

DRAMA ACTIVITY IN TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of using drama activity in the teaching and learning of Intercultural Communication at Thai Nguyen University of Education. Some suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of using drama activity in teaching are also given. The research methods include document analysis and questionnaires. The results show that drama activity had a positive effect on the teaching and learning of intercultural communication as a subject at university. The students generally gained a basic understanding of the outstanding features of communication in many parts of the world. They could make a comparison between Vietnam and other countries and recommended appropriate explanations for the differences. Recommendations were given basing on the difficulties the students claimed in the questionnaire.

Keywords: *teaching methodology; intercultural communication; drama activity; EFL; communicative teaching*

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HOẠT ĐỘNG KỊCH TRONG DẠY MÔN GIAO THOA VĂN HÓA TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM – ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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TÓM TẮT

Bài báo này đánh giá hiệu quả việc sử dụng hoạt động kịch trong dạy học môn Giao thoa văn hóa tại trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên. Một số gợi ý về cách nâng cao hiệu quả của việc sử dụng hoạt động kịch trong dạy học cũng sẽ được thảo luận. Phương pháp nghiên cứu gồm có nghiên cứu tài liệu và sử dụng bảng hỏi. Kết quả cho thấy hoạt động kịch có tác dụng tích cực lên việc dạy và học môn Giao thoa văn hóa. Sinh viên nhìn chung đã thu được những hiểu biết cơ bản về những đặc trưng giao tiếp của các nước trên thế giới. Họ có thể so sánh Việt Nam với các nước trên thế giới và tìm được lời giải thích phù hợp cho những khác biệt. Đề xuất cũng đã được đưa ra dựa trên những khó khăn mà sinh viên trả lời trong bảng hỏi.

Từ khóa: *phương pháp giảng dạy; giao thoa văn hóa; hoạt động kịch; EFL; dạy học theo phương pháp giao tiếp*

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1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) requires much effort due to both the linguistic and the cultural elements. EFL learners are supposed to understand the grammatical patterns and rules, master the practical skills of a language that is different from their mother tongue. Moreover, the cultures that underlie this language bring them many challenges. The differences between learner's cultural backgrounds and foreign cultures make the acquisition of the target language even harder.

In Vietnam, most English-majored university students are required to study Intercultural Communication, in which they need to learn both the language itself and the cultures in which this language is spoken. At the researcher's university, students have to cover this course in their third year. For them, discovering other cultures requires them to double hard work because at the same time they learn the language and they read for information and facts which may be complicated to understand. There are technical terms that are challenging for learners to understand and there are practical customs and habits that can not be discovered through lectures.

The subject of Intercultural Communication at Thai Nguyen University of Education accounts for 3 credits in the university curriculum. Students meet once a week and they have 3 50-minute periods at a time. This course provides students with some basic knowledge of communication and cultural communication which is the basis for studying the similarities and differences in communication when comparing two or more cultures. The course is supposed to give the students a suitable approach to a new culture which helps them adapt their own viewpoints of communicative contexts to suit the current time situation.

The usual teaching methods, including presentation, seminar, and discussion, may not help the students to understand all the key elements in the culture of a foreign country. Within the time allowance in class, the students are required to acquire the theoretical knowledge of communication and intercultural communication and some prominent points about the real communication patterns in some countries. The time the students meet in class is clearly not enough for them to have a quite full comprehension of the cultural communication characteristics of many countries. Therefore, the researcher has added a drama project into the syllabus for 3 English major classes. At the time the study was carried out, the first two classes had graduated, so the researcher only collected data from the class K51, which had just finished learning this subject.

To evaluate the effectiveness of using drama activity in the teaching and learning of Intercultural Communication, the researcher carried out this study. Some suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of drama activity will also be given.

2. Literature review

The precise definition of drama varies from author to author. S. Holden [1] regards drama as "any kind of activity where learners are asked either to portray themselves or to portray someone else in an imaginary situation". Drama requires students to pretend themselves to be in another situation outside the classroom or into the shoes of another person.

According to Bolton, drama opens "a way into knowledge" [2]. Through dramas, students explore the world they live in. The kind of knowledge discussed here is mostly related to "values, principles, implications, and responsibility" [2]. Actually, drama leads to a sense of "understanding" rather than just "knowledge". Drama helps to improve learner's understanding of the target contents.

This can be especially true for the teaching and learning of Intercultural Communication where most of the contents can only be understood through direct experience. Through dramas, students have a chance to explore the new information that they can search for on the Internet and the library. When they read and learn by themselves, the information will come into their mind quickly and stay there for a longer time. Information may gradually become their “understanding” rather than merely “knowledge” somewhere on books.

Drama is a creative learning form. Dramas engage students in cooperative, and process-oriented activities; therefore, students not only gain some knowledge but also practise some necessary soft skills for their studies [3]. Though doing drama projects, students gather in groups and share work among the members. This cooperation allows them to learn from each other and improve their own understanding as well as skills. Preparing a drama requires students certain amount of effort as a drama is not the last-minute result only, but a long process. During this process, students finish their work step by step and they also improve step by step.

Drama can provide students with “artistic experience in socio-cultural discourses and face-to-face interactions in intercultural situations” [4]. By artistic experience, Choi-Yoon-jeong and other authors mean a “conscious activity in which one moves from their sense into their imagination, from impression into idea”. Courtney claims that dramas reflect the life and thought of the community [5]. Drama activity can bring about a real awareness between the drama world and the real world which are reflected in each other. Fleming (as cited in Choi [4]) points out that drama activity provides contexts and helps to engage participants effectively. From those points, it can be seen that drama activity plays the role of a right way to an in-depth understanding into

intercultural communication, and thus it can also be a right way to teach intercultural communication as a subject at university.

U. D. Nuriye suggest integrating drama into the language teaching and learning process for it “promotes contextualized and authentic language use in a low stress and positive environment” [6]. Through drama activity students can get free from their studies and they are allowed to “walk in the shoes” of others. They have a favorable condition to understanding the contexts in the target language’s culture and develop a better social awareness. Moreover, enthusiasm is encouraged among students because they feel that they can contribute to the whole and that the activity is not a single vapid lesson but a lively stimulating activity. Therefore, the effectiveness of the learning process can be promoted and the student’s performance can be higher.

Drama can be used in the teaching and learning of English in different ways. The first type of drama is mime. According to John Dougill (as cited in M. Z. Munther [7]), mime is a “non-verbal representation of an idea or story through gesture, bodily movement and expression”. Role play is another kind of drama where students are “assigned roles which they act out in a given scenario”. Role play has many types including dramatic plays, story dramatization and sociodrama, seminar style presentation, debates and interview. The third kind of drama is simulation where students have roles, functions, duties and responsibilities in a structured situation relating to problem solving. The last type of drama is improvisation which is an “unscripted, unrehearsed, spontaneous set of actions in response to minimal directions from a teacher” [7].

Among those types of drama, role play is chosen by the researcher for the students to perform when they study the subject of Intercultural Communication.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

The research investigates how much the use of drama activity could support the students' understanding of the differences in communication typical features between an English-speaking country and Vietnam when they study the subject of Intercultural Communication.

The study aims at answering two questions below:

1. Does drama activity have positive effect on the learning of intercultural communication as a subject?
2. What are some recommendations to improve the effectiveness of drama activity used in the teaching of intercultural communication as a subject?

3.2. Participants

The participant of the study was 61 students from K51 English major class at Thai Nguyen University of Education. There were 7 males and 54 females. Their ages were between 20 and 21 years old. They come from some provinces in North Vietnam. They were in their third year at the time of the study.

3.3. Research procedure

At the beginning of this course the students were announced that they would have to carry out a drama project and that the final products would be marked at the end of the course. The plays they performed would be about the similarities and differences in communication between some English speaking countries and Vietnam. The drama activity was carried out outside the classroom. The students did the drama activity in groups and the whole class was divided into 10 groups. Each group was asked to make a plan for the activity in which each member was assigned part of the work and this plan needed to be hand in to the teacher. The students were asked to present the detailed procedure of the drama project in

the plan and they needed to follow it. At the end of the term, also the end of the study, the students acted out the plays and recorded them. The teacher could monitor the progress of the activity with the students' plans. The students' plays were about some typical situations in communication in an English-speaking country in comparison with those in Vietnam. The plays exploited the differences in greeting, table manner, fashion style, and child care and education.

The researcher worked as a facilitator during the drama project. At the beginning of the course, she gave an instruction about the form of the final product, the theme, the length, and the quality requirements and explained how the students could implement the project. She monitored the progress the students made using the plan that they gave her. She offered help during the activity when the students asked for it. The students were encouraged to work together as a team, and to promote their creativity to their full potential.

In order to know whether the use of drama activity have positive effect on the teaching and learning of Intercultural Communication, the researcher would compare the questionnaires and the video checklist with the output standard of this course. At the end of this course, the students will be able to understand the impact of cultural elements on communication in different countries. They will be able to learn about some striking features in communication in some countries in the world. They will also be able to use appropriate verbal and non-verbal language in various cultural contexts. Basing on the requirements for the students, the researcher developed suitable data collection tools to guarantee the validity of the research.

3.4. Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments included document analysis and questionnaire. The final products in form of videos were

analyzed by the researcher to see how much knowledge about intercultural communication they had gained. This was also regarded as a tool to verify the results from the questionnaire. The videos were marked using a checklist whose items were derived from the output requirement of this subject.

Two questionnaires were delivered to the students during the research, one at the beginning (pre-questionnaire) and the other at the end (post-questionnaire). The two questionnaires consisted of the same questions in which the students were asked about their attitudes towards the drama project. The post-questionnaire was added with one question about the difficulties the students had when doing the activity. This was an open-ended question where the students were encouraged to give their answers freely without a restriction of number of answers or any clues. The answers to this question would direct the researcher when she attempted to give further suggestions and recommendations for other researchers.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results from the questionnaires

The questionnaires collected data about the students' attitudes towards the drama project.

Table 1 illustrates how the students' attitudes towards drama activity changed over the time. It is clear that more students showed a positive attitude at the end of the course. In details, 95.08% indicated that they enjoyed learning through drama activity and 85.25% thought that they learnt the subject of intercultural communication better when they did drama activity.

The last question in the post-questionnaire collected data on the students' difficulties when they carried out the drama project. The question was "What problems did you have when you did drama activity?". This was an open-ended question where the students could write their answers freely on the paper. Their problems are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. *Students' attitudes towards the drama activity*

Item	Pre-questionnaire		Post-questionnaire	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1. I enjoy learning with drama activity.	13	21.31	58	95.08
2. I think drama activity can help me learn the subject of intercultural communication better.	11	18.03	52	85.25

Table 2. *Students' problems when doing drama activity*

Problem	Number	Percentage
- It was hard to write the script.	41	67.21
- I couldn't act well.	32	52.46
- I couldn't remember the script.	29	47.54
- We found it hard to arrange time to meet.	17	27.87
- It took much time to rehearse and prepare.	16	26.23
- There was too much information and we found it hard to select the right pieces of information.	11	18.03
- I didn't know what to do to prepare for the play.	7	11.48
- Editing took much time.	5	8.20
- I didn't know how to stop the camera from shaking.	3	4.92
- Some people laughed at me and I couldn't focus.	2	3.28

It can be seen from Table 2 that the students encountered a variety of difficulties some of which were common and others were quite personal. The problems that most students had were writing the script of the play, acting and learning the script by heart, with the proportion of 67.21%, 52.46%, and 47.51% respectively. The two problems relating to time management accounted for more than one forth of the total number of students. Some of the students (18.03%) had difficulty when they tried to gather and select information to put into the play and around 11% did not know how to build up a play. No more than 9% of the students had technical problems such as editing the videos and using the cameras. Two students had a problem of emotion control when they acted in front of other people.

The problems that the students had when they did drama activity can be divided into 6 groups for a better discussion: language use, acting, time management, information searching, technology, and emotion control. As can be seen above, the problems of language use and acting accounted for approximately a half of the total number of students. The effectiveness of drama activity can be influenced by these difficulties; therefore, these problems would receive the largest attention of the researcher in the final part of this paper, Recommendation. Time management and information searching can possibly be improved with more detailed instruction of the teacher, so these two problems will be discussed in more details later. Though technology and emotion control seem to belong to a small number of students,

these difficulties will also be paid a suitable amount of attention.

4.2. Results from the checklist

The results from the checklist are presented in Table 3. The results suggest that most groups had done enough preparation. Nine over ten groups included the details that were appropriate to the cultural contexts. For example, in a play about French culture, French students greet each other with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Eight groups used suitable costumes and other props. By appropriate props, the researcher regarded hand-made props that imitated the real objects as appropriate. In this checklist, the focus of the researcher is not on the grammar of the students, but on their general language use, whether the way the characters spoke corresponded to the cultural contexts. On this criteria, seven groups explained appropriately the cultural differences and six groups used appropriate language. They used correct words for traditional objects. For instance, in a play about Russian culture, the students used the word “samovar” for the container used to heat water for tea. In a play about English culture, the students talked about “fish and chips” as one of the popular dishes. Six groups used suitable body language when they performed. They showed natural and appropriate facial expressions, hand movements and tone. For example, in a play about the differences between Vietnamese and American culture, the American students gave a face of fear, with widely open eyes and mouth, and leaned backward when they were offered some dog meat.

Table 3: *Evaluation of students' plays*

Criteria	Number	Percentage
1. The details reflect communicative characteristics of the country (countries) in real life.	9	90
2. The language of the characters corresponds to the contexts.	6	60
3. The characters use appropriate non-verbal language.	6	60
4. The explanation to the differences is clear and satisfying.	7	70
5. They use appropriate performing props.	8	80

In general, more than half of all the groups met the requirements of the play quality. The details and the performing props were mostly appropriate. Those served as a proof of the positive change in their attitudes towards intercultural communication. It is not abnormal to see that the results of verbal language and non-verbal language use by four groups were not as high as the other six groups because the students themselves confirmed in the post-questionnaire that they had a problem with the script. Even so, six over ten is not a low score.

In conclusion, the results from the questionnaires and the video checklist demonstrate a positive effect of drama activity. The students generally gained a basic understanding of the outstanding features of communication in a chosen English-speaking country. They could make a comparison between Vietnam and the chosen country and recommended appropriate explanations for the differences. In general, the students solved the problems in their plays in the right direction.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

It is advisable for the teacher to give a full and detailed instruction before the implementation. The teacher should explain the detailed requirements of the final product. The teacher should give them a sample video so that the students have a full picture of what they will be expected to do. This video should match all the criteria that the teacher set up for the final product. After the students watch the video, the teacher needs to analyze the details in the video and explain how that detail matches the requirements.

The teacher needs to give the students a detailed sample of plan and help them to make their own plan which is as detailed as possible. The plan should indicate the exact time to finish each step of the preparation. The steps should include gathering information, select information, sharing the work, writing first draft of the script, edited

script, video of the first scene, video of the second scene, and video of the final scene, first draft of the full video, and edited video. The teacher monitors the students using the plan, and asks them to hand in the product of each step at the deadline. This plan serves as the solution to the possible problem of time management.

The teacher should give the students an instruction on how to search for information on the Internet or in a library. How to select the right pieces of information and how to arrange them in a suitable and logical order should also be taught to the students.

The script of the play may take the students a long time to write and edit. If the students' level of English proficiency is low, the teacher might need to read their scripts and correct them. The lower the students' level of proficiency is, the more help the teacher should give.

Students' acting skill is not the focus of the study because it can not be taught or changed in a short time. In fact, some could not give a natural smile or have natural eye contact with their partner. Some were speaking but they sounded like they were reading from the script. Thus, the teacher should only remind them of the harmony between verbal and non-verbal language, and between non-verbal language and the context. Emotion control also depends on individual's personality so the teacher's role will be weak at this point.

The teacher should build up a group on a social network so that he/she can give help at any time and any place. Because the drama activity should be done mostly outside the classroom, an online group would support this perfectly. The students are supposed to share information about the devices or the softwares that can be useful for this type of activity. It would be a suggestion to have a student who is good at technology to give help with the problems that the teacher cannot handle.

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