

The Effectiveness of Drama-Based Approaches in Improving Speaking Skills among First Generation ESL Learners: An Experimental Study



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ABSTRACT: Drama has been a popular mode of conveying information to the masses, and it has been a significant method of teaching language as well. The present study tries to investigate the possible benefits of using Drama-based teaching strategies to enhance the speaking capability of first-generation (ESL) English as second language learners. With the use of a quasi-experimental method comprising a pre-test and post-test analysis, the study examined the effectiveness of Drama-based language teaching method with 74 tertiary level First Generation participants from a deemed institution using purposive sampling. Participants' speaking skills were assessed in the parameters of their language fluency, accuracy, vocabulary usage, and pronunciation. The results revealed a significant improvement in their fluency, communicative competence, and confidence in speaking English for specific purposes. The article also discusses the implications of all these findings for ESL instruction and points out the potential benefits of utilizing Drama-based language teaching strategy in enhancing the speaking skills of First Generation ESL learners.

KEYWORDS: drama-based approaches, speaking skills, first-generation, ESL learners.

I. INTRODUCTION

Drama-based approaches have long been recognized as an effective means of improving speaking skills and enhancing communication abilities. Drama, as a form of performance art, provides individuals with a unique and immersive experience that allows them to explore and express themselves in a safe and creative environment. One of the primary ways in which drama improves speaking skills is by fostering confidence and self-expression. Speaking skill is one of the productive language abilities that needs input and training to improve it. Students are very dependent on this speaking competency as it plays a pivotal part in academics like presentations, taking sitting exams, fieldwork practices, and communication with lecturers for guidance (Chi et al., 2021). Acting out scenes and assuming different characters requires individuals to step outside their comfort zones and embody different roles. This process helps individuals overcome stage fright, fear of public speaking, and inhibitions about expressing themselves verbally. Through repeated practice and exposure, participants gradually build confidence in their speaking abilities, which extends beyond the realm of drama and into various real-life situations. Drama-based approaches provide opportunities for individuals to develop effective communication skills, including voice projection, clarity, and articulation. These skills directly transfer to real-life situations where clear and effective communication is crucial, such as presentations, interviews, and interpersonal interactions. Drama may offer the teacher the quickest route to achieving the objective of fostering students' receptive and productive skills, particularly communication skills, among all other forms of literature (Bessadet, 2022).

Drama also enhances non-verbal communication skills, including body language, facial expressions, and gestures. This heightened awareness and control over non-verbal cues, which can greatly improve communication efficiency in various social and professional contexts. Another significant aspect of drama-based approaches is the development of empathy and perspective-taking skills. In order to portray a character convincingly, actors must understand their character's motivations, emotions, and experiences. This process requires them to step into someone else's shoes, empathize with their circumstances, and consider different perspectives. By engaging in these empathetic exercises, participants develop a deeper understanding of human emotions and behaviours, which can greatly enhance their ability to communicate and connect with others in real-life interactions. Moreover, drama-based approaches provide a platform for active listening and improvisation skills. Through the immersive and interactive nature of drama, individuals are provided with a powerful platform to explore and refine their speaking abilities, ultimately enabling them to become more articulate, expressive, and persuasive communicators in both personal and professional settings.

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A. Research Questions:

1. To what extent does the implementation of drama-based approaches impact the speaking skills of First Generation ESL learners?
2. What are the perceived benefits and challenges associated with using drama-based approaches to improve speaking skills among First Generation ESL learners?

B. Objectives:

- To assess the effectiveness of drama-based approaches in enhancing the speaking proficiency of First Generation ESL learners.
- To explore the perceptions of First Generation ESL learners regarding the advantages and obstacles encountered when engaging in drama-based activities for improving speaking skills.

C. Significance of the study:

The study explores the effectiveness of using drama-based approaches to improve speaking skills among First Generation ESL learners. Speaking skills are crucial for effective communication in English, especially in academic and professional settings. However, many First Generation ESL learners struggle with fluency, accuracy, vocabulary usage, and pronunciation when speaking English. Therefore, it is important to investigate innovative approaches that can effectively enhance their speaking skills. This study fills a research gap by examining the impact of drama-based activities on learners' speaking proficiency. Drama-based approaches provide a unique and immersive learning experience, encouraging learners to engage in real-life language use situations. By incorporating drama into ESL instruction, educators can create a dynamic and motivating learning environment that promotes fluency, communicative competence, and confidence in speaking English for specific purposes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Duffy examined classroom teachers' experiences with drama-based pedagogy and highlighted the advantages of increased student engagement, collaboration, and creativity. (Duffy, 2014). In their study of the effects of drama activities on EFL students' speaking abilities, Akyüz and TANIŞ discovered that drama-based teaching methods increased fluency, accuracy, and self-assurance. (Akyüz & TANIŞ, 2020). Bsharat and Barahmeh (2020) offered a theoretical response to the impact of educational active drama on the improvement of speaking skills in English language teaching. They highlighted the beneficial effects of drama on motivation, self-assurance, and fluency (Bsharat & Barahmeh, 2020). According to Göktürk, Çaliskan, and Öztürk (2020) investigation into the effects of creative drama activities on the improvement of English speaking abilities, drama tasks had a positive impact on fluency, accuracy, and confidence. (Göktürk, Çaliskan, & Öztürk, 2020). Lee, B. K., Enciso, P., & Brown, M. R. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 years of research on the impact of drama-based pedagogies on K-12 literacy-related outcomes. They discovered that drama-based approaches significantly improved literacy skills such as reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and written expression. (Lee, Enciso, & Brown, 2020). Lee, Abbott, and Chen (2020) investigated the use of drama-based approaches to enhance students' communication willingness in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes. The study found that drama techniques promoted engagement, self-confidence, and language development among EAP students (Lee, Abbott, and Chen, 2020). Bora (2021) investigated the use of play scripts and drama-based approaches to improve the speaking skills of L2 learners and discovered that incorporating drama into language instruction improved oral proficiency, fluency, and confidence (Bora, 2021). Wongsā and Son (2022) investigated the use of drama-based activities and Facebook to improve the English speaking skills, attitudes, and motivation of Thai secondary school students. They found that combining drama and social media made students better at language, more confident, and more interested (Wongsā & Son, 2022). Tizzard-Kleister (2022) investigated the use of drama-based approaches in person-centered nursing students to improve their sympathetic presence and communication skills. The study revealed the positive effect of drama techniques on fostering empathy and effective communication skills (Tizzard-Kleister, 2022).

Overall, the reviewed literature emphasizes the positive effects of drama-based pedagogies on a variety of outcomes, including literacy skills, speaking proficiency, engagement, collaboration, and creativity. Drama-based approaches foster critical thinking, creativity, and socio-emotional development, and they produce immersive and influential learning environments.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design:

This study employs a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test and post-test to investigate the effectiveness of drama-based approaches in improving speaking skills among first-gen ESL learners.

B. Participants:

74 tertiary level ESL participants who were first generation English learners were selected from a deemed institution.

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C. Pre-test:

Before the intervention, the participants underwent a pre-test to evaluate their initial speaking capacity through observation and to measure their fluency, accuracy, vocabulary usage, and pronunciation through oral presentations, role-plays, and dialogues. The pre-test survey helped the researcher understand the opinions and level of speaking skills of the participants, as well as develop and modify the intervention accordingly. The pre-test question ensured that the groups had comparable speaking abilities at the beginning of the study.

D. Intervention:

The participants received instruction using drama-based approaches over a specific duration. The intervention was designed to provide a rich and immersive language learning experience. The drama-based activities were carefully planned and implemented, considering the learners' language proficiency levels and the specific speaking skills targeted.

E. Post-test:

After the intervention, participants underwent a post-test to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The post-test employed the same measures and tasks as the pre-test to assess improvements in speaking skills.

F. Data Analysis:

The data collected from the pre-test and post-test was analyzed using descriptive statistics and was used to examine the characteristics of the participants.

IV. INTERVENTION PLAN AND PROCEDURE

The six-week study investigated the effects of drama-based approaches on ESL language instruction for first-generation learners. Students were introduced to the benefits and purposes of using plays as well as fundamental theater techniques such as role-playing and improvisation during the first week. The focus of the second week was on building confidence and language skills through improvised dialogues and scenarios, with feedback and instruction on language skills, coherence, and expression. Students worked on accuracy and pronunciation during the third week by reading scripts with an emphasis on pronunciation, intonation, and intonation patterns.

Through role play and participation in specific scenarios, such as giving directions or placing an order for food, the fourth week's lessons focused on enhancing students' vocabulary and language skills. During these activities, peer communication and feedback were encouraged. The fifth week was devoted to collaborative stories and group performances, in which students were divided into groups and collaborated on a short story or play based on a lot system. The students were assigned parts and instructed to rehearse and polish their performances.

On week six, final performances were presented to the class or a larger audience. The transferability of theatrical techniques to real-world speaking situations was discussed in the context of the learning experience and the enhancement of public speaking skills. Throughout the duration of the study, periodic assessments and observations were conducted to evaluate the efficacy of drama-based approaches and measure progress.

Throughout the intervention, the following instructional strategies were employed: Providing clear instructions and objectives for each activity incorporating authentic and meaningful speaking tasks, encouraging active participation and engagement from all learners, providing constructive feedback and guidance on speaking skills, and creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. It's important to note that the specific activities and duration of the intervention varied based on the available resources, the learners' needs, and the overall timeframe of the study. The plan chart above serves as a general outline for implementing drama-based activities to enhance speaking skills among ESL learners.

V. A LIST OF SELECTED PLAYS AND STORIES FOR THE LEARNERS

S NO	PLAYS	AUTHORS	STORY LINE
1	The Zoo Story	Edward Albee	A one-act play that explores the encounter between two strangers, Peter and Jerry, in Central Park. The play delves into themes of isolation, communication, and the human condition
2	The Bald Soprano	Eugene Ionesco	A classic absurdist play that satirizes bourgeois conventions and language. It presents a series of nonsensical conversations and misunderstandings among characters in a mundane setting.

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3	No Exit	Jean-Paul Sartre	A philosophical play that depicts three characters trapped in a room together in the afterlife. The play explores existential themes such as identity, responsibility, and the nature of hell.
S NO	STORIES	AUTHORS	STORY LINE
1	The Necklace	Guy de Maupassant	The story revolves around Madame Loisel, who borrows a valuable necklace to wear to a high society event. When she loses the necklace, she becomes consumed by the fear of the consequences.
2	The Lottery	Shirley Jackson	A story set in a small village that practices a disturbing annual tradition called "the lottery." The story explores themes of conformity, tradition, and the darker aspects of human nature.
3	The Metamorphosis	Franz Kafka	A surreal novella about a man named Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. The story examines themes of alienation, identity, and family dynamics.

For tertiary level students, these plays and stories offer narratives that will get them thinking while also tackling challenging subjects. Through analysis, interpretation, and dialogue-based exercises, they can help ESL students develop their speaking abilities, foster discussions, and stimulate critical thinking.

VI. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table I - Classification of Items in the Questionnaire to Assess the English Speaking Confidence and Proficiency

S NO	STATEMENT
1	I feel confident when speaking in English.
2	I can express my thoughts clearly when speaking in English.
3	I use a wide range of vocabulary during conversations in English.
4	My pronunciation is accurate when speaking in English.
5	I can maintain a fluent conversation in English.
6	I feel comfortable participating in role-plays and dialogues in English.
7	I am able to understand and respond appropriately in English conversations.
8	I feel at ease using English for oral presentations.
9	I have a good understanding of grammar rules when speaking in English.
10	I am able to adapt my language use based on different contexts and situations.
11	I feel at ease when speaking in English.

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12	I effortlessly find the right words when expressing myself in English.
13	I consistently improve my grammar skills when speaking in English.
14	I successfully understand native English speakers in conversations.
15	I confidently initiate conversations in English

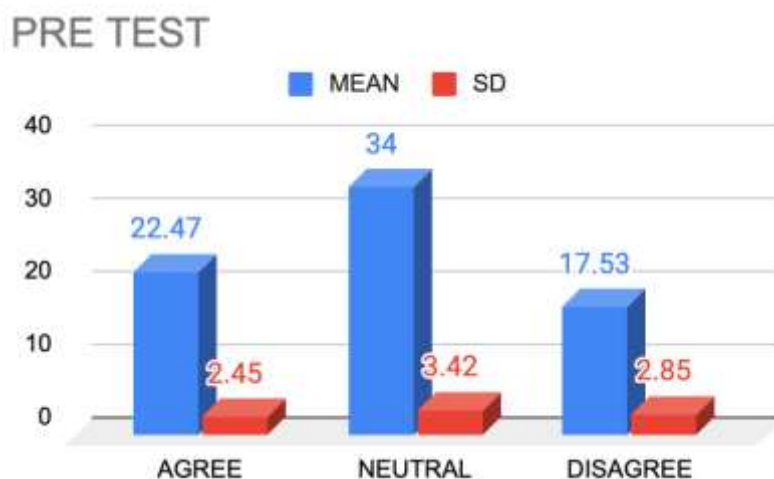


FIG I - English Speaking Confidence And Proficiency Pre-Test Results: Mean Scores And Standard Deviations

Pre-Test: The participants' mean agreement level for the intervention statements was 22.47. The participants had a neutral response with a mean of 34. The participants' disagreement level with the intervention statements was 17.53.

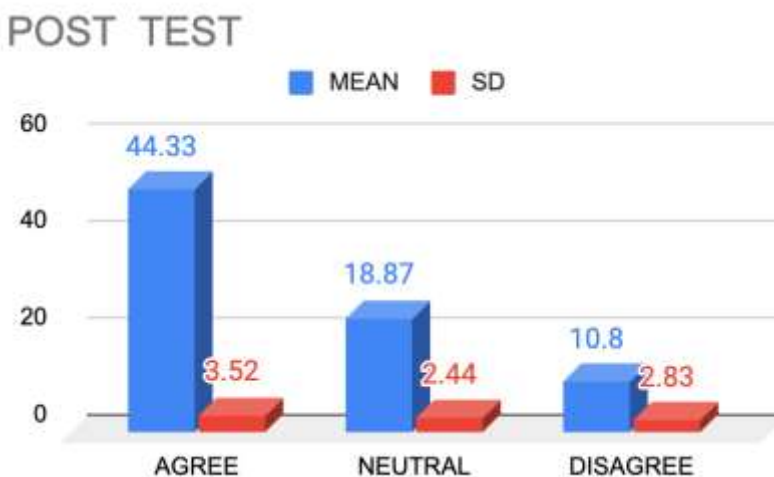


FIG II - English Speaking Confidence And Proficiency Post-Test Results: Mean Scores And Standard Deviations

Post-Test: The participants' mean agreement level for the intervention statements increased to 44.33. The participants' neutral response decreased to 18.87. The participants' disagreement level with the intervention statements decreased to 10.8.

Overall, there was a notable rise in the mean values for the "Agree" category, suggesting a positive change in participants' confidence and proficiency in speaking English. The mean values for the "Neutral" category exhibited varied outcomes, with certain statements experiencing a decrease in the mean value while others showed a slight increase.

The mean values for the "Disagree" category declined, suggesting a positive development in participants' assessments of their grammar skills and comprehension of spoken English.

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The findings suggest that the intervention had a favorable effect on the participants' confidence and proficiency in speaking English. There was a significant increase in the mean agreement level, rising from 22.466 to 44.33, indicating that participants experienced a heightened sense of confidence and proficiency in English speaking following the intervention. The decrease in neutral responses, from 34 to 18.87, suggests that participants became less uncertain or hesitant about their English speaking abilities. Furthermore, the decrease in disagreement responses, from 17.53 to 10.8, indicates that participants had fewer reservations or disagreements regarding their English speaking skills. Overall, the intervention appears to have positively influenced participants' confidence and proficiency in speaking English, as evident from the higher agreement levels and reduced neutral and disagreement responses observed in the post-test.

Analysing the results of the pretest to the results of the post-test reveals that the participants' English speaking skills improved significantly in multiple areas.

Confidence: The rise in agreement from 23 to 44 demonstrates a significant increase in the participants' levels of confidence. This suggests that they felt more secure and confident while communicating in English.

Clarity of Thoughts: The increase in agreement from 22 to 40 shows that there has been a noticeable improvement in the participants' ability to express their thoughts. This suggests that the participants enhanced their communication skills and became more proficient in effectively articulating their ideas.

Vocabulary Usage: Participants displayed improved proficiency in utilizing a diverse range of vocabulary during conversations. The increase in agreement from 25 to 47 indicates an expanded vocabulary and word choice, which is indicative of this.

Pronunciation Accuracy: There was a significant improvement in pronunciation skills, as evidenced by the increase in agreement figures from 24 to 44. This suggests that participants were able to pronounce words and sounds more accurately, leading to clearer and more enhanced quality of speech.

Fluency: The participants showed remarkable advancements in maintaining fluent conversations, as indicated by the increase in agreement from 20 to 47. This could imply that they were able to communicate more seamlessly, without frequent pauses or interruptions, resulting in smoother and more continuous speech.

Comfort in Role-plays and Dialogues: The participants experienced a noticeable boost in comfort levels during their involvement in role-plays and dialogues, as evidenced by the agreement rate climbing from 26 to 50. This suggests that they developed a stronger sense of confidence and self-assurance while participating in simulated conversations.

Understanding and Response: The notable increase in the agreement rate from 21 to 44 could indicate a notable improvement in comprehension and the capacity to respond appropriately in English conversations. The participants displayed enhanced listening and were better prepared for interactions.

Oral Presentations: Despite the agreement levels staying relatively steady at 23 and 41, participants consistently displayed a comfortable sense of usage while delivering oral presentations in English. This indicates that they maintained their confidence and ease in presenting their ideas effectively in the English language.

Grammar Understanding: A significant improvement was observed in the participants' understanding of grammar rules, with agreement figures increasing from 22 to 46. This could indicate a positive impact on grammatical knowledge of the participants, enabling them to converse in a flawless language.

Adapting Language Use: While there was a slight decline in agreement from 24 to 39, participants demonstrated a notable ability to adapt their language use to various contexts and situations. They exhibited a reasonable level of flexibility in adjusting their communication style, showcasing competence in effectively navigating different scenarios.

Comfort Level: The agreement figures witnessed a substantial increase from 19 to 49, indicating a noteworthy decrease in feelings of nervousness or anxiety while speaking English. This suggests that participants experienced a heightened sense of comfort and self-assurance when engaging in conversations in the English language.

Finding the Right Words: The agreement levels remained consistent at 25 and 45, suggesting that participants did not undergo a substantial shift in their ability to articulate their thoughts effectively in English.

Grammar Skills Improvement: The agreement levels remained consistent at 20 and 40, indicating that participants did not perceive a significant advancement in their grammar skills when communicating in English.

Understanding Native English Speakers: The agreement levels remained consistent at 18 and 41, suggesting that participants did not face significant challenges in comprehending native English speakers during conversations.

Initiating Conversations: There was a notable increase in agreement from 25 to 48, indicating that participants experienced a boost in confidence and were more inclined to initiate conversations in English.

The participants showed impressive development in their English speaking skills. They became more confident and clear in expressing their thoughts, used a wider range of vocabulary, improved their pronunciation accuracy, became more fluent, felt more comfortable in role-plays and dialogues, had better understanding and response abilities, felt at ease in different communication situations, experienced less nervousness, and were more willing to start conversations.

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Apart from this, the students' speaking abilities were assessed based on ten criteria: five related to verbal communication behavior and five related to non-verbal communication behavior. Verbal communication behavior included aspects such as identifying the purpose of speaking, using correct vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and appropriate tone/voice modulation. Non-verbal communication behavior included being willing to communicate, displaying confidence in communication, making appropriate eye contact, using facial expressions effectively, and using gestures appropriately. To measure the effectiveness of the teaching methods, the students' scores were recorded before and after a six-week treatment period. It revealed that there is a significant difference between the pre and post-treatment scores, indicating the impact of the treatment sessions on the students' speaking skills.

A. Addressing Research Questions through semi structured interviews.

In order to understand how the students' speaking abilities improved as well as how their attitudes toward and motivation for learning and using English changed, a qualitative analysis approach was also used. The observers evaluated the students' participation and noted any noteworthy actions during the classroom observation. In accordance with the students' speaking abilities, motivation, and attitudes toward EFL learning, content analysis was used to analyze the interview data.

Research Question 1: To what extent does the implementation of drama-based approaches impact the speaking skills of first-generation ESL learners?

The qualitative interviews conducted with the participants provided valuable insights into the impact of drama-based approaches on the speaking skills of first-generation ESL learners. The findings revealed that the implementation of drama-based activities had a significant positive effect on the participants' speaking proficiency. Several key themes emerged from the interviews, highlighting the various ways in which drama-based approaches contributed to their language development. Firstly, the participants reported that engaging in drama-based activities provided them with a unique and immersive learning experience. Through role-plays, improvisation, and theatrical performances, they were able to step into different characters and scenarios, allowing for authentic language use and the application of ESL vocabulary and terminology. This active participation enabled them to practice speaking in a dynamic and realistic context, improving their fluency and communicative competence. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that drama-based approaches enhanced their confidence in speaking English for specific purposes. By taking on roles and performing in front of their peers, they gradually overcame their fear of making mistakes and became more comfortable expressing themselves in English. The supportive and collaborative nature of the drama activities also created a safe space for learners to experiment with language, leading to increased self-assurance in their speaking abilities. Moreover, the participants noted that drama-based approaches facilitated the development of non-verbal communication skills, such as body language, facial expressions, and intonation. They recognized the importance of these elements in effective communication, particularly in ESL contexts where clear and precise delivery is crucial. Through improvisation exercises and character portrayal, they gained a better understanding of the role non-verbal cues play in conveying meaning, thereby improving their overall speaking skills.

Research Question 2: What are the perceived benefits and challenges associated with using drama-based approaches to improve speaking skills among first-generation ESL learners?

The qualitative interviews also shed light on the participants' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with using drama-based approaches for improving speaking skills. The findings revealed a range of advantages as well as a few notable obstacles. One of the main benefits expressed by the participants was the increased motivation and engagement they experienced during the drama-based activities. They found these approaches to be highly enjoyable, as they were able to explore their creativity, work collaboratively with their peers, and have fun while learning. This intrinsic motivation positively influenced their willingness to participate actively in speaking tasks, leading to greater progress in their language skills. Additionally, the participants highlighted the transferability of skills acquired through drama-based approaches to real-life contexts. They recognized that the skills developed, such as effective communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving, were applicable beyond the classroom and relevant to their future professional endeavors. This realization further motivated them to actively engage in the drama-based activities and invest in improving their speaking skills. Despite these benefits, a few challenges were identified by the participants. One common challenge mentioned was the initial discomfort and self-consciousness experienced when performing in front of others. Some participants expressed anxiety about making mistakes or being judged by their peers. However, they acknowledged that with time and practice, these apprehensions diminished, and their confidence grew. Another challenge raised was the need for sufficient time and resources for implementing drama-based approaches. Participants emphasized the importance of dedicated class time, appropriate facilities, and materials to fully engage in drama activities. Limited resources or time constraints were perceived as potential barriers to fully capitalizing on the benefits of these approaches. The qualitative interviews provided valuable insights into the impact of drama-based approaches on the speaking skills of first-generation ESL learners. The findings highlighted the positive influence of drama-based activities on speaking proficiency, including increased fluency, enhanced confidence, and the development of non-verbal communication skills.

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CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study have uncovered some of the significant benefits of utilizing Drama as the primary tool for teaching language. Drama as a language teaching module could inspire the learners to indulge themselves in the proceedings of the classroom. Thereby, it ensures the active participation of the learner and gives an opportunity to get first-hand experience of practicing the target language in the classroom. Since Drama is a team activity and requires a group of like-minded participants, it promotes team effort, coordination, and peer encouragement while exercising the new language. Peer pressure might encourage an individual who feels reluctant to practice language by themselves. Also, Drama primarily revolves around conversations and dialogues that could encourage the participants to make their best efforts to communicate in the target language. The use of drama-based activities inside the language classroom not only stimulates individual participation, but also encourages individual creativity and free thinking in the target language. In this way, participants in the intervention program gradually developed team spirit and started conversing among themselves, and later they could fluently express their ideas in English by themselves. In this manner, the use of Drama-based language learning activities has a great scope for enhancing learning in language classes as it makes the role of the learners more prominent while the teachers act as the facilitators of the tasks and monitor the activities. The significant improvement in the positive responses of the participants in the post-test shows how the use of drama in the language class could positively motivate the learners to improve their speaking skills..

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