

# Exploring the Practicality of Drama Activity in Teaching English to Preschoolers

Nur Ilianis Adnan  
*Universiti Teknologi MARA*  
Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
[nurilianis@uitm.edu.my](mailto:nurilianis@uitm.edu.my)

Astalakshmi Paranjothi  
*Kolej Cosmopoint*  
Ipoh, Perak  
[lakshmiparanjothi@outlook.com](mailto:lakshmiparanjothi@outlook.com)

**Abstract**— In this study, the main aim is to highlight the importance of drama activity in teaching English to preschoolers. A compilation of literature review of all the relevant papers was done. Generally, children are not born equipped with all the essential knowledge and skills, so, environments that provide new learning opportunities and chances during childhood years are very crucial for the future success of a child. However, encouraging preschoolers to learn English is not an easy task. Using drama is one of the best ways to help preschoolers learn English as the students get the chance to ‘play’ and have fun while learning. In addition to mastering the language, drama activity also cultivates critical thinking, and this is in line with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025. Overall, this new approach is expected to match the learning styles of our Alpha generations in today’s modern world. Therefore, it is important for parents, teachers, and policymakers to recognize the benefits of drama activity in educating preschoolers.

**Keywords**— preschoolers, drama, English, critical thinking

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study examines drama-based activities as a means of real-life situations in teaching English language to preschoolers. One of the most effective ways to learn the target language is to use it in a real context. It has been repeatedly shown that students learn a new language better when it has a real purpose of learning, and the use of that language is meaningful and authentic (Zoubi, 2018).

In 2010, the Malaysian Ministry of Education decided to start using English as an educational language at preschool age, along with Malay and other native languages, to improve the preparation of young children for primary school (Azman, 2016). Existing studies

have shown the importance of English development and early language to equip preschoolers with language abilities. Therefore, since 2010, Malaysian kindergarten teachers have been using English in kindergartens as part of a curriculum based on the 2010 National Kindergarten Standards to prepare children to learn English before elementary school (Hagen, 2018).

In general, Malaysian children learn English between the ages of 4 and 6, that is, preschool age. After that, English continues to be taught as a compulsory subject throughout primary school (7-12 years old). This continues at the secondary school level (13-17 years old) and then at the higher education level (Azman, 2016). For most Malaysians, it is not an exaggeration to say that English has naturally become their second language (L2) due to their status in Malaysia. In general, Malaysian learners can safely conclude that they have been exposed to English in their education system for at least 11 years.

Despite around a decade of exposure to the English language, Malaysian students are still unable to use the language well. Tertiary level students and graduates have been reported to have English performance below the expected level of competence (Che Musa et al., 2012; Sulaiman et al., 2015; Yamat et al., 2014). Hence, it is crucial to expose them to the new ways of mastering the English language and this must be done at the early stage of education which is during preschool years.

## II. THEORIES AND MODEL EMBEDDED

### A. *Nativist and Sociocultural Theories*

Nativist Theory was founded by Noam Chomsky in 1957. This theory suggests that humans' speaking

capability has long existed in the structure of the brain. According to Chomsky, every child naturally has a language acquisition device (LAD) which is a system that enables children to combine words. The system is to help them understand the rules of the pronunciation and the meaning of the sentences heard when they have mastered vocabulary. At the same time, LAD is becoming a form of storing grammar rules existing in human minds. Another perspective of language acquisition is that children can process words in the language they have listened to since young. As for the Sociocultural theory which was introduced by Vygotsky in 1962, it is believed that children's language, cognitive, and social capabilities can be improved through social support and interaction. Vygotsky states that the learning experienced by children only functions when they communicate with people around them, and when they perform interaction with their peers. Children's intelligence will determine just how fast they can grab the concept and function of meaningful words that they are listening to. With sufficient vocabulary, listening to phrases in English being used by the teacher will prepare the children to speak well (Hamouda, 2013). In this study, both theories are related to each other to show the importance of listening and speaking skills to preschool children.

### B. Clement Model of L2 Linguistic Confidence

This motivation model focuses on the importance of L2 confidence in creating a desire for future communication. Linguistic self-confidence, as described by Clément (1980), is a socially defined construct. Clément describes linguistic self-confidence as a powerful mediating process in a multicultural environment that influences a person's motivation to use the language of another speech community. In a multi-ethnic context, a positive attitude on the part of the L2 learners would lead them to seek contact with the target L2 community members. If the quality and quantity of interaction with the L2 community are relatively frequent and pleasant, self-confidence (operationally defined in terms of low anxiety and high self-perceptions of L2) and competence in using the L2 would develop. On the contrary, this means that anxiety may encourage students to avoid native speakers and potentially adversely affect the quality of future communication.

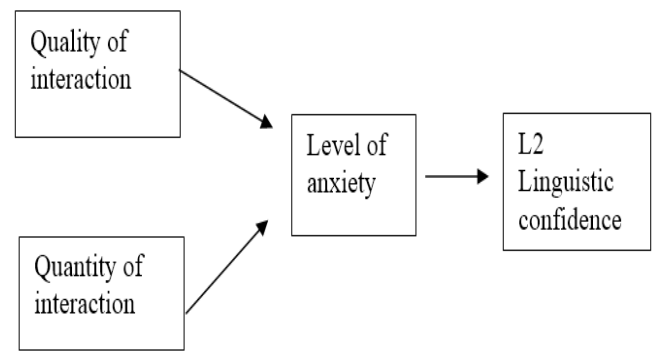


Fig. 1. Clement Model on Linguistic Confidence

### III. METHODOLOGY

Several steps were taken to ensure a high-quality review of the literature on practicality of drama activity in teaching English to preschoolers. First, a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed journals was completed including eBooks and proceedings from conferences. Second, the reference section for each article found was searched to find additional articles. Besides searching for high-quality literature review, effort in getting authentic photos to be presented as the figures in this paper was also taken.

### IV. FACTOR CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENTS' COMPETENCY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

One of the factors that contributes to the limited knowledge of the English language is anxiety. Mastering a new language can be an unsettling psychological experience (Dewale & Thirtle, 2009) thus anxiety could manifest as an inhibitor to the English language lesson. This is because, in a classroom where traditional teaching and learning approaches are practiced, students are expected to learn the language in the classroom where they are required to grasp everything that it takes to learn a language. For example, the alphabets, phonics, pronunciation, grammar components, grammar rules, mastering of the listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills. Staying calm and unaffected becomes a must to the students when all these requirements are laid out in front of them. Studies posited that anxiety in the form of intrusive thoughts or negative emotions disrupts students' cognitive functions (Faizah Idrus & Tuan Muhammad Hanif Tuan Ab Hamid, 2021). Hence, when it comes to learning the English language, an English language learning-friendly environment is essential to get the best out of the students. Students should be exposed to a conducive and productive environment (Masaazi, 2015). A "learning-friendly" environment is "child-friendly" and "teacher-friendly." It emphasizes the importance of students and teachers working together as a learning community. It locates the

children at the centre of learning and encourages active participation in learning. It also fulfills the needs and interests of teachers. It allows and motivates the teachers to give all children the best education possible (Subedi & Shresta, 2020). Therefore, one of the ways that can be employed by teachers in the classroom is drama. According to Ramadhani (2019) drama activity can be one of the strategies to overcome students' anxiety because students with lack and poor motivation become proactive when participating in drama activities.

## V. USING DRAMA ACTIVITY IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO PRESCHOOLERS

Incorporating drama in the classroom can develop both verbal and nonverbal communication by providing students with room to exercise their voice and body language, as well as building a bond which aids students to feel less isolated and motivates them to help one another in the classroom. Drama represents the relationship towards oral skills where speakers and listeners in the drama can build and share meaning besides conveying information about purpose and emotion. The significance of drama is its ability to tap on students' creativity that helps with problem solving. Creativity is a complex process seen in all emotional and intellectual activities in all areas of study and work (Bernstein & Bernstein, 2004). Lee and Liu (2021) affirms that the most effective way of learning a target language is to put it to the test in a real-life situation. For example, if the drama requires a child to act and play a role of a lost child who is asking for direction, the child is put in a situation where he or she has to think of appropriate words to use when they speak. Training students to speak through drama will eventually help students to speak with confidence when they encounter a situation for real. Drama provides an authentic arena for real language use in real situations with an emphasis on reciprocal, synchronized, unpredictable audience interactions. Drama requires students to role play, and it gives students the opportunity to pretend and act like another person. In a scenario like this, students could use the freedom they have in class to express themselves, act and convey dialogues at ease. This helps students to practice using new vocabulary and use the English language at ease. Students basically get to explore their potential and improve over time with practice.

Drama is a field that makes individual activities and affects the cognitive, affective, dynamic, and social aspects of a person. With its content, drama has qualities, which enable the individual to take pleasure, and develops one's aesthetic side. Drama is one of the

most effective teaching methods because it allows the child to get involved in the process, do, live, feel, implement, and think. Drama exists within the child's nature through games. Children get a chance to express themselves more comfortably through drama. Looking at studies in drama implementations, which are effective in realizing both permanent and functional learning, it is more productive than almost all other techniques, especially unavoidable in developing perception (Tombak, 2015).



Fig. 2. Drama Activity I



Fig. 3. Drama Activity II



Fig. 4. Drama Activity III



Fig. 5. Drama Activity IV



Fig. 6. Drama Activity V

In figure 4, the students and teacher pretended to go into a tunnel. The teacher used a hula hoop and a brown cloth to create a DIY 'tunnel'. During this tunnel play, students were able to work on the obvious gross motor skills such as crawling and body awareness. Besides, students were also able to learn new vocabulary and phrases such as 'tunnel', 'crawl' and 'go into the tunnel'. By doing this, students will be able to learn and remember better because children are usually able to play with just about any object, but it is much easier and more stimulating when they have the proper props to help them truly create their dramatic play themes (Goldstein, 2018). This idea is supported by Raja Rosila Raja Berahim et al. (2021) and Istiqlaliah Nurul Hidayati et al. (2020). They stated that children have short attention spans and a common problem in classroom teaching is teachers usually use conventional teaching styles when teaching, especially vocabulary, instead of implementing innovative methods. Thus, students are not keen to learn and master the vocabulary of the target language. So, teachers should choose methods that are not only appropriate but fit to the nature and ability of the target learners they are teaching. Children will easily be drawn into what they are taught when the materials are stimulating.

As in figure 5 and 6, masks were used in the drama lesson. Masks or headgears are important in drama performance as they help to exaggerate the expressions and define the characters the children are playing. According to Roy (2016), when using masks, students were able to disassociate from their sense of self, enabling them to participate without inhibition. They

were able to view ideas and each other with a greater depth, as well as being engaged deeply, hence, helping them to be more confident in expressing themselves.



Fig. 7. Drama Activity VI

#### VI. RECOMMENDATION (EMBED IN THE CURRENT SYLLABUS, MALAYSIA BLUEPRINT, SDG)

The Malaysian government pays great attention to the English language mastery among Malaysian students. Nevertheless, encouraging preschoolers to have good critical thinking skills is also included in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. In the blueprint, there are six student aspirations mentioned and one of them is on thinking skills. Every child will learn how to continue acquiring knowledge throughout their lives, to be able to connect different pieces of knowledge and to create new knowledge. Every child will master a range of important cognitive skills including critical thinking, reasoning, creative thinking, and innovation. This is an area where the system has historically fallen short, with students being less able than they should be in applying knowledge and thinking critically outside familiar academic contexts.

In line with Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, it is believed that preschoolers need to focus on not only the language but also thinking skills. Therefore, it would be beneficial for schools to embed the drama lesson in their current syllabus as drama education operates as a significant link in this chain and cultivates critical thinking via theatrical techniques. Students can discuss and dramatize social issues in the classroom where they can express concerns, make judgements, and eventually make an appropriate decision. These drama activities encourage students' critical thinking. Role playing in small groups is a drama activity which enables students to be more engaged and improve their critical thinking skills. This method promotes students' collaboration skills as they interact with each other, as well as developing their empathic ability. Furthermore, they are encouraged to exchange knowledge, cultivate their observations, develop abstract or inductive

thinking skills, and participate in the decision-making process (Dima, Dima & Tsiaras, 2020).

## VII. CONCLUSION

It is very important for the educators to apply various teaching and learning methods in the classroom apart from the traditional methods. This paper along with other studies in the literature can be said to have contributed to this fact by revealing the advantages of using drama activity in teaching English to preschoolers. Drama activity can help to bridge a similar gap between the classroom and real-life situations by giving opportunities to the students experiencing real-life situations. According to Lee and Liu (2021), one of the effective ways to learn a target language is to put it to the test in a real-life situation. It has been proven that students acquire a second or foreign language best when they have a real purpose for learning, and when they are able to use the language in meaningful and authentic ways. It is undeniable that drama activities facilitate the type of language behaviour that could lead to fluency as it can help to reduce language anxiety. This paper also projected the connection between anxiety and a learner-friendly environment. The idea from this paper is in line with previous research, suggesting that drama activities can help in teaching English to preschoolers.

In conclusion, drama activity can be said to have positive impacts on preschoolers especially in assisting them in learning a language, expanding their vocabulary, reducing their language anxiety, and improving their confidence in speaking English. It is hoped that parents, teachers, and school administrators can consider the recommendations presented in this concept paper to implement drama activities in the classroom as one main activity replacing traditional ways of teaching language to preschoolers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to the director of Treasure Chest Education, Ms. Sabina Lee for her full support in providing information and pictures from Speech and Drama programmes offered by her company in Singapore, Johor, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur.

## REFERENCES

- Azman, H. (2016). Implementation and challenges of English language education reform in Malaysian primary schools. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 22(3), 65 – 78.
- Clement, R. (1980) Ethnicity, contact, and communicative competence in a second language. In: Giles, H.M., Robinson, W.P. and Smith, P.M. (Eds.), *Language: Social Psychological Perspectives*, (pp. 147-154). Pergamon, Oxford.
- Dewaele, J. M., & Thirtle, H. (2009). Why do some young learners drop foreign languages. A focus on learner-internal variables. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 12(6), 635–649.
- Dima, A., Dima, A. & Tsiaras, A. (2020). The improvement of critical thinking through Drama Education for students in the fifth grade of Primary school. *Drama Research*, 11(1), 2-17.
- Faizah Idruz & Tuan Muhammad Hanif Tuan Ab Hamid (2021). Profiling English language learning anxiety among selected rural area secondary school students in Malaysia: A case study. *International Journal of English Language Teaching*, 9(1). 1-20.
- Goldstein, T. R. (2018). Developing a dramatic pretend-play game Intervention. *American Journal of Play*, 10(3), 290-308.
- Hagen, A.M. (2018) Improving the odds: Identifying language activities that support the language development of preschoolers with poorer vocabulary skills. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 62(5), 649-663.
- Hamouda, A. (2013). An Investigation of listening comprehension problems encountered by Saudi students in the EL listening classroom. HR Mars. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive and Development*, 2(2), 113-155.
- Istiqlaliah Nurul Hidayatia, Tina Priyantina & Deddy Sofyanm(2020). *International Journal of Business, Economics and Social Development*, 1(2), 100-111.
- Lee, Y. J. & Liu, Y. T. (2021). Promoting oral presentation skills through drama-based tasks with an authentic audience: A longitudinal study. *Asia-Pacific Edu Res* (2021).

- Masaazi, F. M. (2015) Developing a friendly and productive language learning environment (FPLE). *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 3(5), 144-154.
- Musa, N. C., Lie, K., & Azman, H. (2012). Exploring English language learning and teaching in Malaysia. *GEMA OnlineTM Journal of Language Studies*, 12(1), 35–51.
- Raja Rosila Raja Berahim, Wan Noorli Razali & Noor Azli Affendy Lee (2021). Read aloud and total physical response with kindergarten students. *International Journal of Practices in Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 9-15.
- Ramadhani, T. (2019). Overcoming anxiety in English language learning through drama performance. *Companion Proceedings of the SEADRIC*, 145-149.
- Root-Bernstein, R., & Root-Bernstein, M. (2004). Artistic scientists and scientific artists: The link between polymathy and creativity. In R. J. Sternberg, E. G. Grigorenko, & J. L. Singer (Eds.), *Creativity: From potential to realization* (pp. 127-151). Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.
- Roy, D. (2016). Masks as a method: Meyerhold to Mnouchkine. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 3(1), 2-11.
- Subedi, R., & Shrestha, M. (2020). Student friendly teaching and learning environment: Experiences from technical vocational educational training schools in Nepal. *European Journal of Educational Technology*, 3(1), 1-13.
- Tombak, A. (2016). Importance of drama in preschool education. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 1-7.
- Zoubi, S. A. (2018). The impact of exposure to English language on language acquisition. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 5(4), 151-162.