

# Theorising Participatory Drama as Literacy Education

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**Abstract:** In today's world, compulsory education has been widely implemented in the vast majority of regions. The most fundamental and important educational goal of compulsory education is to cultivate individual literacy ability. Recent studies have shown that using drama as a teaching method can effectively promote the development of literacy learning. This paper analyzes why drama can develop literacy according to the definition of literacy and introduces the related drama strategies from four aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing to explain how to use drama to enhance literacy ability, and concluded that thinking cognition should always be the core of literacy and cannot be separated.

**Keywords:** Drama Education; Literacy Education

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## Introduction

In the 21st century, compulsory education has been implemented around the world, and cultivating individuals to be literate has become one of the most important educational goals. In many education systems, the aim of literacy is to ensure that every person who reaches adulthood can read and understand all they are likely to encounter in daily life. (Carroll and Chall, 1975: 8). Recently, studies have shown that using drama as a teaching method can effectively promote the development of literacy learning (O'Toole and Dunn 2021). However, current studies have not theorized its drama practice into the four categories of literacy education, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the connections between current practices and its theoretical roots in drama education.

### 1. Listening and Thinking

The development of literacy starts with listening. Before children can read or write, they first need to learn to listen and reflect (Baldwin & John, 2012). In drama pedagogy, the setting of the attractive situation and storylines often can attract the students' attention and lead the students into the virtual world of drama; their brains will form corresponding images and at the same time as the story is told, their imagination will also be developed. Therefore, telling a story through drama practice can stimulate imagination and high order thinking.

For example, in a class on the theme of the animated film "Mary and Max," the actor-teacher designed a drama activity that involved listening and imagination. The students were requested to sit down in a rectangular and close their eyes to listen to the teacher reading a letter from a little girl named Mary who wrote to her pen pal Max. In the process, students need to imagine the space and furniture of her home based on Mary's narrative and then share their ideas with others in body and oral language. The majority of students are relatively concentrated when listening to the narratives. They don't feel bored while listening. Their brains are actively working. They are not just hearing the words, but more importantly, they are thinking spontaneously. It is precisely because the drama gives them a situation in which they can truly imagine so that they can freely exert their potential creativity. As Leonard (1991) noted, good listening is focused, critical, and comprehensive. It requires us to be sensitive to the various information we hear and it affirms our respect for others as well as their ideas and contributions (ibid). It can be said that it is the drama that inspires the enthusiasm of young people and gives them a platform to listen effectively to better enter the language and literacy development.

### 2. Oral language and Communication

"A solid oral language foundation allows children to generalize from what they already do well" (Leu and Kinzer, 1995:241). In the process of children's growth, oral expression ability is often regarded as the most important training target in language development. McMaster (1998: 575) refers to drama as a tool for "thinking loud" because it can contribute to the simultaneous improvement of speaking ability and thinking the ability to a certain extent. For drama education, improving speaking ability does not mean making the voice louder or more pleasing when speaking, but allows the students to be allowed to express more liberally, having the opportunity to

speak out their inner voice and have an equal dialogue with others.

Empirical studies discover that the oral communication in drama pedagogy enables students to understand class content faster and apply it effectively. For example, the poem "A case of Murder" was used to explore students' literacy development. After the students took turns reading the poems, the teacher encouraged them to understand the meaning according to the semantics and further released to read the sentences emotionally. After that, they tried to understand the context and use a few of skills that they thought are appropriate (i.e. pauses, accents, subtly shifting rhythms) to read the sentences we were assigned. This case shows that drama can arouse the interest of learners to use oral expressions in a dramatic situation to explore the meaning of the text. It is not teaching literacy through repeating passively, but letting students learn in "active grappling, wrestling, or struggling" (Grady, 1996:67).

### **3. Reading and Comprehension**

The most intuitive definition of the word "reading" is to read words and symbols. But in the drama class, students not only read the texts on paper but also interpreting meaningful images and dynamic action. Reading comprehension, as a high-level goal of reading (Moll, 2014), depends on what the students actually understood. Reading expert Cris Tovani (2000) has pointed out that there is a common misunderstanding that if someone is performing a reading behavior, it means they are read. However, they may not actually receiving or interpreting the meaning from text when "reading". This reason can be attributed to two main reasons, one is that reading content itself is not attractive, so it does not stimulate students' interest; the other is that students are tired of the way of bowing the head and reading alone. To this end, drama can indeed reawaken the vitality of reading for students because of its motivational rich situation and cooperation.

Drama is a social activity (Baldwin and John, 2012). It expects children to communicate, solve problems, create situations together (ibid). For example, In the "Fishing Child", the strategy of "Still Image" has been used. In this process, the organizer took the charm of magic as the starting point and guided the students to think about a question about "If you have magic in real life, what do you want it to be?" Around this challenging topic, each group engaged in intense discussions. At this time, the presenter put forward another higher requirement, that is, after the discussion reached an agreement, each group should construct a meaningful sculpture image related to this magic through collective cooperation. One of the students read and explained a meaningful picture of a group from a special perspective. In this group, each of the five members holds a bottle of water in their hands. Their posture levels range from left to right is low to high and their mental state is from dying to full of vitality.

### **4. Writing in Role**

In recent years, the "raise standards in writing" has been listed as a priority in development from the school inspection report for many times (Baldwin & John, 2012). Empirical studies reveal that students with with strong writing skills are more likely to take a favorable position in real life, such as gaining employment opportunities and expanding their social circle (ibid). From a pragmatic point of view, the range of writing techniques involved can be quite extensive. For example, when we fill out orders and schedules in our daily lives, that is related to logic and reasoning. From an aesthetic point of view, writing skills are also associated with one's creative ability and emotional empathy such as writing poetry and lyrics (ibid).

In drama pedagogy, there are many strategies are used creatively by teachers. For example, in the session of "Mr. Fox and Lady Mary", the teacher gave students an opening letter as pre-text. In this letter, they can feel a mysterious atmosphere because a lot of information was not clearly stated, but it only revealed some hidden clues for the readers to image boldly. In the design of the lesson, students can discuss the development of stories with their peers and try to write to warn Lady Mary about Mr. Fox's plan. In the process, they also need to refine the background of character (i.e. age, shape, relationship with others) and imitate the style of pre-text. After having a preliminary idea, autonomous dialogue and role play can be carried out. For older students who already have a certain cognitive ability, they will further be encouraged to write the script in a dramatic text, including dialogue and stage directions. Crumpler (2005) points out that drama in education is a powerful tool for writing development. Whether to cultivate rational thinking ability or emotional creation aesthetic, drama can make students' writing more effective and ideological.

## **Conclusion**

This paper analyzes why drama can develop literacy according to the definition of literacy and introduces the related drama strategies from four aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing to explain how to use drama to enhance literacy ability. It can be said that the relationship between these skills is closely linked.

All in all, most importantly, thinking cognition should always be the core of literacy and cannot be separated. Only truly

understanding can be said have learned. Only authentic feelings can develop empathy. Only through multi-angle critical thinking and creating more meaningful things can we become more confident and independent individuals to help provide more and more powerful, profound and unique answers to the repetitive problems of human experience and the world (Barton, 2014).

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