

# Improving Students' English Skills Through Drama Performance

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**Abstract:** The ultimate goal of learning a language is to be able to use it to communicate, to learn and to create. How to better utilize different resources and create opportunities for students to use English so that they can master it naturally has been a never-ending research topic for English educators. In order to find out whether drama performance can help students improve their English skills, the authors set up drama teams of college students, including English majors and non-English majors, to carry out the research. From the research, they have found that drama performance not only can help students improve their English skills, but also develop their communication skills, organization skills, cooperative skills and creativity.

**Keywords:** English skills; Drama; Performance

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## 1. Introduction

English teaching is one of the most important subjects in university education as it has a significant impact on students' future academic and career development. However, traditional teaching models often lead to a lack of interest and motivation among students. Therefore, finding an effective teaching method to stimulate students' interest and motivation in learning English has become a common concern for educators.

At present, English teaching in China is still striving to break away from the traditional teacher-centered model, where teachers are only responsible for imparting knowledge while students learn passively. In a teacher-centered classroom, the participation of students in the classroom is limited. Although task-based teaching has become increasingly popular in recent years and students' participation is increasing, some tasks are too unimaginative to generate interest in learning. Therefore, combining education with interesting activities is undoubtedly an ideal model, as students participating in these activities can make progress through doing what they are interested in. Drama performance seems to be able to combine language learning with recreation to stimulate students' interest in English learning and create opportunities for them to use the language. With this in mind, the authors set out to do their research both in theories and practices.

## 2. Theoretical basis for improving language skills through drama performance

The theoretical support for improving language skills through drama performance includes the Edutainment theory, Learning Motivation theory and the Constructivism theory.

### 2.1 Edutainment

Edutainment is an educational philosophy that combines entertainment and education. It believes that learning and education should not be boring and monotonous, but rather interesting, meaningful, and challenging. Edutainment aims to improve students' learning interest and motivation and promote their learning effectiveness by integrating entertainment elements into education (Gee, 2008).

Edutainment is a new educational idea that believes that students' learning and teachers' teaching should be more relaxing, enjoyable, interactive, and participatory. Therefore, under the guidance of Edutainment, teachers can use a variety of teaching methods and means, such as gamified learning, interactive classrooms, and project-based learning, to create interesting, meaningful, and challenging learning environments that stimulate students' interest and motivation in learning (Inayati & Waloyo, 2022).

Edutainment is supposed to not only improve students' learning effectiveness but also promote their comprehensive development. In the entertainment-education environment, students can unleash their creativity and imagination, improve their problem-solving abilities and team spirit, and better adapt to the future development of society (Laster, 2010). Therefore, Edutainment has become an important trend and development direction in modern education. When it comes to applying Edutainment in teaching, drama performance is one of the best choices.

## **2.2 Learning Motivation**

Learning motivation refers to an individual's motivation and willingness to participate in learning activities. The importance of learning motivation for students is significant as it affects their attitudes, behavior, and achievements towards learning. One form of learning motivation is cognitive drive which refers to the internal motivation and drive that individuals generate in their actions and thought processes based on their cognitive level and needs. Cognitive drive can be applied to stimulate students' interest in learning and enhance their learning motivation by providing challenging tasks which can be set to encourage students to continuously challenge their cognitive level and abilities while completing the tasks, and to gain recognition for their growth and progress (Sheldon,2012).

Learning interest is one of the important factors that stimulate students' active learning, and drama performance is a method that can effectively stimulate students' learning interest. Teachers can set interesting scenarios and storylines. Storylines and vivid and interesting scenarios can attract students' attention and stimulate their learning interest. Students can experience interesting scenarios and storylines through setting task challenges that have a narrative, thereby stimulating their learning interest. What's more, teachers should provide personalized learning experiences to the students. Different students have different learning interests and needs. Therefore, personalized learning experiences can be provided based on students' characteristics and needs. For example, students can be allowed to choose their own tasks, thus better stimulating their learning interest (Stott & Neustaedter,2013). Last but not least, increasing social interaction elements is necessary. Social interaction can increase students' engagement and learning interest in drama performance.

## **2.3 Constructivism**

The constructivist theory believes that learning is a process in which learners construct meaning or build new knowledge based on their prior knowledge and experiences(Wang,2006). Thus, teaching should be built based on what learners already knew and engage learners in learning activities. Teachers need to design environments and interact with learners to foster inventive, creative, critical learning. Therefore, teachers must balance an understanding of the habits, characteristics as well as personalities of individual learners with an understanding of the means of arousing learners' interests and curiosity for learning (Wang,Qian,Gui & Zhang,2016).

## **3. Experiments on applying drama performance to improving students' English skills**

In order to find out the effectiveness of drama performance in improving students' English skills, some experiments were carried out by the research team. They formed a drama performance team of 20 English majors in 2021 and another team of a mix of English majors and non-English majors of 30 students in 2022, divided the students into pairs, and assigned them to finish different tasks including doing research according to performance themes, writing drama scripts, performing practices, and taking part in drama performing competitions . The following is some a detailed description of what they did.

### **3.1 The organization of drama performances**

Every year the English department organizes an English drama competition in our school. There's a general theme for each year's performances such as the introduction of traditional culture, the development of the country, great people, etc. The teachers in the research team organized a group of about 20 college students and divided them into 10 pairs. Each pair did some research according to the theme and came back with some ideas. They presented the ideas in the group and decided which idea was the best. Afterwards, they did some more research revolving on the specific theme they had chosen and constructed a story which was revised and translated into English later on. Everything was done by the students, but guided by the two teachers in the research team.

When the script of the play had been written, the group members began to practice performing, with the teachers' guidance. When they were ready, they took part in the competition and showed their performance in public on campus.

The research team did this for two years in a row, both in 2021 and 2022, and had great results: both teams won the 1<sup>st</sup> prize.

### **3.2 Findings of the experiments**

The following are some positive aspects the research team has found as the result of drama performance:

Drama performance can help students learn English better. Many students are shy or hesitant to speak English, becoming followers

of “mute English”. Speaking is essential to learning any language, and performance can help to fill this gap. By setting up different scenes in a play, students can practice in context, particularly in situations they are interested in or familiar with. This makes them feel more at ease and less nervous. With practice, students’ English has improved significantly.

Drama performance can help improve students’ communication skills. Performances can provide more opportunities for students to communicate. While practicing, they can discuss, help each other and improve their language expressions, and at the same time, deepening their emotional connections.

Drama performance can help improve students’ organization, cooperation skills and creativity. Performances place students at the center, requiring them to organize, create, and participate actively, reflecting both the teacher’s guidance and the students’ initiative. Through cooperation, they produce more ideas and help each other to improve. This can reduce students’ learning anxiety and help stimulate learning motivation, cultivate learning interest, and encourage students to learn actively, which is conducive to making difficult content easier to understand and for students to grasp more knowledge.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, drama performance can be an effective way to engage students in English learning and enhance their learning experience. The use of performance can provide a fun and interactive approach to teaching that can improve motivation, learning interest, and cognitive drive. Through the use of drama performance, teachers can create a positive and engaging learning environment that promotes student participation and reinforces positive behavior (Heathcote, 1985). By taking part in drama performances, students can not only improve their English skills, but also develop their communication skills, organization skills, cooperative skills and creativity.

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