themes that captured how students interpreted and engaged with drama in the English learning process. The document data were analyzed concurrently to validate and enrich the thematic findings. By employing this methodological framework, the study offers a holistic and in-depth exploration of drama as a pedagogical strategy in English language education, highlighting both its pedagogical implications and the experiential realities faced by learners in a higher education context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative case study set out to (1) explore students' perspectives on the use of drama in English-language learning and (2) identify the students' challenges when employing drama in class. The researcher conducted interviews, observations, and reflective-journal analyses with five English-education students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh who had direct experience with drama-based learning.

Interview Result

Table 1. Interview Results on the Use of Drama in English-Language Learning

No.	Interview question	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E
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1	Describe your experience of learning English through drama.	Enjoyable; the class felt lively.	Realistic, hands-on learning.	Helped me dare to speak.	Focused & active, though sometimes nervous.	Fun and motivating.
2	How does drama affect your understanding of English material?	Helps me recall vocabulary & sentences.	Understands language in everyday contexts.	Easier to grasp & express ideas.	Understands language in social contexts.	Helps me grasp material practically.
3	What benefits does drama offer you?	Boosts speaking confidence.	Raises motivation & focus.	Builds self-confidence.	Improves speaking ability.	Refines pronunciation & intonation.
4	Challenges faced during drama activities?	Hard to memorise long scripts.	Stage fright during improvisation.	Trouble recalling scripts & improvising.	Nervous when performing.	Difficulty adjusting improvised dialogue.
5	How does drama influence your classroom engagement?	Makes me active and enthusiastic.	Motivated & focused.	More active and challenged.	More active & involved.	Energetic and engaged.
6	To what extent does drama improve your speaking skills?	Aids pronunciation and fluency.	Enhances oral communication.	Improves fluency.	Helps contextual language use.	Greatly enhances communication skills.
7	Should drama continue to be used? Why?	Yes learning is enjoyable and effective.	Yes classes become less boring.	Yes effective and beneficial.	Yes learning is more engaging.	Yes effective and fun.

The interview data above show that drama provides an enjoyable, interactive learning experience. All five students reported heightened engagement: Student A found the classroom “lively” and felt drama helped memorise vocabulary in real contexts, while Student B appreciated its “applicative” nature for daily expressions. Student C noted greater courage to speak publicly, and although Student D felt nervous on stage, the method still improved speaking ability and social-context comprehension. Student E highlighted increased enthusiasm and practical understanding of course content. Every participant agreed that drama raised their motivation and activity levels. Students A and E felt more energetic; Students B and D reported sharper focus; Student C welcomed the challenge to be more active—clear evidence that drama significantly boosts student participation. overall, all five students said drama positively affected speaking proficiency.

Nonetheless, difficulties emerged, chiefly memorising scripts and improvising. Students A and C found long texts hard to remember; Students B and E struggled with spontaneous dialogue; Student D’s stage fright hampered concentration, although it diminished with practice. These findings suggest that while drama is effective, additional

support and rehearsal are needed to overcome such hurdles. Despite these challenges, all students endorsed continued use of drama, citing its contribution to comprehension, speaking skills, and overall learning motivation.

Classroom Observation

Table 2. Observation Results on Drama-Based Instruction

Observed aspect	Key findings
Student participation	Most students were active and enthusiastic, especially during dialogue practice and group performances.
Verbal & non-verbal responses	Students delivered lines expressively, using supportive intonation and gestures, though some remained nervous.
Group collaboration	Strong collaboration: students helped with script-writing, rehearsals, and pronunciation correction; lively peer discussion.
Language skills displayed	Noticeable gains in vocabulary and sentence structure; increasing use of idiomatic expressions and greater fluency.
Emotional engagement & motivation	The classroom atmosphere was vibrant; students were highly motivated and seldom bored, with several showing extra initiative.

Based on the observation above, it can be confirmed that drama created a lively, dynamic classroom. Students were active not only on stage but also in preparation writing scripts, assigning roles, and practising pronunciation and intonation. Verbal improvements were evident in fluency, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy; non-verbal cues (facial expressions, gestures, eye contact) further conveyed meaning, showing students' awareness of multimodal communication.

Furthermore, motivation rose markedly in which students looked forward to class, willingly rehearsed outside scheduled hours, and displayed initiative indicative of drama's capacity to generate meaningful, enjoyable learning experiences. These results reinforce the interview findings on drama's benefits for language proficiency, confidence, and motivation.

Reflective Journals

Table 3. Summary of Reflective-Journal Analysis

Analysed aspect	Summary of findings
Perceptions of drama	Students described drama as enjoyable, creativity-enhancing, and making English learning more meaningful and contextual.
Self-reflection on abilities	Students reported gains in pronunciation, speaking confidence, and spontaneous sentence construction.
Challenges encountered	Frequent difficulties included script memorisation, rehearsal time management, and stage fright.
Strategies to overcome challenges	Additional group practice, discussion of dialogue meaning, and pronunciation drills with audio aids.
Learning outcomes	Most students concluded that drama helped them grasp English contextually and boosted self-confidence.

The result of reflective journals above corroborated the result of interview and observation data. One student wrote, "Through drama I learn English not only from books but through direct experience and I know how to speak in specific situations." Students recorded improvements in speaking, pronunciation, and awareness of intonation, gesture, and expression. Additionally, the use of drama encourage students to hone spontaneous sentence formation.

While they acknowledged obstacles memorisation and performance anxiety students documented coping strategies such as regular group rehearsals, recording their own voices for pronunciation feedback, and role-playing outside class hours. Written assignments showed most students could compose dialogues with correct sentence structure and context-appropriate vocabulary, indicating drama's positive spill-over into writing skills.

Discussion

The findings of this study, derived from interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals, indicate that the use of drama in English language learning positively influences students' engagement and skill development. Students consistently reported that drama created a more dynamic and enjoyable classroom atmosphere, enhanced their motivation to learn, and allowed them to understand English materials in more contextual and meaningful ways. These experiences can be understood through five interrelated themes that illuminate both the benefits and challenges of drama-based instruction.

The first theme is one of the most evident outcomes that is *the improvement of students' speaking skills*. Drama provided opportunities for learners to practice oral communication in authentic contexts, leading to increased confidence, clearer pronunciation, and better control of intonation and expressive delivery. These findings echo Abdul Rahman et al. (2022), who highlighted drama's contribution to students' oral fluency and emotional engagement, as well as Hasan and Rahmawati (2021), who emphasized its role in enhancing spontaneity and accuracy in spoken English. Observations revealed that students engaged actively during rehearsals and performances, demonstrating meaningful communication in line with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (Richards, 2017). Reflective journals also showed greater awareness of suprasegmental features such as stress and rhythm, supporting Oktaviani and Desi's (2022) argument that drama promotes mastery of intonation patterns. These outcomes reinforce Thornbury's (2019) assertion that fluency and accuracy must be balanced in second language communication.

The second theme is *students' active engagement and heightened motivation*. Drama activities transformed learning into an interactive and collaborative process, encouraging enthusiasm and participation not only in performances but also in scriptwriting and group preparation. This aligns with Maley and Duff's (2018) perspective that drama positions learners as active participants rather than passive recipients. Students' reports of anticipation and excitement for drama classes resonate with Dörnyei's (2020) theory that learner-centered and meaningful tasks stimulate intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Alasmari and Alshae'e (2020) found that drama fosters collaboration and retention, while Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that reduced anxiety and positive emotional climates facilitate better acquisition. In this context, drama functions not only as a tool for linguistic development but also as a powerful driver of student motivation and emotional involvement.

The third theme is *contextual and meaningful language use*. Students expressed that through drama they were able to practice English in realistic, socially relevant scenarios, making their learning more practical and culturally embedded. Observations confirmed that learners incorporated idiomatic expressions, adjusted their register, and used specific vocabulary suited to real-life interactions. This finding is consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978; Donato, 2022). By adopting different roles, students also

developed empathy and intercultural awareness, outcomes often overlooked in traditional methods. These results correspond with Oktaviani et al. (2023), who identified drama as a context-based approach that supports pragmatic and intercultural competence. They also align with the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (Ellis, 2017), in which communicative tasks drive meaningful acquisition. Thus, drama effectively bridges the gap between language as an abstract system and language as a tool for real communication.

The fourth theme is *challenges in implementing drama*. Despite the benefits, several challenges emerged in implementing drama-based instruction. Students reported experiencing performance anxiety, difficulties in memorization, and constraints related to time and rehearsal. These barriers echo findings by Putri and Handayani (2023), who noted persistent speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms, and Rahayu and Putra (2021), who identified stage fright and self-consciousness as key obstacles in drama activities. Individual differences in personality and confidence levels were also apparent, highlighting the need for supportive classroom environments. As Borg (2020) argues, constructive feedback and emotional safety are essential for overcoming affective barriers, while teacher preparedness and adequate scaffolding play a crucial role in enabling students to benefit fully from drama-based methods.

Last, the fifth theme is *students' strategies for overcoming challenges*. Interestingly, the study revealed that students developed their own strategies to overcome the challenges, demonstrating autonomy and resourcefulness. Reflective journals highlighted practices such as peer rehearsals, self-recording for performance review, and collaborative script discussions. These strategies align with Nation and Macalister's (2021) emphasis on learner autonomy and strategic learning, as well as Richards' (2017) advocacy for task-based approaches that encourage independent practice. By adopting such measures, students not only addressed their immediate difficulties but also cultivated lifelong learning skills, including self-reflection, teamwork, and emotional regulation. This demonstrates that drama-based learning fosters not only linguistic competence but also resilience and proactive attitudes essential for academic and professional growth.

Overall, the discussion highlights that drama in English language learning offers substantial pedagogical benefits by improving oral communication, enhancing motivation, and creating meaningful contexts for language use, while also presenting challenges that require careful pedagogical support. The way students developed their own coping strategies further illustrates the transformative potential of drama not only as a teaching method but also as a medium for cultivating independence, creativity, and confidence in language learners. In light of these findings, it becomes clear that drama-based learning should be seen not merely as an alternative instructional activity, but as a comprehensive approach that integrates linguistic, affective, and social dimensions of language acquisition. This understanding sets the stage for the conclusion, where the implications for teaching practice, curriculum development, and future research will be further elaborated.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study demonstrates that the integration of drama into English language learning brings significant benefits to students' linguistic, affective, and social development. Drama not only enhances oral communication skills such as fluency, pronunciation, and intonation but also fosters greater motivation, engagement, and collaboration in the classroom. By situating

language use in meaningful, contextualized scenarios, drama helps bridge the gap between abstract knowledge and real-world communication, supporting the development of pragmatic and intercultural competence.

Despite its many advantages, drama-based instruction is not without challenges. Performance anxiety, time constraints, and memorization difficulties emerged as notable barriers. However, students' ability to develop coping strategies such as peer rehearsal, self-recording, and collaborative preparation reveals that drama can also cultivate learner autonomy, resilience, and reflective practice. Overall, drama should be considered not simply as a supplementary activity, but as a comprehensive pedagogical approach that supports holistic language acquisition.

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