

# The Impact of English Play on Teenage Learners

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**ABSTRACT:** By questionnaire and interview with participants in an English play contest, the study found that English play was an especially effective English learning strategy in non-English-speaking context. Learners' participation facilitated language internalization, recognition improvement and it also had invisible, formative influences on their personality development.

**KEYWORD:** English play; teenage learner; English learning strategy

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Language play (LP) has received considerable attention over the last decade. Cook (1997:224-31) argues that play is highly beneficial to human development, and that LP is especially important not only in child language acquisition, but in adult language learning as well. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), researchers focusing on the role of LP in child L2 acquisition are Tarone (2000:31-54), Cook (2001:366-87), Cekaite and Aronsson (2005:169-91) and many others, whereas researchers like Kramsch and Sullivan (1996:199-212) have concentrated on the functions of LP in adult L2 acquisition.

The present study explores the impact English play (EP) exerts on the growth of teenage learners in language competence, personality development and cognition improvement in non-English-speaking context. First a description of English play contest (EPC) is introduced with one held recently as a case study. A questionnaire and an interview have been followed. Finally the researchers discuss why learners in the non-English-speaking context are interested in LP by drawing on the participants' experience, reflections and understanding. The discussion highlights the implications of organically integrating such pedagogic activities into classroom instruction in non-English-speaking countries.

## 2 A CASE STUDY

English play has been widely practiced both in class and outside class in various schools, since it can

greatly arouse learners' urge of learning by providing them with "real" scenes and relaxing atmosphere to use English naturally. Holding English play contest has become a habitual practice on campus. The particular EPC studied here has been held recently which consists of three rounds of competitions: the preliminary competition, the semi-final competition and the final competition. The first round performance takes place in class and the second held in respective branch campus. The final is carried out on the main campus. After two rounds of tough competition, seven dramatic groups successfully entered the final competition shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The seven plays entering the final competition

Serial Number	Name of the Play	Serial Number	Name of the Play
1	<i>The Magic Love</i>	5	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
2	<i>The pink Pyramid</i>	6	<i>Othello</i>
3	<i>Sherlock Holmes</i>	7	<i>Great Teacher Alice Li</i>
4	<i>If You Are the One</i>		

### 2.1 A questionnaire

For the purpose of exploring participants' experience and reflections, we have conducted a questionnaire (see Tables 2-4) focusing on how EP influences participants linguistically, emotionally and intellectually. In the following tables, '1' represents 'strongly agree or agree'; '2' 'neither agree nor disagree' and '3' 'disagree or strongly disagree'.

Table 2: The impact of EP on learners' language competence

Item	1	2	3
EP helps cultivate language sense and enhance language awareness.	95	21	7
EP creates just such a situation for learners as they engage in the act of noticing linguistic forms in the course of EP and gradually replace incorrect productions with correct L2 forms (Tarone op.cit.).	94	22	7
EP may lower affective barriers to SLA by providing a means of assuaging anxiety, thus allowing linguistic data to pass through the 'affective filter' (Krashen 1981) and become 'intake' (Chaudron 1988; Schmidt 1990:129-58).	90	24	9
EP may increase the memorizability of the discourse engaged in by the learner. Craik and Lockhart (1972:671-84) suggest that retrieval from the long-term memory is facilitated by the creation of a 'trace', or triggering association.	94	25	4
Total	78.15%	18.69%	5.65%

Table 3: The impact of EP on learners' personalities

Item	1	2	3
I feel excited, fun and expecting to perform on the stage, for I am not alone and I am well prepared.	97	21	5
EP helps improve my introvert personality traits, thus becoming a little bit more open, positive and optimistic.	98	19	6
The experience on the stage helps me acquire a sense of achievement and satisfaction.	104	16	3
EP helps develop my self-confidence.	110	12	1
Total	83.08%	13.82%	3.05%

Table 4: The impact of EP on learners' cognitive ability

Item	1	2	3
EP provides me with the opportunity to demonstrate and challenge myself.	106	15	2
EP is the outcome of collaborative work by all team members. By working together with others, I learn how to handle conflicts in a peaceful way like making concessions or compromises.	104	17	2
Total	85.37%	13%	1.63%

For the questionnaire, 129 subjects have been surveyed, but only 123 are valid. The findings are as follows: Linguistically, 75.81 percent of learners acknowledge that EP facilitates English learning which verifies previous viewpoints (Tarone op.cit., Krashen 1981, Chaudron 1988; Schmidt op.cit., Craik and Lockhart op.cit.) with most participants' first-hand experience. More than 18 percent neither agree nor disagree with this view, and only 5.65 percent of learners don't think it conducive. As to

their emotional response, 83.08 percent highlight their emotional satisfaction and sense of accomplishment. Their participation had invisible, formative influence on their personalities. They confirm that they can feel their unconscious adjustment in their personalities. Over 13 percent neither agree nor disagree with this point, and 3.05 per cent don't think it useful. Intellectually, 85.37 percent suggest that collaboration and peer-learning are its pervasive features, and during the process of preparation and performance, they could exercise, demonstrate and challenge themselves. Only 13 percent neither agree nor disagree with this point, and 1.63 percent totally don't agree with it.

## 2.2 An interview

For an in-depth study, an interview is subsequently conducted with some representative participants. Generally they say EPC is a multi-sensory approach to language learning. Their participation has enabled them to explore English from different angles and help form positive personalities and develop their creativity, cooperation and learner autonomy.

### *What do participants say about EPC?*

For the convenience of analysis, we categorize the interviewees according to their roles in the activity. The findings reveal the theoretically supporting evidence for the very existence of such event.

#### *→ Group leaders*

The first group we interviewed is group leaders who regard themselves as group backbone and binder. Among them, Jack Tan was keen on acting and rather talkative. He describes his experience like this:

#### *Excerpt 1*

I used to play supporting roles in short Chinese literary creations, so I had some experience. When the teacher informed us that there would be an EPC and we could form groups and participate in it voluntarily. Some students wanted to have a try and they all trusted me and elected me as the group leader. At first I allowed them to develop their roles as they liked and I, being the pillar of the group, played the main character. If conflicts or arguments arose, I would try to negotiate and discuss the matter with other members and managed to find a solution. By organizing and directing our play, I had learned coordination, compromise and cooperation. I was the group backbone and binder. (Jack Tan, June 6 2014. Revised and translated from Chinese original).

In their eyes, all the group leaders are strongly committed and feel greatly challenged. Gloria Cai accounted her pressure in this way:

### *Excerpt 2*

As a group leader, I had taken great responsibility for the group members. At the first stage, Problems arose one after another. Some were late for the rehearsal; some disagreed about certain details. I always felt upset. Because I was the very person who called them together to practice the performance and it would take us a lot of time and I could not anticipate the result. Another reason was that our play was a classic folktale with the old stuff as the theme and we all could not play boldly and freely. Personally, it did not matter whether we won or failed, but for our group it meant quite a lot. I feared that I would fail to live up to their expectations, and I feared that we would be denied for the first round of competition and I feared that we had devoted so much but without any gain ultimately. However, all of us unanimously agreed that this was indeed a rare opportunity for us to join in the game and since we all liked English and liked performance, we should work hard and sacrifice anything for the shared goal. I reminded them that participation was more precious than getting the prize, so we should cherish the time we stayed together. Anyhow just as the old saying goes, "Heaven rewards the faithful." and we did enter the final and won second prize. (Gloria Cai, June 4 2014. Revised and translated from Chinese original)

#### *→Dramatic members*

When we talked to the dramatic members, some of them were very excited and admitted that it was a new and electric experience; a platform for self-assertion and a chance to get to know more people and make new friends. Jenny Zhang told us:

### *Excerpt 3*

We were very excited that we could perform on the stage of Lecture Hall 208. In the past, when we were there, we could only be audience. Now as freshmen we dominated the stage and it's really exciting. Since we had well prepared, we neither had the jitters nor felt embarrassed. The only thing we felt was it's new and it's fun to play together on the stage! It was really a challenge. It had never been easy, but we made it. Our class was made up of students from two schools: School of Computer Science and School of Electronic and Information. The majority of our dramatic group came from the latter and two from the former. We only had four periods of English class together every week and seldom spoke to each other. Because of the repeated rehearsal, we knew each other better and became good friends now. Although the competition was over, it had not come to an end. Our team members would go on striving for new goals. (Jenny Zhang, June 10, 2014. Revised and translated from Chinese original)

In Kate Feng's descriptions, she emphasizes peer-peer instruction, teamwork and autonomous learning:

### *Excerpt 4*

In most cases, when we practiced our performance, different kinds of arguments would inevitably occur. When it came to pronunciation problems, usually a dictionary would be our authority. For instance, once when one student pronounced the word 'president' as [ˈprɪzɪdənt], another student pointed it out and said it was wrong and it should be pronounced as [ˈprezɪdənt]. Some said the former was right and some said the latter. Under this condition, we had to turn to dictionaries for help. (Kate Feng, June 10, 2014. Revised and translated from Chinese original)

## 3 DISCUSSION

The participants' experience may be regarded as a distinct form of language learning compared with classroom learning. In class, "English teachers are often constrained by a host of factors such as an official curriculum, textbooks, required teaching objectives, class hours, and school cultures." (Gao, 2009: 60-67) Since English teachers are often busy completing their teaching plan in the limited class time, students have little time practicing what they have learned, consequently they have no chance to experience the joy of learning language, let alone appreciate the beauty of English. In contrast, during their whole process of play performance, students plunged into a happy and relaxing atmosphere. Our interview produced images of enthusiastic English learners actively engaging in collaborative language learning. It also revealed that committed group leaders, as group backbone and binder, played a crucial role in deciding on critical issues and maintaining the bonded community. They knew the importance of compromise and the significance of timely communication and cooperation—see excerpt 1 and excerpt 2. During their rehearsal, when they came across difficulties, the members could support each other in order to reach their shared goal—see excerpt 4. Obviously, such activities help the students develop community cohesion and motivate their autonomous learning efforts. In these activities, they are likely to acquire some leadership qualities and competence that the study has identified in learners like Jack Tan and Gloria Cai—see excerpt 1 and excerpt 2.

Out-of-class learning activities are an extension and complement to classroom pedagogical endeavors. They can serve as a bridge between 'conscious language learning' and 'subconscious language learning'. In the time-limited classes, teachers can concentrate on difficult points and class presentations. If necessary, teachers can make clear

the tasks including requirements, goals and the items students should pay attention to. Outside class it is the students who should be the boss of their study. By frequently participating in these activities, Teenagers can transform and enrich their language learning experiences.

Out-of-class learning activities can help change teenagers undesirable personalities. By asking teenagers to get fully prepared before demonstrating themselves in front of the public, English play may create a low anxiety space for learners to freely experimenting with L2 free from any concerns of 'losing face' (Cekaite and Aronsson op.cit.). They may become open-minded, talkative and they are willing to 'show off' their talents. By voluntarily involving teenagers in such group work, it may help change their passivity into activity.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

This study further justifies the recognition that 'language classroom is not a real world where behaviour has serious consequences but---like much of the discourse of native-speaker children and adults --- a play world in which people can practice and get prepared. And as adults, we should never forget that people, whether they are old or young, by nature, like to play. Likewise, teenagers not only like to play with words, they like to learn and grow in a playful atmosphere even more.

#### 5 RESEARCH PROJECT

1. "Multimodality-based Development of Teaching Resources of English Masterpieces Videos" in

2013 authorized by Philosophy and Social Sciences Project Planning Office of Guangdong Province (Project Code: GD13XWW10).

2. "Network-based Development and Exploitation of English Movies and TV shows" in 2013 authorized by Education Department of Guangdong Province (Project Code: 2013WYXM0078).

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