

## **A Study on the Impact of a Drama-in-Curriculum Programme on Students' Oral Competence and Confidence**

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### **Abstract**

This study, undertaken under the auspices of the Singapore Education Ministry's 'Teach Less, Learn More' movement, investigated the impact of the school's Drama-in-Curriculum Programme on students' oral competence and confidence. The Drama-in-Curriculum Programme for Secondary 1 (Grade 7) students in the Express course aimed to provide them with a consistent platform to use English Language. Teachers designed a series of performance tasks that incorporated drama strategies including role play, improvisation, and freeze frame and playing in-role that provided opportunities for students to communicate in English Language in authentic settings in a non-threatening way. Students were given regular feedback on their oral performance through teacher observation checklists, peer evaluations and oral rubrics. The project was held over ten weeks and a class was chosen for study. A large effect was observed between the comparison and the project groups in the students' oral competence and confidence levels. For the class which had undergone the intervention, a comparison of the instructional practices mapped along the dimensions of PETALS<sup>TM</sup> Framework was conducted before and after the project. PETALS<sup>TM</sup> dimensions were measured using the PETALS<sup>TM</sup> Engagement Indicator (PEI) questionnaire. A moderate effect was observed in the Pedagogy, Experience of Learning and Learning Content scales and a small effect in the Assessment scale. The implications of the findings will be discussed in this paper.

## **Introduction**

Schools in Singapore were given a vision by the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1997 ‘...to be model learning organisations, where teachers and principals will constantly look out for new ideas and practices and continuously refresh their own knowledge. There should be a spirit of innovation, of learning by doing, of everyone at his own level all the time asking how he can do his job better.’ (Goh, 1997). As strong fundamentals have been laid, each teacher should seek new ways to do his job better and to provide engaged learning in every class for every student.

At Commonwealth Secondary School, teachers in the English Language Department observed that their students generally were not using the English language as their primary medium of communication, nor were they in a habit of reading regularly or selecting a wide variety of texts for reading. Upon further deliberation, staff members concurred the following: (a) a lack of exposure to the language has become a barrier to understanding and enjoying literary texts; and (b) about 33% of the students conversed in English at home and were not confident in articulating their views in English.

As a result, in 2007, the English Department in Commonwealth Secondary School decided to embark on a Language Arts curriculum that would use literary texts and methodologies to make English Language learning more engaging and enriching for its students. This curriculum aims to provide opportunities for students to: (a) appreciate the English Language and use it confidently, creatively and elegantly in both verbal and written forms for a variety of purposes, audiences and situations for communication, personal expression and learning; and (b) enjoy Literature and be enriched by it. As this was a new curricular innovation, it was implemented at the Secondary 1 Express level for a start. To achieve the aims of the Language Arts curriculum particularly in the areas of enhancing oral competence and confidence, the teachers decided to incorporate a drama module within the framework of this new curriculum. Known as the Drama-in-Curriculum programme, it focused on teaching students oral and language skills through drama conventions.

## **Literature Review**

According to studies, drama developed proficiency in the widest range of language functions and allowed students to experiment with vocabulary, register and speech patterns (Kao & O’Neill, 1998; Wagner & Barnett, 1998). Drama and language were noted to be closely connected because they both required the skills of communicating and expressing meaning through words. Drama instruction involves using language in varied ways and it has resulted in an improvement to vocabulary, expression, retention, imagination and language usage (Podlozny, 2000; Schaffner, 1984).

Neelands and Goode (1992) highlighted that the opportunities to work in a range of roles and situations offered infinite possibilities for language use. Involving students in the negotiation and constructing drama through the

medium of role play allowed them insights into the relationship between context and language. According to the work of Kao and O'Neill (1998), confidence levels increased when students have something to talk about and, most importantly, when they knew how to express their ideas. They believed that drama helped students to develop confidence and motivation through self-expression, initiative and enthusiastic cooperation. As students worked in the 'safe space' of drama, their confidence to participate and communicate improved. The flexibility of time, roles and relationships within the 'as if' of the drama event allowed students to construct and reconstruct a communicative text. The students were able to enactively shape and reshape the text to communicate the intended meaning by rephrasing and editing without fear of failure. Because students moved, spoke and interacted in roles, their cognitive, kinesthetic and affective dimensions were engaged, resulting in deep learning.

Larsen-Freeman (1986) explained the importance of role plays in giving learners an opportunity to practise communicating in different social contexts and social roles. Ladousse (1987) added that role play used different communicative techniques and developed fluency in the language, promoted interaction in the classroom and increased motivation.

Harris and Mahon (1997) advocated that drama should have a place in any language syllabus as it could revive interest and bring life into students and teachers alike. They stressed the importance attached to the expressive and meaningful delivery of the spoken language.

The communicative nature of drama activities was observed to be a great motivator for students as well as teachers (Mahoney, 1997). Such activities: (a) developed conducive group dynamics of a classroom for students to interact with one another; (b) fostered a high level of interaction through student-student interaction; and (c) provided the students with a much needed outlet for self exploration and self development.

Stinson (2007), through her work with some Singapore schools, noted the benefits of using drama activities in language teaching. Drama was believed to provide a framework for learning and a context for communication, making communication purposeful and meaningful. It also allowed for connection to the real world contexts and provided intrinsic motivation.

The above studies and writing affirmed the role of drama in encouraging students to use language purposefully in a variety of situations and accomplish a variety of tasks. This study used an equivalent group post-test design to investigate the impact of the Drama-in-Curriculum programme on students' oral competence and confidence. The research questions were: (a) Does the use of the Drama-in-Curriculum programme among Secondary One students increase their oral competency and confidence levels as compared to those who have not undergone the intervention?; and (b) Are there differences in the pre- and post- scores obtained in the PETALS<sup>TM</sup> scales as a result of the intervention?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A class of 40 Secondary One students formed the project group in this study. From the previous cohort, a class of similar ability was selected to be the comparison group. The students in both groups had obtained a Grade A for their English Language subject at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) (Grade 6 national examination). The project and the comparison groups were heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicity and studied two first languages in English Language and Chinese Language.

### **Procedure**

The Drama-in-Curriculum programme was the intervention in this study. The preparation for the intervention included: training of the teachers and students, the planning of a ten-week curriculum, and the design of lessons.

The participating teachers had prior basic training on how to teach English Literature. The teachers attended a two-day basic Drama course, "Drama as a Pedagogical Tool", to learn useful drama techniques such as hot seating, getting-in-role etc. The teachers came together to incorporate these drama techniques into their lesson plans. On a weekly basis, they provided feedback on one another's lessons and jointly reviewed and refined the lessons and the resources.

The students also attended training sessions on drama techniques conducted by a trainer hired by the school. From these sessions, the students were equipped with the skills of interpretation of character, clarity of diction, voice projection, expression and body language.

The Teaching for Understanding (TfU) curricular framework guided the planning of the ten-week programme which focused on the building and sustaining of the development of understanding in students. This TfU framework comprised four key components, namely generative topics, understanding goals, performances of understanding and ongoing assessment. The understanding goals for each learning unit were made explicit and reinforced throughout the unit. The thrust of the programme was to teach language skills using drama conventions, namely, freeze frame, gossip mill, playing in-role, conscience alley and hot seating.

An illustration of a typical lesson unit is as follows. Based on a picture book called Tuesday, the teachers designed activities that allowed students to be engaged in oral communication. Some of these drama activities included: got into a freeze frame of the picture given, pretended to be the characters in the picture, and carried out a conversation in pairs pretending to be the characters. At the next stage of the lesson, students took on other roles and became journalists covering the event. They generated and asked questions from "experts" on the event. At the end of the lessons, the students produced a front page news article based on the event.

Throughout the ten weeks, the teachers used drama conventions to teach the various language skills, focusing on building the oral competence and confidence of their students. Students developed and demonstrated their understanding of key concepts through a series of performance tasks such as role plays, the use of drama conventions and oral presentations that became progressively more challenging. Teachers monitored the students' progress and provided formal and informal feedback as part of ongoing assessment.

## Measures

The students' scores in the reading and conversation segment in the school's internal oral examination were collected and analysed to determine whether students in this Drama-in-Curriculum programme were more competent and confident than students in the comparison group. The conversation segment tested the students' ability to converse with the examiner on a specified topic. The students' proficiency in this segment was used as a proxy indicator of oral confidence since they were not given the topic to prepare in advance.

Student engagement was measured using the 60-item PETALS™ Engagement Indicator (PEI) questionnaire, which was developed by teachers on a research project attachment to the Ministry of Education (2005). It comprised six scales: Pedagogy, Experience of Learning, Tone of environment, Assessment, Learning Content and Engagement. The Pedagogy (P) scale measured the extent of consideration given to: (a) students' prior knowledge; (b) learning styles; and (c) readiness. The Experience of Learning (E) scale measured the extent of support given to connect and apply concepts learned. The Tone of Environment (T) scale measured the degree to which students feel safe and respected in a stimulating and productive learning environment. The Assessment (A) scale measured the level of timeliness, specificity and relevance of evidence provided by assessment as feedback to support and to inform learning. The Learning Content (L) scale measured the relevance and meaningfulness of the content to be learned. Each of the P, E, T, A and L scales contained six items. The engagement scale (GG), comprised three sub-scales namely: Affective Engagement (GA), Behavioural Engagement (GB) and Cognitive Engagement (GC). Each of the engagement sub-scale contains ten items.

Focus group discussions were conducted with students to ascertain the following: (a) what they had learnt from the drama-based lessons; (b) what they enjoyed most about these lessons; and (c) what had been their greatest area of improvement.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the mean scores from the oral examination of the project and comparison groups. The large effect size in favour of the project group suggested that the Drama-in-Curriculum programme was able to increase both students' oral confidence and competence. The programme activities had provided learning opportunities to enhance the students' oral confidence. Teachers observed that students in the project group were less inhibited during

the oral examinations and were able to engage well with the examiners. The students were also able to use intonation, pitch and tone, appropriately during their reading. Closer analysis of the students' oral scores indicated that the effect size for reading was slightly lower than that for the conversation segment. This suggested that whilst the students had gained in confidence through the Drama-in-Curriculum programme, they needed more time to hone their pronunciation and articulation skills.

Table 1. Comparison of Reading and Conversation Mean Scores

	<b>Project Class</b> Mean (SD)	<b>Comparison Class</b> Mean (SD)	<b>Effect size</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
Reading Score	8 (1.0)	7.2 (0.9)	0.9	Large Effect
Conversation Score	13 (1.3)	11.6 (1.2)	1.2	Large Effect

The analysis of the transcripts from the focus group discussions indicated that students found the drama lessons to be very interesting and they had increased awareness of strategies for speaking confidently and competently. They found strategies like "anchor position" and "voice projection" to be very useful during class presentations. In addition, the role play sessions had helped them to feel less intimidated in presenting in front of an audience. They enjoyed tremendously the way the teachers conducted the lessons and expressed that the use of drama conventions like freeze frame, conscience alley, tap and speak, etc. provided an excellent avenue for them to voice their thoughts and feelings. Below are some comments from the students:

"It has built my confidence and I am no longer afraid of presenting in front of an audience."  
*Student 1*

"The programme has helped me to express my thoughts and feelings better....The drama lessons are very fun and interactive. They have taught me new skills."  
*Student 2*

"It has improved my public speaking skills as I don't like to speak in front of other people. But now I am usually one of those who volunteers for oral presentation in other subjects."  
*Student 3*

Table 2 tabulated the mean scores of students' perceptions of four PETALS™ Framework dimensions. The Drama-in-Curriculum programme had a moderate effect in the Pedagogy scale in favor of the post project condition. This suggested that in the students' perceptions, their teacher who used drama techniques had better met their different learning styles and readiness.

Table 2. Comparisons of Pre- and Post-Project Mean Scores

<b>PEI Scales</b>	<b>Pre-Project</b>	<b>Post Project</b>	<b>Effect Size</b>
Pedagogy (P)	67.4(20.0)	78.1(11.6)	0.54
Experience of Learning (E)	61.1(24.6)	74.1(12.8)	0.53
Assessment (A)	72.9(22.3)	79.8(12.2)	0.31
Learning Content (L)	68.9(21.7)	81.5(10.5)	0.58

The moderate effect size observed for the Experience of Learning scale indicated that the students, after undergoing the programme, felt that it had stretched their thinking. It appears that the performance tasks encouraged students to take on different roles and perspectives had enabled the drawing of interconnection between topics or between content and real life. Similarly, a moderate effect size was observed for the Learning Content scale. This could be explained by the contexts of the student activities being rooted in real life situations which they found to be more meaningful and relevant.

Although the teacher provided ongoing feedback on the tasks during the intervention, the effect size on the Pre- and Post-intervention scores from the Assessment scale was marginal. As the students might be less sure in providing feedback on their own work or to their fellow classmates, the students might have given lower ratings on the items related to self and peer feedback in the Assessment scale. The implication for future direction could be to use the next iteration of the intervention to equip students to be more competent in carrying out peer and self evaluation. This recommendation is consistent with the inter-scale correlation analysis output found in Table 3. It was noted that there was a strong relationship between Assessment and Overall Engagement (0.82 at 0.01 level), affirming that assessment practices such as peer and self evaluation that support learning have the potential to engage students.

Table 3. Inter-scale Correlations

<b>P</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>GA</b>	<b>GB</b>	<b>GC</b>	<b>GG</b>
1.00	0.72	0.73	0.74	0.73	0.75	0.70	0.71	0.76**
0.72	1.00	0.76	0.77	0.79	0.77	0.81	0.77	0.82**
0.73	0.76	1.00	0.82	0.80	0.74	0.78	0.72	0.78**
0.74**	0.77**	0.82**	1.00	0.82**	0.80	0.76	0.79	0.82**
0.73	0.79	0.80	0.82	1.00	0.81	0.79	0.79	0.83**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Key:

<b>P</b>	- Pedagogy	<b>GA</b>	- Affective Engagement
<b>E</b>	- Experience of Learning	<b>GB</b>	- Behavioural Engagement
<b>A</b>	- Assessment	<b>GC</b>	- Cognitive Engagement
<b>L</b>	- Learning Content	<b>GG</b>	- Overall Engagement

Further, it was noted that within the Overall Engagement scale, Assessment scale correlated strongest with the Affective Engagement sub-scale followed by Cognitive Engagement sub-scale. This relationship indicated that the teachers' ongoing feedback informing students of their strengths and areas for improvement would intrinsically motivate students to improve on the specific areas highlighted by the teacher.

Although the Tone of Environment scale was not reported, the relatively strong correlation index (0.78 at 0.01 level) between the Tone of Environment scale and Overall Engagement scale indicated that the safe environment provided by role play would engage learners.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study indicated that the school's Drama-in-Curriculum programme had increased the level of students' oral competence and confidence. Following from the data, the school inferred that though the students were more vocal and expressive, their accuracy level in the areas of pronunciation, intonation and enunciation would have to be strengthened through other pedagogies.

Based on the students' pre- and post-programme PETALS™ perception scores, the students viewed the programme as being learner-centric (P), challenging (E), relevant and meaningful (L). However, the smaller change in the Assessment (A) scores, suggested that students' ability in using self- and peer-assessment would need to be strengthened.

At the same time, the results would have to be interpreted in the light of the limited sample used in the study and the use of a pre-validated teacher-constructed survey instrument. The refinements could include: (a) choice of a



more suitable proxy measure of confidence; (b) validation of the survey instrument; and (c) use of a larger sample.

Further refinements to the study would be needed before the preliminary benefits of the programme could be established. Given that the findings using the PETALS<sup>TM</sup> Engagement Indicator questionnaire were based on a pre-post single group design, an extension into a longitudinal study would better be able to confirm the benefits of the programme.

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