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## Drama as a FL enhancing creative activity in FL preschool learners' environment

### Abstract

The study was aimed at checking whether the drama technique positively affects the acquisition of English vocabulary among 5-year-old preschool students. The study involved 16 students from one of the kindergartens in southern Poland (8 in the experimental group and 8 in the control group). The aim of the study in the experimental group was to help them learn a selected set of English vocabulary so that at the very end they would put on a Christmas presentation. At the same time, the control group practiced the same material with the method generally recommended for teaching preschool children, i.e. with flashcards or games. In both cases, the experiment lasted more than 2 months, with 30-minute English classes for the participants once a week. The results of the study were subject to statistical analysis: both dependent and independent samples of the t-test were used here. After collecting all the information, the hypothesis that the drama technique positively affects the acquisition of English vocabulary among 5-year-old students was confirmed. In addition, it has been shown that this type of foreign language learning methods turned out to be more effective and more durable than other language learning techniques used in preschool education.

**Keywords:** English drama, preschool learners, TEFL, vocabulary assimilation

# 1. Introduction

According to quite a large group of teachers, the current model of education tends to be rigid, and, as a result, lacks creativity and an individual approach to learners. The issue can be traced back to the core curriculum, which in many aspects overwhelms and demotivates students. The role of any teacher is to resuscitate the educational system so as to bring the classroom back to life. This goal might be realized in a number of ways, depending on the subject, level of learners, and teacher's preferences. Nevertheless, one of the attainable teaching techniques is drama, which necessitates active involvement both from the teacher and the students. Even though the drama technique seems to gain more and more popularity nowadays, it still requires further investigation and insight into its value.

Bearing in mind the present position of drama in foreign language education (FLE), we shall concentrate on its beneficial and creativity-inducing potential as regards to both foreign language teaching and social interaction. Many authors pay attention to the benefits that students are able to receive due to drama sessions, in which they absorb the nature of language in real contexts and situations. However, it is not the only asset to drama on the grounds that it remarkably affects participants' social, interactive and emotional spheres. Although drama tends to be highly exploited in a variety of educational areas, we are not likely to encounter it in the environment of very young EFL learners. That is why, the following paper is intended at the investigation of the effects that drama has on young EFL students in terms of teaching the foreign language selected set of vocabulary.

The experiment is designed to assess the drama potential on English teaching results in the local context of one of the kindergartens in Upper Silesia. Due to the deficiency of similar studies concerning 5-year-old EFL learners, we hope to fill a gap that exists in this area of research. A range of language analysts considers the validity of drama in teaching English, but only a few analysts examine the issue in terms of such young learners from Poland. As many preschool teachers of English encounter a countless number of limitations, they frequently resign from extra projects associated with foreign language teaching. Such tasks are likely to be completed in the mother tongue or with older and more advanced EFL students. We decided to examine the position of drama in the case of FLE to preschool learners, and to evaluate whether drama significantly contributes to the increase of foreign language proficiency. The assessment is based on a particular set of vocabulary items.

Thus, the present study endeavours to elicit answers to the following research questions:

1. Does drama contribute to the remarkable improvement of the selected English vocabulary among EFL preschool learners?
2. Is drama more successful and suitable for young learners than other methods of FLE? Are the students more involved in learning during drama-based classes than during traditional classes?
3. Does drama influence the assimilation of the selected set of vocabulary for a longer period of time? Is it more worthwhile?

In conclusion, we hope that the answers to the above-mentioned research questions will allow us to collect valuable feedback on how English drama performance can impact on the progress that 5-year-old children make in FLE.

## 2. Literature review

Sparling (1993) observes that drama usually refers to a general term that encompasses a variety of purposes. He describes drama as a combination of dramatic reasoning and visualization of the world. These activities can lead to the participants playing roles and improvising, using role play and scene study. The act is completed with a theatrical performance. According to Courtney (1982: 3), drama should be treated as a “spontaneous human process of identification with and impersonation of others.”

On the other hand, educational drama can be broadly defined as any dramatic practice that is aimed at achieving specific educational benefits (Sparling, 1993). As the author emphasizes the term encompasses a variety of options that allow for teaching a foreign language. The most common situation to employ educational drama is in a secondary school setting, where drama experience can be easily transformed into a theatrical performance. However, there is no reason for ignoring younger students, even preschool learners may participate in such drama activities. Sparling (1993) suggests that creative drama and improvisation seem to be frequently exploited in elementary schools.

In some other research, Holden (1981) agrees that drama should be treated as a platform between the classroom and the outside contexts. The combination of gestures, movement, and facial expressions allows the students to be more self-assured when a real-life English discourse takes place and they have to participate in it. The author reminds teachers to give some freedom to the learners on the grounds that they might need it in situations outside the classroom. When talking to other people, they have to rely on themselves without any assistance or correction from the teacher. That is why practicing English with the use of drama is important and beneficial for achieving satisfying and successful results in everyday English conversation.

In some other research, Witerska (2011) comes to the conclusion that drama stimulates human development and boosts creative activity directed at the world. Not only does it enrich the student’s life and the relationship with the community, but it also allows for self-improvement. Furthermore, intriguing evidence for the effectiveness of drama relates to the creation of the learner’s own identity in the process of self-reflection.

In Szymik’s opinion (2014) a drama participant, as the constructor and creator of the role, instead of being a passive inferior to the teacher’s commands, learns and develops through active steps. The linkage between the character’s motivation and student’s own experience supports intellectual and emotional activity as well as enthusiasm for teamwork. The author believes that, by suitable communicational situations, the teacher elicits verbal conversations among learners, and makes shy students more engaged or encouraged. Consequently, they might overcome stress and anxiety, which frequently accompany regular class discussions. Drama supports both subject teaching and the development of

mental faculties. At the same time, Maley and Duff (2005) add that it also boosts students' motivation by making them more self-assured.

Furthermore, Wessels (1987: 10) characterizes drama as "a technique of communicative language teaching." The author pays attention to the learner who actively takes part in the process of learning instead of being a passive observer. Wessels (1987: 11) stresses "genuine communication," which typical course-books usually lack. By this term, he means unrestricted conversations that involve "hesitations, interruptions, distractions, misunderstandings, and even silences" (Wessels, 1987: 11). Additionally, all the discourses implicate some emotions towards the interlocutor, which, in turn, might indicate the type of relationship between the speakers. However, what determines a particular relationship is the status of each of them (superior or subordinate). This could be related to the actual context and place of the conversation. The last element, according to Wessels (1987: 11) entails "body language – facial expressions, gestures, the position of our limbs, and non-verbal sounds." Wessels (1987) reminds us that the above-mentioned aspects are guaranteed when drama tasks are taking place.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants and Procedures

The study was conducted among two groups of preschool learners attending one of the kindergarten schools in southern Poland. 30-minute-long English classes took place once a week. Although the learners absorbed the language by a variety of TEFL techniques, such as songs, chants, games, and other activities, they had not been familiarised with drama performance in English. The first group, which took part in the Christmas drama performance, numbered 20 children, while the second one, which was taught in a traditional way, 25. On account of corresponding results of both groups in the oral Pre-test, both the experimental group and control one consisted of eight 5-year-old participants in each case.

The experiment started in October and continued till April 2019. Having taken the Pre-test, which determined their initial level of knowledge, the students were able to participate in the whole procedure. The members of the drama group started to practise their roles. Although we picked only 8 students for the experimental purposes, the whole group was engaged in the performance, and each member had their own role. At the same time, the control group was progressively introduced to the language items of our interest. However, the techniques were limited to flashcards, and any activities or games connected with them. Each time, the students were familiarized with three or four new words, which were later revised in games and songs.

The drama rehearsals continued until mid-December. Subsequently, the members of the drama group were supposed to perform in front of the audience. The next step was taking the Post-test 1, which structure was identical to the Pre-test. However, the Post-test 1 was only addressed to the 16 sample participants, i.e. 8 selected from the experimental group and 8 from the control one.

In April, the same sample participants took the Post-test 2, which served as an indication of the more successful and long-lasting technique in terms of TEFL in case of preschool learners. Both the Post-test 1 and Post-test 2 were conducted on the same terms as the Pre-test.

Finally, the appropriate statistical instruments were applied and the *t*-Test results were estimated.

### 3.2. Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments employed in the study were the following: Pre-test, Post-test 1 and Post-test 2, which were exactly the same tests, checking the knowledge of the particular set of Christmas-oriented vocabulary.

Not only did all the tests focus on the colours such as: *yellow, pink, orange, blue, white, green, purple, and red*, but also on the following concrete nouns: *reindeer, robot, mouse, lights, bauble, Christmas tree, train, doll, computer, bells, helicopter, Santa, ball, and star*. The total score of the tests was 22 points, which constituted 8 points for the first task and 14 points for the second one. At first the students had to colour eight baubles according to the teacher's instruction. Then their task was to match the pictures to the correct words, as the teacher read them out loud.

## 4. Results and discussion

In the tables below some basic information, such as: mean, median, mode, variance, and standard deviation, is included (Table 1 and Table 2). The data concerns the two sample groups: experimental and control ones.

At the beginning the mean scores of the Pre-test in two groups are comparable, i.e. 9.375 ( $\approx 43\%$ ) in the experimental one and 9.625 ( $\approx 44\%$ ) in the control one. This outcome might be indicative as far as the aspect of homogeneity is concerned. When it comes to the mean scores of Post-test 1, the results present as follows: the experimental group obtained a higher outcome, i.e. 20.25 ( $\approx 92\%$ ), than the control one – 14.5 ( $\approx 66\%$ ). This suggests the former group has made greater progress in the assimilation of the target English vocabulary. Later on, referring to the results of Post-test 2, the experimental group mean score is 19.625 ( $\approx 89\%$ ) and the control one's 13 ( $\approx 59\%$ ).

Table 1. Mean, median, mode, variance, and standard deviation in the experimental group

	Mean	Median	Mode	Variance	Standard Deviation
Pre-test	9.375	10,0	11	8.26786.	2.87539.
Post-test 1	20.250	21.5	22	6.21429.	2.49285.
Post-test 2	19.625	19.5	19	2.83929.	1.68502.

Source: Own elaboration

When paying attention to the median, while the highest value (21.5) occurs in the Post-test 1 in the experimental group, the lowest one (10) occurs in both groups when taking the Pre-test. However, taking into consideration the mode, which is the most frequently appearing value, it is the highest in the Post-test 1 of the experimental group (22) and the lowest (7) in the case of Pre-test in the control group.

The final element of this part of the analysis relates to the variance and standard deviation. Here the highest value refers to the Post-test 2 in the control group. The lowest one, in turn, can be noticed in the Post-test 2 of the experimental group.

Table 2. Mean, median, mode, variance, and standard deviation in the control group

	Mean	Median	Mode	Variance	Standard Deviation
Pre-test	9.625	10.0	7	6.55357.	2.55999.
Post-test 1	14.5	14.0	13	9.42857.	3.0706.
Post-test 2	13.0	12.5	12	21.42857.	4.6291.

Source: Own elaboration

In order to check if drama has a beneficial impact on the absorption of the selected set of the English vocabulary among 5-year-old learners, we have resolved to employ the dependent-samples *t*-test of the Pre-test and Post-test 1. Such a *t*-test is conducted with the use of the scores only from the experimental group to assess the increase or decrease in the language items of our interest. Additionally, we are able to verify the importance of the implementation of English drama to the preschool curriculum. By this, we mean how significant is the increase in knowledge of the selected material covered in the sample experimental group.

Owing to the fact that the *t*-value in the *t*-test dependent-samples of the Pre-test and Post-test 1 in the sample experimental group is 8.536917 and the *p*-value is .00006., the result is statistically significant. It indicates that drama improves the acquisition of the selected language items as far as the participants in the sample experimental group are concerned.

Later on, we have investigated the result of the independent samples *t*-test in terms of Pre-test outcomes in both the sample experimental and control groups. The significance level is set at .05. On the grounds that the *t*-value is  $-0.18367$  and the *p*-value is .856905, the result is not significant. The gathered information suggests that there is little difference in the initial level of participants' familiarity with the selected English vocabulary set as far as the two sample groups are taken into account. What can be assumed is the significance in contrasting the scores from both groups in the following sections. We concentrate on the statistical data concerning the results of the independent-samples *t*-test of Post-test 1 in both the sample experimental and control groups.

With the use of presented scores, we obtained the information that the outcome is valid as a consequence of the fact that *t*-value is 4.11202 and the *p*-value is .001057. The result implies that the difference between the sample experimental and control groups' scores

is meaningful, which entails better assimilation of the selected set of English vocabulary in the former one. In other words, drama seems to be more successful and suitable for young learners than traditional methods of TEFL.

The final section is devoted to the interpretation of the independent-samples *t*-test of Post-test 2, which compares the scores in the sample experimental and control groups. The following calculation allows us to assess the value of the employment of Post-test 2 in both groups. Since the *t*-value is 3.80378 and the *p*-value is .001936, we can conclude that the result is again significant. What can be deduced from this fact is that statistically drama practice generates more long-term teaching results than traditional TEFL methods in the case of 5-year-old preschool learners.

As for the results analysis, we shall concentrate on the values of mean, median, mode, variance, and standard deviation in both groups, where the highest increase in the assimilation of the selected set of English vocabulary items takes place after the treatment, which is the Christmas drama rehearsals and performance, in the experimental group. Hence, our hypothesis that drama positively influences English vocabulary assimilation among 5-year-old preschool learners has been confirmed. What has been also verified is the opinion of many other authors, (Bujak-Lechowicz, 2006; Maley, Duff, 1982), who claim that drama contributes to beneficial teaching results and a better understanding of the covered material. As we can see, this rule turns out to work in the preschool environment as well.

The mean score difference between Pre-test and Post-test 1 in the experimental group is 10.88 points, which, in turn, suggests the truth of the first of the research questions. That is why one might conclude that drama contributes to the remarkable improvement of the selected English vocabulary among the EFL preschool learners. On the grounds that the control group's results are significantly lower, the traditional methods of TEFL in kindergarten seem to be less productive and successful. This phenomenon might stem from the fact that the experimental group was more motivated and involved in the task due to their final performance. In addition, such a drama project was innovative and very absorbing, which unquestionably influenced the way the students learned the material. Simultaneously, the control group's work was not aimed at any final realization so they might not have been encouraged enough.

That is why, it is possible to assume that drama is more successful and suitable for young learners than other methods of TEFL, which verifies the truth of the second research question. We may assume that the traditional approach to teaching English needs to be reshaped or modernized in order to ensure better teaching results. This might be the suggestion for the teachers working with such young ESL learners who necessitate special treatment in terms of foreign language teaching.

We can also conclude that the students seem to be more involved in drama experience than during traditional classes, which again is associated with the second research question. The teacher undoubtedly noticed greater enthusiasm in the case of the experimental group members, who were extremely delighted with every rehearsal. They especially enjoyed the costumes and props. The positive aspect of the presence of different objects in English classes which might make the learners interested in the lesson and stimulate the way they remember the target material can be deduced.



However, in both groups, there is a slight decline in terms of the mean score difference between Post-test 1 and Post-test 2, which indicates that not repeated material tends to be forgotten regardless of the teaching method. Therefore, it is advisable to revise with students the covered information many times. However, drama seems to maintain the word memorization in a more efficient way because the decrease between the results from Post-test 1 and Post-test 2 in the experimental group is lower.

As far as variance and standard deviation are concerned, the most considerable value ( $\sigma = 4.6291$ .) occurs in the Post-test 2 in the sample control group's results. In this case, we might observe the most visible deviation from the mean. It might be associated with the fact that learners have assimilated the material in the most inconsistent way. This may imply that the traditional methods of TEFL in a long perspective cause the greatest hesitation in terms of the learners' level of knowledge.

On the other hand, the least striking irregularity ( $\sigma = 1.68502$ .) concerns the scores of Post-test 2 in the experimental group, which signifies that the level of the participants' knowledge of the particular set of English vocabulary items is the most consistent. We might suppose that the learners in the experimental group were more interested in the presented material, and that is why it became more consolidated and memorized, relatively, by all these participants. Simultaneously, we can acknowledge the truth of the third research question, which doubts whether drama influences the assimilation of the selected set of vocabulary for a longer period of time. This can be assumed due to the fact that the mean score of Post-test 2 in the experimental group is still comparatively high as against this from Post-test 1, so we might expect drama to be worthwhile and profitable in the long-term.

Summing up, in the case of Post-test 1 and Post-test 2 results in the control group, the decrease and the inconsistency of the learners' level is bigger. This might suggest that drama is more successful as well as suitable for young learners than other methods of TEFL.

In addition to the above-mentioned calculations, we conducted two types of t-test: dependent- and independent-samples ones. The former are aimed at the comparison of the results within the same group. The latter instead refer to checking the significance of the study between different groups, which in our case are the experimental and control ones.

The first of the administered *t*-tests in our research is the dependent-samples *t*-test of Pre-test and Post-test 1 in the experimental group. The outcome is statistically significant which indicates that drama contributes to the improvement of the teaching outcome in the case of the experimental group. This again confirms our belief that drama has a positive and remarkable effect on the teaching results and at the same time supports our hypothesis and the first of the research questions.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning to include the results of the independent-samples *t*-test of the Pre-test. In this case, however, the outcome is insignificant, which in our situation is a positive result. It entails the fact that at the very beginning our two groups, the experimental one and the control one, were at a similar level as for the acquaintance with the selected set of English vocabulary. That is why the analysis of the differences in both groups is reasonable.



Referring to the result of the independent-samples *t*-test of the Post-test 1, owing to the fact that the outcome is significant, we might conclude that drama is a more successful TEFL technique among preschool learners than other traditional methods.

Finally, we consider the results of the independent-samples *t*-test of Post-test 2. In this case, the result is significant again, which verifies the third of our research questions connected to the long-term effects of teaching with the use of drama. Namely, drama is more effective when considering the time factor and effectiveness.

## 5. Conclusion

According to all the applied statistical tools, the main hypothesis that drama positively influences English vocabulary assimilation among 5-year-old learners has been validated. In addition, we have affirmatively replied to all the three research questions. This, in turn, strengthens the sense of the hypothesis. Not only does drama have a remarkable impact on the process of teaching English to young students, but it appears to be more successful and long-lasting than traditional methods of TEFL to children.

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## **Streszczenie**

### **Technika dramy jako środek dydaktyczny zwiększający aktywność twórczą w środowisku uczniów przedszkolnych podczas lekcji języka obcego**

Badanie miało na celu sprawdzenie, czy technika dramy pozytywnie wpływa na przyswajanie słownictwa angielskiego wśród 5-letnich uczniów przedszkolnych. W badaniu wzięło udział 16 uczniów z jednego z przedszkoli w południowej Polsce (8 w grupie eksperymentalnej i 8 w kontrolnej). Celem nauki w grupie eksperymentalnej było wyuczenie wybranego zestawu angielskiego słownictwa tak, aby na koniec wystawiła ona świąteczną prezentację. Jednocześnie grupa kontrolna ćwiczyła ten sam materiał metodą ogólnie zalecaną do nauczania dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym, tj. przy pomocy fiszek lub gier. W obu przypadkach eksperyment trwał ponad dwa miesiące, a 30-minutowe zajęcia z języka angielskiego dla uczestników odbywały się raz w tygodniu. Wyniki badania podlegały analizie statystycznej: zastosowano zarówno zależne, jak i niezależne próby testu *t*. Po zebraniu wszystkich informacji potwierdzono prawdziwość hipotezy zakładającej, że technika dramy pozytywnie wpływa na przyswajanie słownictwa angielskiego wśród 5-letnich uczniów. Dodatkowo wykazano, iż tego typu formy nauki języka obcego okazały się skuteczniejsze i dawały trwalsze efekty od innych technik nauki języka stosowanych w edukacji przedszkolnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** technika dramy, nauka przedszkolna, TEFL, przyswajanie słownictwa