‘I play, therefore I can’: Using drama activities to reduce the English speaking anxiety of college students

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Abstract

Research on drama and anxiety remains relatively unexplored in applied linguistics and language teaching in the Philippines. This study addresses this need by looking into the effects of drama activities on college students in the Philippines who were observed to have anxiety in speaking. More specifically, the study involves the students in a series of improvisational activities, aiming to improve their confidence in speaking. Student motivation, anxiety, and confidence in speaking English are measured by pretest and post-test survey, interviews, and observations in implementing a workshop that employs drama activities. Drawing from Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), this study examines the efficiency of drama activities in providing a safe space where they can motivate one another and learn collaboratively. The findings of this study may encourage language teachers to design strategies that scaffold learning activities to minimize anxiety and reinforce positive attitudes towards speaking in English.

Keywords: theatre activities, speaking anxiety, confidence, motivation

Introduction

Since teachers of English prioritize students’ progress, they seem compelled to implement effective strategies in teaching English. Moreover, ESL teachers look for ways to improve the ESL classroom and ensure that students can access a meaningful language learning experience. The question as to which is the best approach in an ESL classroom may not be the concern of the post method era anymore. Then again, whether language policies may mandate schools to increase or minimize students’ use of or immersion with ESL, students will have to face anxiety and lack of confidence that may reduce motivation towards learning English. Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis (Krashen & Terell, 1983) enumerates self-image, motivation, and emotional state as contributory to students’ language acquisition. While it is true that Krashen (2008) adheres to performance evaluation since students may need to undergo quizzes and exams in a foreign language class, Krashen contends that lower anxiety results in better language acquisition and maintains that if students have low self-esteem and poor motivation, there is a high affective filter that blocks language acquisition.
In the same light, Dornyei (2005) asserts that “there is no doubt that anxiety affects L2 performance” (p.198). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, in Horwitz, 2001) designed the seminal Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to gauge this learning anxiety. Horwitz (2001) found that FLCAS yielded consistent results in showing the absence of correlation regarding anxiety and achieving proficiency in a second language. Although some studies suggest that nervousness may result from deficient L2 acquisition, anxiety every so often comes from unnecessary concern for mistakes and the judgment that comes with it. As stated by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) and cited by Galante (2012), in the course of language learning, students find speaking the most frightening compared to the other skills. If language anxiety is seen as negatively impacting language learning, understanding and addressing anxiety, inducing classroom situations is a priority. If ESL students are unwilling to use L2 in the classroom, they may not improve their speaking skills. Therefore, ESL teachers are expected to provide activities to feel more comfortable when speaking English in the classroom and eventually develop a nurturing oral interaction.

Drama positions itself as an available and effective tool to amplify students’ motivation and confidence in speaking while lessening their anxiety. Wagner (1998) argues that exciting these activities help teachers and students create a safe space for learning a second language because they are exciting and enjoyable. Moreover, when students feel safe in the classroom, they somehow assume that they will succeed and eventually become more independent language learners. McCaslin (2006) suggests the use of creative drama, which includes theatre techniques such as pantomime, storytelling, roleplaying, improvisation, and process drama to establish a collaborative atmosphere in the classroom. Similarly, Bowell and Heap (2001) propose improvisational theatre that performs short scenes on-the-spot; however, (Lobman and Lundquist, 2007) propose that teachers make improvisational theatre games less intimidating by guiding students in their active play.

When students engage in drama activities, they become dynamic language users as they imaginatively take communal characters and engage collectively; thus, students create a fluent, purposeful, and generative language (Kao & O’Neill, 1998 in Stinson and Winston, 2011). By the same token, Carson (2012) counts drama as a way to expose students to real-world situations that interface with purposeful language use. This affirms Dougill’s (1987) argument on the “unpredictability in language use” (p. 6) and language being naturally unplanned and subjective. Specifically, Carson (2012) points out the advantage of using unscripted drama, which allows students to build imaginary functions with realistic communicative circumstances for L2 use, which is focused on meaning; thus, students use L2 spontaneously, creatively, and genuinely.

The second language classroom may take full advantage of drama activities as a pedagogical tool for effective communication. Although drama may not be the most contemporary strategy for the L2 classroom (Boudreault, 2010), one cannot reject the conviction that it has become a dependable and effective intervention for improving language teaching and learning.

Via (1976), Maley and Duff (19800, and Granger (2004), as cited in Galante (2012), claim that drama encourages students to generate a performance, which stands as a concrete proof of their learning process (Fuentes, 2012). Moreover, in a second language classroom, drama challenges students to employ speaking, reading, writing and listening while they learn creatively. Specifically, students write a script, understand and execute stage directions,
showcase their dramatic abilities, and listen as co-actors or audience members. Ho (2011) states that these four skills naturally fuse during the communication process. When students perform drama activities, they are compelled to read, write, speak, and listen for content and production. Most importantly, when teachers design an appropriate environment where students can develop these skills, drama addresses students’ L2 deficiencies (Zyoud, 2010) and Ho (2011).

In the same vein, Atas (2015) finds that EFL learners navigate through a synthetic milieu when speaking an L2 in the classroom. Atas (2015) also points out that when students move freely and use body language, they become more motivated to learn. However, students are scared to commit mistakes in class; they feel worried, uncomfortable, and judged, which may cause reticence. Providing prompts that allow students to employ a second language in authentic situations may address this. Since the author relies on the literature on how drama lowers anxiety levels of ESL learners, it is hypothesized that drama being a pedagogical tool, boosts students’ confidence while they creatively learn a language in context.

Task-based language pedagogy is a progressively investigated topic in applied linguistics (Thurman, 2008), with considerable endeavors to outline and characterize the nature and purpose of a language classroom task. A common factor that connects successful and unsuccessful explanations of task-based learning is the need for a genuine context where students’ may collaboratively learn (Ellis 2003).

In the same light, Dalziel et al. (2011) claim that theatre activities pose credible ways of encouraging unpretentious circumstances and connections in a language class. On the spot drama activities and spontaneous rehearsal are predominantly germane to the randomness of language use, which is naturally unscripted and exposed to several responses. Therefore, students are engaged through their interests, encouraged to focus on meaning, and guided to produce an outcome that is practical to real life. The use of drama activities has clear advantages for language learning regarding motivation, the use of the language in a context, teaching and learning cross-curricular content, etc. (Phillips, 2003 in Fuentes, 2010).

Ranta and Meckelborg (2013) suggest that drama reduce anxiety and heighten ELL students’ motivation. South Korean college students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) felt more comfortable and self-assured when speaking in English after undergoing an after school program that employed drama activities (Coleman, 2005). Similarly, in Stintson and Freebody’s (2006) study, Singaporean students of EFL admit that they became less anxious speaking in English after completing a drama-based English program. These two studies corroborate what Stern’s (1980) findings found that students feel more confident and less nervous when speaking while performing a drama activity. Dundar (2013), Geibert (2014), and Erdogan (2003) affirm that theatre activities such as role-playing are effective, meaningful, and fulfilling classroom strategies. They create real-life contexts that nurture learners’ emotional development, enhances creativity, and develop a sense of responsibility. Therefore, teachers who employ drama activities should prioritize, establish, and maintain a positive atmosphere where students feel safe and involved in every collaborative task.

The teachers’ fundamental concern is to engage language learners in meaningful activities that will help them become confident, motivated, and independent lifelong learners. One way to address this, as shown by existing research, is to integrate dramatic activities that provide opportunities that students look forward to, enjoy, and value.
The research explored how a workshop that employs drama activities influences students’ anxiety, motivation, and confidence in speaking in English. The theory that a drama-based workshop would help students develop their confidence and outgrow their anxiety in speaking in English. It was also projected that improvisational activities would successfully motivate students to use English when communicating in class. Lastly, this study may be helpful to teachers who recognize the usefulness of drama in ESL classrooms and programs.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted in a university in the Philippines, which offers scholarships to marginalized students. The 15 participants met ten times every Saturday while two teachers and a teacher aide were interviewed regarding the workshop design and students’ performance after the workshop. These students were recommended by their scholarship program coordinator, who observed that they needed an extra class that would probably improve their confidence in speaking in English. The students’ ages differed slightly (16 to 18 years old), but most of them were college freshmen taking up one or two writing or speech subjects in English.

Instruments and Data Sets

Pre-survey on motivation, anxiety, and confidence. On the first day of the program, the participants answered the pre-survey questionnaire based on Horwitz and Horwitz’s FLCAS to identify their levels of motivation, anxiety, and confidence about speaking English before they were exposed to drama activities. The survey composed of 17 statements from the FLCAS: 1) six statements on anxiety (S7, S8, S9, S10, S12, S15); 2) five statements on confidence (S3, S11, S14, S16, S17; and six statements on motivation (S1, S2, S4, S5, S6, S13).

Drama activities. Subsequently, the participants were asked to perform a series of drama activities, which were observed and examined every session. Students’ motivation, anxiety, and confidence in speaking English were monitored and noted during the workshop sessions. Participants were also asked to write a journal reflecting on what they thought, felt, and wondered about during the activities.

Post-survey on motivation, anxiety, and confidence. Participants’ levels of motivation, anxiety, and confidence after the drama-based workshop were categorized through the post-test survey based on Horwitz and Horwitz’s FLCAS. Participants and their teachers were interviewed after the culmination of the workshop.

Procedure

During the first day of the program, participants answered the pre-test survey. As suggested by Taylor (1998), a reflective-practitioner is a teacher who collects and analyzes data fresh from the classroom. This pushed the researcher to create a classroom, design a workshop module, implement this among a group of college students, and reflect on the module’s efficiency in reducing students’ English speaking anxiety. Additionally, Taylor’s (1998) activism on reflecting in-action as divergent from acting after the research has presented theatre games as
less intimidating to conduct for teachers who are non-actors. As Taylor (1998) argues, using drama in any setting is an ART; where ART stands for Action, Reflection, and Transformation.

Given that the study's primary objectives were to reduce speaking anxiety and increase the motivation and confidence of students, the workshop was designed so that activities do not bother participants emotionally. The study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the response of college students to a theatre-based workshop. According to Creswell (2003), quantitative and qualitative methods interweave in a mixed-methods design. The study mainly involved quantitative, while the quantitative data gathered merely reinforced descriptions of participants' responses to the drama-based program. Participants’ parents or guardians gave their informed consent a week before the workshop started.

**Data Analyses**

The questionnaires were formulated using a 5-point Likert scale, with one being assigned as “strongly disagree” and five as “strongly agree.” For each question in the pre-survey and post-survey questionnaires, the mean scores were computed to test if the drama-based workshop improved participants' motivation and confidence in speaking in English. The standard deviation for each item was also calculated to measure the dispersion of responses for each question.

**Results and Discussion**

The quantitative data findings show that drama activities positively affected students’ anxiety, motivation, and confidence. It can be gleaned from the table that P1, P2, P6, P8, P11, P13, P16, and P17, which are positively stated, show increased post-survey mean scores. On the other hand, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P10, P12, P14, and P15, which are stated in the negative, manifest a decrease in the post-survey mean scores.

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<tr>
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<th>Pre-survey and post-survey mean scores</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceptions</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I think that I need to learn to speak English.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I am doing all I can to learn English.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I think learning English is difficult.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I think learning English is boring.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>It doesn’t matter to me if I ever learn English well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I enjoy learning English.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I feel nervous when speaking in English.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I am not bothered by my mistakes when I speak English.</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1 shows statements on anxiety (P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P15), confidence (P3, P11, P14, P16, P17), and motivation (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P13). The majority of the students gained from the drama-based workshop, especially when speaking impromptu, feeling confident when speaking, and being motivated to speak in English better until the end of the workshop. Also, the findings of the interviews and students’ journals are quite similar to the findings of the survey. During the interview, students constantly expressed their fear of committing mistakes when speaking in English. Most students claimed that they know what to say; however, they are shy to speak up. Students confirmed their responses in the post-interview survey, emphasizing how they enjoyed the theatre activities and eventually felt better speaking in English. Students also shared how they started to see the classroom differently from the usual lecture and worksheets to the fun-filled collaborative activities they look forward to. However, some students mentioned grammar as another cause of their anxiety. Although they affirm they developed reasonable confidence to participate during the activities, they felt that they would still need to avoid grammatical errors in the formal classroom.

Interestingly, while students during the first day of the workshop, vocally said that they are nervous, shy, and indifferent, their responses during the last day, students felt the exact opposite. Some students also claimed that they became more confident towards the end of the workshop. At first, they somehow felt forced to speak in English; however, they learned to enjoy speaking in English as the workshop progressed. This supports Dundar (2013), Geibert (2014), and Erdogan (2003) argument that drama activities allow students to take full control of a language as they develop positive attitudes and cultivate a sense of responsibility in language learning.

Although most students reported that they had developed some excitement to speak in English, a few students talked about their fear of not having enough vocabulary. Many of the students stated that they are not afraid of making mistakes while speaking English and that committing mistakes is part of learning a second language. Initially, it was observed that the participants were considerably motivated, cooperative, and determined. The students seemed to enjoy many of the activities. As regards motivation, the pretest scores significantly corroborate the preliminary observations. Kao and O’Neill (1998 in Stinson and Winston, 2011) refer to this as the learners’ conscious decision to engage, interact, and improve to make language use practical, proficient, and purposeful.
From the observations, although students did not appear too anxious, most of them were afraid. Although the students were not apparently nervous or uncomfortable, they were frequently uncertain and uneasy when speaking in English during classroom activities. On the other hand, the students seemed reasonably relaxed with each other. They appeared much more confident, giving short spontaneous responses when required to share their thoughts on an activity. It was evident that the students had enough ideas to express, and these were concertized in their performances. On the first day, there were quiet moments, but routinely repeating the warm-up activities made them less stiff. This refers back to the initial unwillingness of L2 use impends language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986 in Galante, 2012), which may be confronted by using activities that make students feel safe and nurtured.

As supported by observations during the intervention, it was noticed that many could speak English quite well, but they were just hesitant to speak. Despite the initial shyness during the first day of the workshop, it was noted that the group was expressive of their thoughts during discussions. This is why, despite observable reluctance in speaking English, the pre-survey also showed some levels of confidence in speaking.

Students distinctly performed the warm-up activities in each session. They were always laughing while working together. When students were very familiar with the warm-up activities, they used louder voices and employed more interesting movements. This can be referred back to the statement “I am comfortable when speaking in English,” which resulted in an increase in the post-survey mean score of 4.0 from 3.2. During the interview, responses centered on how enjoyable, supportive, and unintimidating the warm-up activities validated the mean scores. This coincides with what Wagner (1998) and Lobman and Lundquist (2007) posit as the creation of no judgments zone when teachers design unintimidating speaking activities that allow students to learn together and build each other. In addition, McCaslin (2006) and Bowel and Heap (2001) also affirms that a collaborative environment will help students detach from their fear of speaking.

This class was already a unified group. Although the drama activities chosen also leaned to community building, students did not identify the community building as an aspect of the workshop. They seemed to have focused on the language benefits of the workshop. Most of the students claimed that while doing improvisational theatre activities, they could think critically, speak English spontaneously, and feel good about themselves. During the activity Family Portraits, where participants sculpted themselves in groups to create human tableaus of families, their level of enthusiasm and commitment during the human tableau activity was noticeably high, extended until they told stories culled from the group sculptures. Although the participants used Filipino during the human tableau activity, they delivered their improvised dialogues in English with ease. This illuminates Ellis’s (2003) and Dalziel et al.’s (2011) arguments that when language learners perform real-life tasks, they use language organically and meaningfully, which extends to the activation of their genuine experiences and unexpected grasp of interactive speaking skills. In other words, (Phillips, 2003 in Fuentes, 2010) reports this as the power of drama activities as tools for motivation for students who speak English because they understand why this language matters.

The teachers agreed that the activities were motivating and beneficial. One of the teachers said:
They were using English in a fun way. The workshop exposed them to many interesting opportunities where they could speak in English. The more practice they get, the more motivated they will become. The warm-ups look very interesting. Students do not want to start immediately in class. They need something to prepare them gradually. (College instructor interview, January 10, 2016).

Another teacher even asked if she can use some of her English classes' activities and was positive about how the activities are geared towards transformative learning and the possibility of embedding social issues to encourage students to engage with these activities purposefully.

Although students manifested different nervousness levels during the workshop, the number of students who thought this was false greatly changed after the workshop. Two confidence statements – “I always am afraid to speak out loud even if I know how to say something in English” yielded an apparent decrease in the post-survey mean score of 1.9 from 3.3. This indicates that students became more self-assured about their grasp of English after doing theatre games. During the interview, students kept saying that mistakes committed eventually make them better English speakers. Besides, some students even stressed that drama activities increased their confidence in speaking in English without having enough time to think about what they will say. When they return to their respective classes after a workshop, they feel more ready to participate during the class recitation. Most importantly, some students mentioned that they felt good every time they volunteer to speak in English, which aligns with the increase in the post-survey mean score (4.7) of the statement “I can learn English because I am smart enough.” This corroborates Wagner’s (1998) argument that the exciting, challenging, and enjoyable nature of drama strengthened by its connection to life helps teachers and students feel more confident using a foreign language.

As shown by the post-survey mean scores, theatre games help motivate students to lessen their nervousness and nurture their self-confidence. This substantiates Coleman’s (2005) research on the effectiveness of drama in reducing the anxiety of Korean EFL students; Stinson and Freebody’s (2006) study on how an English speaking drama program helped Singapore EFL students feel more confident in speaking English, and Stern’s (1980) study on drama positively helping students speak English assertively. Similar to these previous studies, the students showed positive results after the drama workshop. Since the students had fun doing the activities, they somehow perceived speaking in English as less complicated. During the interviews, all the students expressed that they will participate in drama workshops again and encourage other students to join in the future. In addition, halfway to the end of the workshop, they were more relaxed as they spoke louder and less inhibited. These observations corroborate the results, which assert that students reduced their speaking anxiety.

This exploratory study affirms that a drama-based workshop posts itself as an effective and alternative pedagogical tool for Philippine ESL classrooms. However, only a few local studies have looked into the drama as a teaching methodology. Therefore, more studies on the use of drama in the Philippine classroom is imperative. This study aimed to examine how drama activities might reduce the speaking anxiety of college students. The study’s goals were to substantiate other studies affirming that drama can be an effective method to lessen speaking anxiety and improve English language learners’ confidence and motivation.
Conclusion

This study’s findings reveal that drama activities can be successfully applied through an extra speaking class or workshop to assist college students in gaining more confidence in speaking English. The findings support results from other studies, which found that drama could reduce students’ language anxiety (Coleman, 2005). Although the sample size may not illustrate general assumptions, the results of this study propose how improvisational theatre activities become useful tools in reducing the English speaking anxiety of college students by increasing their motivation and confidence. As observed in the course of the intervention, the students displayed an adequate grasp of English and merely needed confidence in speaking in English daily. In view of Krashen and Terell’s (1983) understanding and using the language in context, the drama workshop provided comprehensible input in a meaningful context that made speaking in English fun yet significant.

Moreover, since the activities also addressed community building within the group, the improvisational theatre helped strengthen their unity and eventually lower students’ affective filter. Observations support that students became more confident and less anxious in speaking English. Students towards the end of the program talked more often in a louder and more assertive voice. Most importantly, their journal entries indicated that they would want to participate again and invite more students to experience the drama workshop because they believed it helped them speak English better. While it is true that the results in the study may not be true to other groups, the findings of this research could prospectively yield to groups whose English comprehension is quite advanced. The improvisational theatre activities that also contribute to community building like tableaux, puppetry, image theatre, and process drama can be employed as an intervention among students who considerably know English but are not that confident and motivated to speak it.

This research, combined with previous studies, could encourage schools to conduct drama workshops among students who have anxiety in speaking English if not use these activities in their speech classes. Further studies may explore how various improvisational theatre activities influence students with varying English skills. Moreover, long-term studies with larger groups could strengthen the position to offer drama workshops among college students and contribute to existing knowledge on drama activities in the ESL classroom. Since it was not clear in the study if drama helped improve English comprehension even among students who did not speak, a more extensive study should look into drama affecting students’ output and their input.

It is anticipated that the findings of this research will persuade English teachers to integrate drama activities in their classrooms. There is a need for professional development workshops in a drama for teachers at the tertiary level and the Philippines' basic education programs. Although up until today, some teachers and administrators consider drama improvisation or play a silly activity, the drama is a powerful tool that creates a safe space where students can reduce their anxiety in speaking English.

References


**About the Author**

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