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The Use of Drama in English Teaching of Chinese Arts Colleges

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ABSTRACT

The study of English communication is not only a must to arts majors for international arts communication, but also a big challenge for them to master. The aim of the study is to explore the use of drama activities in English communication class in a Chinese arts college and to determine whether drama activities are beneficial to arts majors' language proficiency and other cognitive skills. For this study, we employed a qualitative method by analyzing students' reflective writings and observing participants' activities. The findings show that drama in education is an effective way to teach college English in a Chinese arts college, so that a more elaborated curriculum design is urgently needed for better teaching and learning.

Keywords: Arts Majors, Drama, Drama Activities, English Teaching.

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1. Introduction

With the world's globalization, countries have much more frequent and deeper interactions and communications in the fields of politics, economy, culture, education, etc. English, as the lingua franca, plays an increasingly role in the international affairs and communications. The mastery of the language of English is the new requirement made by the rapidly developing and changing society.

In China, English communication has been stipulated as a required basic course at all levels of educational institutions ranging from primary schools to universities. And English communication examinations have been a must for various entrance requirements, whether into a high school, a university or college, or into a graduate school for further study. Arts colleges or institutions, with a specialized entrance examination, put an emphasis on candidates' artistic skills and professional knowledge, which contributes to Arts majors' comparatively lower scores in the learning of common core course, including English communication. English course is not only ignored by arts majors, but also a big challenge for students to learn and for educators to teach.

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Effective teaching approaches must be carried out to improve English teaching for arts majors. Studies indicate that arts majors are creative, imaginative, active, free and full of passion, and they prefer to have multiple English learning styles, that is, visual, kinesthetic, auditory and tactile (Jiang, 2008; Liu, 2010; He, 2012; Zhou, 2015). Teachers and educators at arts colleges should search for effective teaching methods and strategies which could match students' different learning styles.

Drama practitioners (e.g. Burton, 1955; Fox, 1987; McCaslin, 1996; Basom, 2001; Chang, 2012) note that drama is a useful learning tool and it promotes learners' development. The use of drama has been applied to teach different subjects, such as history, physics, English, Spanish, geography, etc. Drama in education is said to enhance learners' motivation and interest in learning and the application of drama develops participants' meaningful and active thinking, reasoning, creativity and interpersonal skills. That is perhaps the reason why drama in education is gaining more and more popularity at various levels of educational institutions.

In addition to the use of drama in the above mentioned disciplines, drama in education has been applied to second and/or foreign language acquisition (Paksoy, 2008; Mok, 2012; Nordin et al. 2012). Researchers found that drama is an ideal and effective teaching method in foreign language acquisition. However, rare studies were conducted into the examination of drama activities in the institutions of higher education, especially in the context of arts colleges. Besides, Chang (2012) presents that drama facilitates the visual, kinesthetic and auditory sides of learning. Those features match arts majors' learning styles. The proper teaching approach, the use of drama, may be effective in the aspects of stimulations of learners' learning motivations and interests, and will be beneficial for English learning and teaching at arts colleges.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the use of drama activities in English communication classes in a Chinese arts college, as well as to determine whether drama would match arts majors learning styles and promote their English proficiency and other skills developments. Fifty-five students from different arts disciplines were chosen to be involved in the experimental classes with drama activities. We asked them to recreate and play out four chosen cartoons, and to write reflections about the learning activities. They were interviewed with semi-structured questions after six weeks. We collected and analyzed their reflections and interviews. Based on the analysis of participants' reflections and interviews, we found that using drama to teach college English communication is an ideal and effective way to stimulate learners' interest, enhance their language proficiency, improve their communication skills, and develop their many soft skills.

2. Literature review

In order to conduct research on the use of drama to arts majors' English acquisition in a Chinese arts college, it is vital to contextualize the study with the relation to research on drama and drama in education.

2.1 Drama

The word drama is derived from the French word *dran* which means pushing, acting and practicing. Drama includes all kinds of actions and interactions with objects and or with other persons. Dorothy Heathcote (1972) states that drama refers to any action or situation in which we are involved actively and where the participants' attitudes are the main concerns rather the characters we play.

In a dramatic situation, attendants employ all their experiences and capabilities to portray the characters with the help of drama, the symbolic language (Verriour, 1994). The attendants connect the play's text to their own life experience and to the world they have learned about creatively and imaginatively, and then use the symbolic language to express themselves freely and effectively. According to Somers (1994), drama is a means of communication and a tool to obtain our goals. Drama

provides an opportunity for the attendants to exchange ideas about the text and to cooperate collectively for the same goal. Thus, it may promote various aspects of the attendants' cognitive learning and development.

2.2 Drama in education

Drama in Education is considered useful in the holistic developments of students, with the emphasis on students' process of exploration, discovery and meaning-making (Schonmann, 2000). In a dramatic situation, students are in the center, actively involved in the learning process, and they employ various dramatic techniques and learning forms, such as audio, visual and tactile, to explore the imaginary world and to experience the situation.

Many researchers maintain that drama is one of the most effective teaching methods in classrooms of language. Drama activities can be taken place at every stage of all the subjects or disciplines. It has been employed in classes and has gained significant achievements, such as business (Kalidas, 2014), science (Pantidos, Spathi & Vitoratos, 2001; Cokadar and Yilmaz, 2010), social studies (Celikkaya, 2014), and in-service training (Cayir, Akhun & Simsek, 2016). Early childhood educators (e.g. Johnson, Christie & Yawkey, 1987; Wee, 2009) note that drama, as a learning tool, plays a positive and significant role in children's vocabulary learning, articulation, social and interpersonal skills, cognitive development, etc.

Due to those findings, drama in education has got many applicable studies in second or foreign language acquisition. For example, by examining the effects of drama in education in Hong Kong primary and secondary English classes, Mok (2012) proposed that using drama is vital and helpful for learners to use the target language more relevantly and appropriately in communication. Paksoy (2008) determined in his study that drama has a crucial influence on the communicative skills of learners of English as a second language. Nordin et al. (2012) investigated that drama in education could integrate the four language skill, that is, reading, writing, speaking and listening, and stimulate students to use the target language frequently and naturally. The above studies indicate that drama is an ideal and effective teaching method in foreign language acquisition. However, rare studies were conducted into the examination of drama activities in the institutions of higher education, especially in the context of arts colleges.

Thus, this study aimed to explore the use of drama activities in English communication classes in a Chinese arts college, determine whether drama is beneficial to improve arts majors' English language proficiency and identify the other effects of drama on arts majors' developments.

3. Research method

3.1 Participants and materials

The research was conducted with two cohorts of arts majors from a Chinese arts college. The first cohort (with 23 students) was a class of arts majors in the field of drama performance, dance, and the art of broadcasting and hosting. The second cohort (with 22 students) comprised arts majors in the disciplines of art management, and communication and media production. Each cohort is in the same level of English language proficiency, which is comparatively lower than that of other college majors. They have difficulties in English communication and learning. They are acquired by the Education Bureau to attend English communication courses twice a week in the first years of their college period. Based on the features of the cohorts, we chosen four cartoons for them to recreate and play out for the following reasons: the speech rate is suitable for arts majors to follow; the vocabulary size is appropriate for them to master; and characters tend to perform boastfully to show the senses and dramatic conflicts. The four cartoons chosen are Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King, Kung Fu Panda and Zootopia.

3.2 Procedure and instrument

Initially, we gave each cohort a short introduction of drama activities and techniques. Each cohort was divided into five small groups with four to five students. We adopted and revised O'Toole and Dunn's (2002) template, including the three phases of initiation, experience and reflection. In the initiation phase, we listed learning objectives, used warm-up exercises, introduced pre-text and built the context. The experiential phase included the activities to develop the story, discuss the roles in the story and act out some scenes. The reflective phase has two versions of reflection, one is in-role reflection, that is, participants are asked several questions in relation to the development of the story; the other is out-of-role reflection, with participants connecting the experience to their knowledge and to the world they know. After their groups' performance, they were assigned writing tasks of reflecting the experience, feelings, understanding and insights as to the project they have done. Six weeks later, we collected and analyzed all these participants' reflections and interviewed them with semi-structured questions.

4. Results and discussion

Analysis on participants' reflections (labeled as R#) indicated that using drama to teach college English communication is an ideal and effective way to stimulate learners' interest and motivation, improve their English language proficiency, enhance their skills of communication and cooperation, and develop their many soft skills.

4.1 Learning interest and motivation

The traditional class is the teacher-centered one where teachers are the authority and they control the whole class while students follow teachers' steps and do as teachers ask. Drama activities offer students' chances to express their thoughts, discuss the same play or theme, and experience the situation. Thus, students are actively involved in the acting and the class. When they know that they are the center in the class, they are motivated and become motivated.

R 15: I know then I should play a part since I was assigned to act out the scene... Before, I just listened to what my teacher taught and took notes.

R 23: We discussed the scenes for a long time and shared our reading and thoughts... we have our own roles to analyze, every one has their tasks... we were engaged in the play.

R 31: We used to be asked to memorize words, sentences and texts. But we still didn't know how to use the language in a natural way. Now there are situations in which we can use the things we learned and for the play, we are interested in finding the right expressions.

All the students claimed that in the dramatic situation which is similar to a real-life situation. They were asked by the situation to use the language to express their ideas, to communicate with the group members and to act out their version of the given movie. They were stimulated to find out the correct words and sentences to express and to act out. The more they were involved in the drama activities, the more interested they became in the language learning.

4.2 Language proficiency

Learning through experience helps permanent learning. Studies indicate that learners could remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they heard, 30% of what they saw, but 90% of what they are involved in. Drama activities enable learners to be in process actively by seeing, feeling, thinking, doing and experiencing. It has been demonstrated that using drama has a positive effect on language acquisition (Karateke, 2006; Kodaz, 2007). Learners in this study echoed the same statements.

R8: Everyone had his or her task to complete, so we must listen to the videos carefully to know better

about the movie, and then we analyzed and discussed the roles and the plot with other members. We used the language more and better than before.

R31: In the past classes, we listened to the teacher, followed the teacher's step, took notes and did many exercises about grammatical structures and vocabulary. Now we have the real situation to practice in a natural way. We were engaged in the process, listening, writing and talking.

R37: When we see the movie or the videos, we could understand new words better in the context. The whole text was visualized too, so it was easier to understand. In the discussion group, we shared our ideas and learned more from our classmates, not only the words and expressions, but also many grammatical sentences.

From the above reflections, we found that using drama in class could create a real-life situation in which learners could visualize the text and understand the text better. They searched for the correct words and expressions to convey their understanding and thoughts. In the brainstorming process, they recalled what they have acquired and learned what they haven't mastered. For better communication, they memorized the new things and used them on the spot. They changed the learning approach from passively absorbing to positively decoding. Their language proficiency was highly enhanced.

4.3 Communication skills

Learners' reflections mentioned many times that using drama improved their communication skills. By imitation of the performance in the movie, they learned about the techniques to communicate thoughts and emotions, such as eye contact, facial expression, movements and gestures to communicate effectively. Drama activities offer participants' the situation to express themselves in the best way.

R22: All of us have a role to play and a task to do, so we have the chances to express our own thoughts. We listened to others and grasped a better way to communicate. After the class, our group members could practice many times. We really benefit a lot from practicing, especially in listening, speaking and performing.

R30: Now we did have the chances to use English to communicate with our classmates and with our teacher. In the past, we were only assessed by the standardized examinations, and there were few chances for us to use the language to communicate.

R42: Language is a communicative tool. I learn English for better communication with foreigners. I know grammar and vocabulary are essential for English learning, but I think practical usage and communication are more significant. I love dramatic activities in our English class, because I could use the language.

These reflections show that using drama in language learning class could create an interactive and communicative study model. In this model, learners could involve in the class actively and have more opportunities to practice their oral English, so their communication skills were practiced and improved. It also proves that using drama is an effective way to teach languages.

4.4 Soft skills

Drama activities helped learners' lessen anxiety, build confidence, facilitate cooperation and foster critical thinking. Learners are exposed to chances and tasks to practice and act. The more they speak in front of the audience, the less they would become anxious and more confident they become. Since learners had their own role and task, they figured out they should cooperate with other members for a better performance. Discussion sections foster their critical thinking in the process of analyzing the characters and the plot.

R 6: We knew we were a team and every one has their own role, but the whole play cannot be done if someone was absent.

R 19: The most impressive thing was that I was less anxious when speaking in front of the class. I practiced

many times after class and I finally conquered anxiety and became more confident.

R 35: We had the freedom to think about the characters and theme from different perspectives. And we are free to discuss and talk about the characters critically.

The findings supported other researchers (e.g. O'Neil & Lambert, 1990) views that drama in education can not only enhance learners' language proficiency, but also facilitate their other skill developments. Therefore, drama in education can be applied to many disciplines and trainings.

5. Conclusion

The study was conducted on the basis of analyzing two cohorts of arts majors' reflections about the six weeks classes. We adopted and revised O'Toole and Dunn's template in using drama in the College English Communication class. We determined four cartoons which were comparatively easy for arts majors to understand and follow. We found that drama in education in English communication classes could stimulate learners' motivation, advance their language proficiency, and develop their communication skills and other soft skills. These findings further supported that a more elaborated drama curriculum design was urgently needed and drama in education would fulfill a significant part in College English Communication class.

For better teaching and learning effects, in-service training courses on drama are needed for language teachers and educators. Since most of them are English language majors, they may have difficulties in making drama performance plans. That implies there should be more interactions and communications between drama specialists and language educators for further research and better teaching.

Our study is only a preliminary one on two cohorts of arts majors: one in the field of drama performance, dance, and the art of broadcasting and hosting, and the other in the disciplines of art management, and communication and media production. And the study was conducted for a short period of six weeks. The further study can be done on more cohorts of arts majors, such majors as music, fine arts, Chinese opera and design. They are likely to transform the traditional teaching approach and to facilitate learners' motivations and skills in English and other aspects as well. These efforts will benefit to arts majors, language instructors and curriculum designers and furnish them with guidance for further teaching and research.

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