

The Use of Drama Role-Playing in Teaching English Literature for English Majored Students: An Action Research at Van Lang University

Hoa Mai Phuong Nguyen^{1,*}

¹ Department of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Hochiminh City, Vietnam

*Corresponding author. Email: phuong.nhm@vlu.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

Role-Playing has been applied to teach literature in many countries; however, research on this subject is minimal. This study aims to describe literary class activities, which is considered the first step of action research to solve the difficulties in teaching English literature in the Vietnamese context. The participants include 100 senior English majored students involved in the Pre, While and Post activities in the English Literature class. Post-session interviews were conducted to learn more about learners' attitudes. These activities initially aroused students' interest in understanding literary works and enhanced their ability to appreciate the selected stories in Van Lang University's curriculum.

Keywords: *Drama role-playing, English literature, drama-based teaching activities, motivation, language skills development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Drama role-playing has been a common method in teaching language and literature. Despite its popularity, not many studies on this subject have been conducted in the Vietnamese context. Until very recently, a study on dramatization at the Ho Chi Minh City Open University has been conducted to examine the benefits of this approach to teaching English literature (Pham Thi My Duyen, 2020).

However, activities related to the step-by-step implementation of drama role-playing remain unexplored. As the first step of action research, this article initially explores the effectiveness of Drama role-playing activities to overcome the difficulties encountered in my Anglo - American literature classes at Van Lang University.

The English-American literature curriculum at Van Lang University consists of 30 periods, equivalent to two credits. The number of lessons is divided in half with the same number of theoretical and seminar hours. However, this program is designed to promote students' sense of self-study. Therefore, the number of self-study and reading hours of students is up to 30 hours.

The module's objective is to help English-majored students at Van Lang University gain a basic knowledge of Anglo-American literature history, mastering the basic types of literature, and understand some of the authors and typical works, which helps expanding their understanding of people and Anglo – American literature. Through self-study and classroom presentations, students will be able to develop the ability to search and analyze information in research on Anglo - American literature, increasing their confidence in preparing and presenting the lessons in class as well as improving their team-work skills.

How English literature is taught at Van Lang University:

In terms of learning materials, the textbooks are compiled, mainly focusing on the introduction of the developmental stages of English and American literature through periods. This theoretical part only focuses on introducing a number of typical authors and works corresponding to each period. Due to the limited course time, the program focuses only on four developmental stages in English and American literature. Students also learn a typical literary work for that period with each stage. In particular, the students were supposed to work in groups of 6 - 7 students

presenting the theory and the literary work content. Each makes two in-course presentations in a rotating format. For the literary work, the students were asked to relate their personal experience to the literary work by answering some questions as follows:

1. What does the text have to do with you, personally, and with your life (past, present, future)?
2. How much does the text agree or clash with your view of the world, and what you consider right or wrong?
3. How well does the text address things that you, personally, care about and consider important to the world, your family, and your people of your social class?
4. How well did you enjoy the text (or not) as entertainment or as a work of art?

The teacher's feedback is made after each presenting session.

Through the above implementation, there are a number of advantages and disadvantages found as follows:

1. The presentation of the typical authors:

In terms of advantages, studying and presenting in class has given students a chance to read books and explore the given materials, from which the teacher can easily see the students' extent of searching and studying documents so that she can correct the information presented and provide further while giving remarks. This also brings an opportunity for other students, who are not part of the presentation group and may not have read the book, to be motivated to find out the information. There has not been much interaction between the presentation group and other students in the class on the downside.

2. The presentation of the plot and the themes of the work:

In terms of advantages, students are motivated to learn about the literary work content through different sources such as movies and reputable websites, from which to have a deeper view of the content. Therefore, students have enough knowledge to relate to themselves and answer the given questions. Answering self-related questions enable students to develop creative thinking skills and see the world in a multidimensional way. Students can also learn more about a culture by exploring the storyline, widening their vocabulary range, and developing their speaking skills during presentations. However, the biggest disadvantage of this session is that students do not have many opportunities to analyze the characters in terms of characteristics and psychological traits as well as to present their favorite topics in work. All aspects of the literary work are seen and presented in a very general

way. From the above issues, in order to improve the effectiveness of English Literature teaching and learning, drama role-playing was applied in teaching and learning literature at Van Lang University.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of drama role-playing

Drama role-playing in teaching is defined in many different ways. According to Courtney and Jossart (2007), it is the learners' interaction with literary work in a particular text that learners access. Meanwhile, Holden (1981) simply defines that drama as a learners' performance to project himself imaginatively into another situation, outside the classroom, or into the skin and persona of another person.

Manon van de Water et al. (2015) point out the differences between formal theatre and in-class theatre. The differences focus on the audience and the purpose of the drama in two different settings. The participants in the formal theatre are regarded as talented individuals who are well trained to become professional actors. Additionally, the drama is for everyone, which, in fact, is a universal human skill that we use every day, such as communication, empathy, observation, and improvisation. The aim of using drama in the classroom is not the creation of refined performance but the development of emotional, embodied and cognitive knowledge built on experience. These skills are shown through the actors' acting on stage in order to convey the plot of a story or a certain message. Each actor's life experience will help their acting and show these skills more honestly. Meanwhile, in class, learners do not necessarily have the qualifications to become an actor and may not have the same life experience as the character. Whether the work in class is successful or not heavily depends on the learners' perception of the work. Therefore, the drama is used in the classroom to help develop cognitive, expressive, and emotional knowledge based on learners' experiences, not to create a subtle performance in which the actor's acting, as well as other factors such as costumes, props, and stage setting skills, are focused.

Belliveau and Kim (2013) agree that drama-based teaching activities help enrich classroom interaction, learning experiences, and language skills and develop a sense of diversity, collaboration, creativity, and aesthetic imagination. More importantly, drama-based teaching activities have made a great contribution to helping learners perceive literary works. The next section will elaborate on the benefits of drama role-playing in teaching English literature, which sheds light on the impacts of drama on learners' language proficiency and socio-cultural development.

2.2 Benefits of drama role-playing in teaching literature

Previous studies have shown that drama is a rewarding and effective teaching strategy in the classroom. The greatest benefits of drama lie in the following values: literary interpretation and language skill development.

2.2.1 Developing skills for literary interpretation

In terms of language acquisition, dramatization has brought plenty of benefits. Braun (2002) has demonstrated dramatization as an effective method to help learners develop their reading and writing skills and critical thinking ability. Greenfader and Brouillette (2013) conducted a mixed-method study, including test and focus group interviews with primary school students. The study revealed that these students understood the lesson quickly by combining speech and gesture and remembered it longer. Through this method, students also improve their imagination and ability to capture the plot and the characters of the literary work.

2.2.2 Language skills development

The skills that students can best develop are reading skills. Students have to read the literary work over and over again, and in that way, different understandings may arise. According to Wolf (2004), it is the emergence of different ways of understandings that help motivate students to discuss during practice time, which brings them a better understanding of literary works. That is, acting motivates and gives students a deeper understanding of literary works through reading activities and discussion. Students grasp the topics and basic messages conveyed in the literary work during the reading process. In addition, there is a mutual interaction between theatre activity and understanding of literary work. In order to have a good performance conveying the message of a part of a literary work or the whole work, students must have a profound understanding of the text. The deeper they understand the text, the more successful their performance is.

In addition to promoting reading skills, through drama activities, readers can also develop vocabulary actively instead of only passively understanding the meaning of the words through classroom translation methods. According to Gill (2007), drama increases the chance of using the target language through interactive activities, and at the same time, learners develop listening and speaking skills.

2.2.3 Enhancing motivation

As far as motivation is concerned, Maolida and Savitri (2017) used three techniques to enhance learning motivation: giving rewards, collaborative learning,

using a poster. This method helps the whole class to focus on acting and competing for good results. However, this method lacks detailed evaluation criteria, which enable the teacher to be more specific and fair in making assessments when learners perform acting.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year, the revised program in teaching English and American literature was implemented for the first time at the research site. Each literature class consists of about 50 students. The students were divided into eight groups, each of which consists of 6 - 7 students participating in learning the theory and content of the literary work. Each group made two in-course presentations in a rotating format. These groups drew lots to see if their work was about literary theory or about literary work analysis. Any group who had done the theory presentation had to work on the literary work analysis presentation thereafter and vice versa. The division of work for each group ensures that each theoretical session to learn about the author and the literary work would be done. In every 3-period session, the group in charge of the theory session took turns presenting briefly their PowerPoint slides about the general characteristics in terms of British or American society and history in a certain period, which thereby leads to the writing tasks. Typical authors and their literary works were briefly introduced as well. In order to be best-prepared, the students in each group were given one-week preparation for their presentations, and they were also encouraged to explore additional materials from various sources to support their presentations. After each presentation, the consolidation session was delivered by the teacher to provide them with more related information as well as help them to grasp deeper knowledge through questioning and answering tasks and therefore, at the same time, the teacher was able to check the students' level of information exploration.

For the group in charge of presenting the literary work, the students of this group were asked to find out about the author and the literary work context. After that, the plot and the themes of the work were explored and presented. In this part, the lecturer also consolidated knowledge by asking questions related to each topic mentioned in work. This is a session that enhances students' creativity due to the fact that the students were required to relate the issues in the literary work to their own experiences. The students should answer the questions by relating the literary work to their individual experiences. Students also shared their points of view and provided a detailed explanation to clarify their point. Students were also encouraged to state why some of their personal opinions were incorrect. Moreover, they were also supposed to point out the issues of great concern in the era depicted in the

literary works that still impact the students' community in particular and on the whole society in general. Students also shared how they feel the beauty of the literary work in terms of entertainment and art.

As far as I can observe it, my students' most noticeable challenges are limited language proficiency levels, lack of language skills, and low motivation. In order to overcome those challenges, I used drama role-playing as an intervention for my action research.

As noted above, this research paper is the first step in a series of actions performed in action research. According to Pardede (2008) action research model includes the following steps: planning, acting, observing, reflecting. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) suggest that acting and observing should be combined and concurrent steps. After each pedagogical improvement activity, the planning step will then be checked, revised, and continued. In other words, action research is not a one-time and an end-to-end activity, but a series of activities consisting of repeated steps and so on to improve it for the better.

Thus in this study, the planning step, as well as the acting step, were taken as follows:

The teacher recommended works that are typical of a specific literary development phase (10 minutes).

The teacher introduced the topics in work and showed students which topic occurs with the most frequency in the story (5 minutes).

The presentation group students chose their favorite topic and had one-week preparation for the presentation.

Students were required to introduce the authors with literary work and the plot briefly. The theme of the presenting group's work was presented before a video excerpt included the theme is shown (15 minutes).

The presentation group began playing the role after the film ends (15 minutes).

To conduct these activities, there should be a storyteller and character roles. The storyteller acted as a narrator providing the whole class with the setting and the segment of the work.

The whole process took about one hour, after which the class gave comments about the roles, and they were asked to briefly present the content of the presentation to their understanding (15 minutes).

Students' interview was conducted to find out about their opinions about role-play activities and thereby facilitate them to share the steps they found the most rewarding and explained why they found the activities useful.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The student interviews showed that most students understand better about the literary work theme through role-playing performance. The steps taken before the performance are supportive, helping students grasp the literary work's content. In particular, the shown movie excerpt is a factor that draws students' attention to the performance and helps them better understand the theme conveyed through the performance. Therefore, the whole class gained a sense of comparison when watching the group's performance. Besides, it is the acting activities that help students remember the work's theme.

Students developed listening, speaking, and pronunciation skills in terms of language skills and knowledge. Most of the students interviewed answered that they had read, watched, and practiced dialogues and characters' speeches before the performance, which helped them pronounce words correctly and speak more fluently. Through role-playing, students had more opportunities to learn and broaden their vocabulary range. This finding is consistent with what the research says about the importance of "frequent exposure to the word in different contexts" and providing learners with opportunities for vocabulary acquisition (Snow et al., 2009, p. 327).

The feedback session made by the whole class after the performance allowed the students to develop creative and critical thinking skills. Students could share their opinion about their favorite role players with a clear and full explanation. For example, in work "The Old Man and The Sea", students said that the one who played the fish performed excellently though he did not say a word during the performance. The beauty was shown through the fish-like body movements that the student-created in his performance. Students also showed interest in the speeches and the student's facial expressions who played Mrs. Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice". This character is the embodiment of middle-class people who want to change their lives and rise to the upper class by making friends with the rich. Therefore, she is always zealous about the marriage of her daughters. The character's outrageous zeal brought excitement to the students as their classmates portrayed the character.

Students also shared that their favorite activities were watching movies and role-playing because watching movies helped them visualize the characters through acting, verbal and non-verbal language, and pronunciation. They are better prepared before watching the performance. They also believed that role-play makes them more confident, active, and creative. In "The Old Man and The Sea", for example, students used blue silk to create waves. They also shared that the role play also helps them to interact more and feel more

comfortable during class. The students' feedback to the performance also gives them the opportunity to openly share about the performance, helping other presentation groups draw lessons when preparing for other literary work performance.

The results indicate that there were improvements in the learning environments, including an increased level of motivation on the part of the learners involved.

The second key theme to emerge is the role of performance in motivating students. Positive feedback from teachers and students plays an important role in building a sense of confidence in students' personal capabilities.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are two important limitations to consider, however. The first is that a detailed guideline should reflect the teacher's role in giving support to the students during their performance.

The second relates to the lack of direct observational data with respect to instruction and student participation. The research was limited to interview data based on students' perceptions. Nonetheless, this project lays the groundwork for further steps in action research. Based on the study results, improvements could be made, and more pedagogical techniques could be employed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning English literature in the context of using English as a foreign language.

6. CONCLUSION

Role-playing activities are not separating activities, and they must be led from other activities such as introducing the author and the literary work, presenting the plot, and watching movies. These activities help students in the presentation group, and the whole class better understand the work and the theme before the performance to have appropriate feedback. Role-playing performance enhances students' creativity and provides them with more classroom interaction. The most notable point that should be counted is that it creates an environment where students' language skills are able to be practiced and developed.

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