

## **Drama and Questioning Techniques: Powerful Tools for the Enhancement of Students' Speaking Abilities and Positive Attitudes towards EFL Learning**

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**Abstract:** With the aim of satisfying students' need for improved English speaking skills in order to handle the growing challenges of international communication in a globalized world, the study was conducted to examine the benefits of drama and questioning techniques to enhance verbal communicative skills. The attitudes of students towards English instruction employing such techniques were also investigated. The experiment was conducted with an intact group of 15 non-native undergraduate students whose major was not English. To collect data, the speaking achievement pre- and post-tests were administered. The investigation of students' attitudes towards the instruction using drama and questioning techniques was conducted by employing a triangulation of data collection instruments consisting of teacher's diaries, students' journals, and attitude questionnaires.

Research findings revealed that there was statistically significant difference between the mean scores students obtained from the pre- and post-tests. The data obtained from students' journals and attitude questionnaires manifested students' positive attitudes towards English instruction delivered through drama and

questioning techniques, although the same could not be said with the data obtained through the teacher's diaries. Based on such findings, it could be concluded that drama and questioning techniques could help enhance students' speaking abilities and their positive attitudes towards EFL learning.

**Keywords:** attitudes/ drama techniques/ questioning techniques/ speaking achievement

## **Introduction**

English has become the primary lingua franca of an increasingly interconnected globalized world, yet Thai students tend to lag behind in acquiring adequate communicative skills in the language. Studies have shown that in general Thai students have very low English speaking skills (Pattaranon, 1988; Jong-Utsah, 1988). In general, at a large number of workplaces, employers are looking for applicants who are proficient in English speaking and listening, and some of them may request that schools and universities focus on developing such skills in students (Kulawanit et al., 2005). For this reason, it is of paramount importance for English teachers to find effective pedagogical techniques to help enhance students' speaking abilities, among other English skills they also need to develop. This article is a report on findings from the examination of the effectiveness of an English instruction using the integration of drama and questioning techniques to enhance students' speaking skills. The study also aimed at investigating students' attitudes towards the English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques based on the premise that students' attitudes significantly influence their language learning attainment, as pointed out by Naimon (1978, cited in Krashen, 1981) argues

that students' attitudes towards language learning situations were "the best predictor of success" (p.33). It was anticipated that the findings of this study regarding the effectiveness of the instruction integrating drama and questioning techniques as well as the attitudes of students toward the implementation of the instruction would shed light on ways teachers can make use of these two techniques to more effectively and fruitfully enhance their students' speaking skills in their class.

### **Literature review**

The ability to speak in a foreign language involves several components that speakers need to acquire in order to communicate effectively. For this reason, the enhancement of speaking ability involves not only the acquisition of linguistic forms but also the knowledge of communication contexts, which determine both the content and manner of verbal expression. The ability to interpret and appropriately respond to nonverbal clues such as facial expressions and tones of voice also plays a part. Therefore, learners should be provided with learning environments where different forms of social interaction are simulated in order to acquaint them with a variety of linguistic forms and communication contexts. One of the most influential learning theorists, Vygotsky (1987), proposes that language development depends entirely on social interaction. He postulates that knowledge entails self-regulation and that social interaction enables individuals to construct knowledge which is meaningful to them. In terms of language perspective, according to Hymes, "communicative competence must include not only the linguistic form of a language but also a knowledge of when, how and to whom it is appropriate to use this form" (Hymes, 1966 cited in Paulston and Bruder, 1976: 55).

These theoretical concepts underpin the application of drama and questioning techniques to enhance learners' speaking ability in that the two techniques support interaction and that drama provides learners with opportunities to learn to communicate in contexts where most, if not all, components of communicative competence exist. As Esslin (1976) points out, in drama it is not the words but the situation in which the words are delivered that matters.

Drama techniques are defined as strategies to communicate or convey the intended meaning which involves a wide range of activities (Via, 1987). Drama refers to a work of art which will be exploited as a resource for language learning in the present study. Therefore, it is worth noting that these two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

The benefits of drama techniques or drama to speaking development are extensively acknowledged. According to Hamilton and McLead (1993), drama is beneficial especially to speaking development. Wessels (1987) adds that drama can reinforce a need to speak by drawing learners' attention to focus on creating dramatic situations, dialogues, role plays, or problem solving exercises. Other aspects that add to the benefits of drama techniques in language learning are also clarified by Mattevi (2005) and Makita-Discekici (1999). They posit that the use of drama in an English class not only enables English teachers to deliver the English language in an active, communicative, and contextualized way but also equips language teachers with the tools to create realistic situations in which students have a chance to learn to use the target language in context. Furthermore, according to Dougill (1987) and Taylor (2000), drama techniques can satisfy primary needs of language learning in that they can create motivation, enhance confidence, and provide context in learning a

language. It is also great fun. All these views seem to confirm the benefits of drama in the enhancement of students' speaking abilities.

Elements of drama, according to DiYanni (2000), consist of plot, the sequence of events, character development (the element which makes things happen in drama), dialogue (which functions in advancing the plot, creating settings, and revealing character), staging (the presentation of drama in performance), and theme (the central idea or motif of the play). Meanwhile, drama techniques utilized in a language class have generally been divided into seven types, including games, mime or pantomime, role playing, improvisation, simulation, storytelling, and dramatization. The present study combined drama elements and types of drama techniques into an arrangement of instruction in order to broaden learners' opportunities for nourishing their speaking abilities.

With regard to questioning techniques, they are considered pedagogical devices vital for initiating classroom interaction (Dillian, 1988). Questioning techniques can be employed to serve various purposes, including (1) to create interest and motivate participation in a class, (2) to encourage students to express their thoughts or ideas as well as to help them clarify their thoughts or ideas, and (3) to evaluate, diagnose, and check students' preparation and understanding of the material as well as the knowledge students bring into the class (Hyman, 1979; Borich, 2004; and Moore, 2005). Additionally, questioning techniques can be applied to create background knowledge of drama components, such as situations, types of characters, or dramatic themes. The understanding of these components will make learners' engagement and interaction in drama activities more meaningful. Due to these functions that questioning techniques can serve, the integration of questioning

techniques and drama techniques can forcefully support the instruction to obtain more productive outcomes.

### **Research Questions**

The present study aimed to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent can drama and questioning techniques enhance students' speaking achievement?
2. What are students' attitudes towards English instruction employing the integration of drama and questioning techniques?

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Design**

A one-group pre-test post-test design was employed in this study.

#### **Participants**

The study was conducted with an intact group of 15 students, three males and 12 females, who were second-, third-, and fourth-year students enrolled in an elective course offered by the university as a seven-week English through Drama summer course.

#### **Procedures**

Four teaching steps were designed by using the integration of drama and questioning techniques to enhance the students' speaking abilities. Before designing

the four teaching steps, language and learning theories were analyzed and synthesized to highlight key concepts which underpin drama and questioning techniques. Next, teaching principles were determined based on theoretical concepts and the integration of the key aspects of drama and questioning techniques. The four teaching steps were validated by a panel of experts and piloted with ten students to ensure their validity and minimize unforeseen flaws.

### **Teaching steps**

The teaching steps were divided into four steps consisting of (1) working on a drama script, (2) drama rehearsal, (3) drama production, and (4) drama evaluation, each of which is detailed as follows:

#### **(1) Working on a drama script**

The first step involved the establishment of background knowledge concerning a play which students were required to engage in. In order to make the interaction more meaningful to students and to facilitate their acquisition of a language, they needed to know who they were in that particular context, who they were interacting with, and why they were interacting with those people. Students' background knowledge of the play was established by means of class discussion of the play's characters, their natures, their relationship with other characters, or their problems. The questioning techniques were employed to encourage students' participations and interaction. Examples of questions are as follows: "What kind of person is this character?," "How does s/he feel about the person s/he is talking to?," and "What is the relationship between the character and the person s/he is talking to?"

Through the establishment of background knowledge about the play, students could

be made aware of other crucial elements of communication in addition to linguistic forms. Also, students had opportunities to practice expressing their thoughts, opinions, and feelings.

### (2) Drama rehearsal

Drama rehearsal was designed to elicit students' physical and emotional engagement. In this step, students were divided into groups or pairs, and they were assigned to play each character's role. The background knowledge established in the previous step enabled them to understand their role and the context where the communication took place. Here, while the play's dialogue that they were required to deliver provided them with language input, the context of the play facilitated their learning of how the forms were applied in that particular context. Close monitoring and interruptions by the teacher were required in this step in order to correct students' pronunciation, to enhance their understanding of their role, and to ensure that students were delivering a dialogue from their understanding rather than being engaged in mere rote recitation. Questions were posed to strengthen students' understanding and to guide how they should express the play's meaning.

### (3) Drama production

This step created opportunities for students to engage in a performance to experience lifelike communication situations without any interruption from the teacher. Through a performance, in addition to delivering a dialogue, students could exploit facial expressions, intonations, and gestures to convey the intended meaning of each character. This helped them internalize both linguistic and non-linguistic components of speaking ability. To make sure that it was manageable within the class time, a performance of an extracted scene was provided for students to practice their



speaking ability. A full-scale stage performance of the whole play was kept for the final project or end of class activity. Students' performance was videotaped for subsequent evaluation.

#### (4) Drama evaluation

Drama evaluation involved the evaluation of the performance. The videotape was played after the performance to allow students to practice expressing their opinions towards their own performance as well as their peers' performances. That students were able to observe themselves enabled them to improve their performance and learn from their mistakes.

It is worth noting that two drama pieces that students were assigned to work on were selected by the teacher according to scripts whose lengths were suitable for a class period, their vocabulary and syntax were accessible for foreign language learners, and their content required only such acting skills as amateurs could conveniently perform (Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo, 2004; Smith, 1984). One of the plays was written by the students themselves.

### **Data Collection**

To collect data, speaking achievement tests were administered before and after exposing students to drama and questioning techniques. An attitude questionnaire, arranged in a five-point Likert scale, was utilized at the end of the experiment. Data were also collected using students' journals and teacher's diaries so as to supplement the questionnaire data.

### **Data Analysis**

The paired sample t-test was employed to determine the increase in the speaking scores gained after the implementation of drama and questioning techniques. Data obtained through the attitude questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean and percentage. As for the qualitative data obtained from students' journals, teacher's diaries, and the open-ended section of the attitude questionnaire, content analysis was carried out.

### Findings and Discussions of Findings

The research findings are presented in two sections—the students' speaking achievement and the students' attitudes towards the English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques.

#### 1. Students' speaking achievement

Students' speaking achievement in the present study was measured by employing speaking achievement test. The findings are illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Comparison of speaking pre-test and post-test scores using paired-samples t-test

	N	Mean	SD	t-statistics	sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	15.00	12.400	4.800	6.879**	0.000
Post-test	15.00	22.96	7.484		

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

As displayed in Table 1, the mean score of the post-test was statistically significantly higher than that of the pre-test at the 0.01 level. Further calculation of the effect size utilizing Hedges'  $g$  formula to measure the magnitude of the treatment indicated that the effect size was large ( $g = 1.68$ ). Based on such findings, it could be claimed that the English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques was effective in enhancing speaking achievement.

Such findings could be explained that the instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques capitalized oral interaction and active experience, which were theoretically vital to language learning. All teaching steps designed on the integration of drama and questioning techniques facilitated different forms of interactions in different contexts, which assisted the students in acquiring language tools. In the first teaching step, for instance, the students had opportunities to orally interact with both peers and the teacher in English in order to express and exchange opinions, while in the second teaching step wherein they were assigned to play character roles, the interaction was in a form of conversational interaction between different characters in the play. Therefore, an opportunity to orally interact and actively engage in all the teaching steps was abundantly provided, hence enhanced students' speaking skills.

The English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques required the students to employ a full range of their language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, a combination which could enrich their linguistic repertoire and benefit their speaking skills. In other words,

although the integration of drama and questioning techniques for English instruction in the present study was used to emphasize the enhancement of speaking abilities, other language skills were also required. During the first teaching step, the students needed to read drama scripts in order to engage in discussions. They were then required to write script and produce a play for themselves. As for listening, it was a natural part of oral communication that took place while the students were engaged in speaking. Hence, through the exercise of both their productive and receptive skills, their learning of new linguistic forms and functions contributed to the enhancement of their speaking abilities.

The students' journals indicated that the students viewed the English instruction with the integration of drama and questioning techniques as beneficial because such techniques created an enjoyable, relaxing, and friendly learning atmosphere. This also helped foster rapport between the students and their teacher. According to Akey (2006), there is a positive association between this kind of relationship with students' level of engagement as well as their academic gain. This could be considered one factor affecting the students' language learning improvement.

## **2. Students' attitudes towards the English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques**

The findings demonstrated students' positive attitudes towards English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques. From the questionnaire, it was learned that the grand mean score of the students' responses to positive questions was 4.39. A high percentage of the students' responses

in the attitude questionnaire indicated that most students had favorable attitudes towards the English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques. Their responses to an open-ended section provided at the end of the questionnaires also confirmed these findings. Many students thought that learning through the integration of these two techniques made the lessons more interesting and more enjoyable, as one of the students stated: *“This class is different from other classes. It is more interesting”* and another added, *“It seems everyone enjoys learning, and that makes me enjoy it, too.”*

Furthermore, students commented that learning through these techniques made them feel more confident to apply their language skills, especially to express themselves. In addition, a number of students stated that they felt the course helped them improve not only their language but also thinking skills. They noted, for example, that *“after studying this course, I think I have gained improvement both in my English language skills and thinking skills.”*

Findings from students’ journals demonstrated similar results. Most of the students thought that the activities in the first teaching step helped enhance their understanding of the lessons, their language, and their thinking skills. They stated that *“I can practice many skills, such as speaking, answering questions in English, and thinking analytically.”* They also liked the learning atmosphere, which they thought was *“relaxing and enjoyable.”* Similarly, they enjoyed the second teaching step for corresponding reasons. They added that the second teaching step helped boost their confidence to express themselves. They said, for instance, that *“I feel more confident to express myself. I learn better, too.”*

However, although the students liked the third step for the same reasons they did the previous two teaching steps, the third step seemed to be their most favored learning exercise, as was evident in the large number of students articulating positive sentiments, including such statements as *“I enjoy it very much because I have a chance to speak English.”* Moreover, the students revealed that the leeway provided to them to express themselves in the third step boosted their self-esteem, as one student explained, *“I feel I can do much better than the previous times in a drama production step. I can see my progress in many aspects. I am proud that I can do it.”* As regards the fourth teaching step, many students stated that they liked this learning exercise because it provided them with opportunities to practice expressing opinions and exchanging ideas. For example, they pointed out that *“We have a chance to practice thinking and analyzing in order to answer the teacher’s questions”* and that *“We have opportunities to express our opinions and to learn other people’s opinions.”*

Comparably, findings from the teacher’s diaries indicated that most students responded positively to the first three teaching steps. The teacher noted that the students had active involvement in teaching and learning during these phases of learning. They also worked attentively. Only in the fourth step did the teacher remark that the students did not participate as actively, recording that *“The students were quiet in this step. Only two students responded to the questions. Others looked tired and bored.”*

The findings from the teacher’s diaries concerning the students’ attitudes towards the fourth teaching step seemed to contradict the students’ attitudes reflected in the questionnaires and their journals. This may suggest that the students’ silence in class did not mean that they did not like the lesson. The reason might be that the

students were afraid of speaking up for fear of committing mistakes, or the allotted time was inadequate for them to formulate their thoughts cohesively (Tan, 2007). It is also possible that the students may have had difficulty expressing their thoughts in English, and as a result they chose to remain silent. It is therefore the teacher's responsibility to examine the cause of the silence and encourage the students to get more actively involved in class activities.

## **8. Conclusion and Implications of the Findings**

Drawing from the findings of the study, it could be concluded that drama and questioning techniques were effective for the enhancement of speaking abilities. The statistically significant difference between the mean pre-test and post-test speaking scores suggested that students benefited from drama and questioning techniques. Their positive attitudes towards the English instruction delivered through the integration of drama and questioning techniques yielded further support to the effectiveness of these two techniques. For this reason, drama and questioning techniques are worth implementing in an actual EFL learning environment with an aim to enhance speaking skills of students.

The implications of the findings are that extensive opportunities for learners to have active experience in simulated lifelike conversations are of paramount importance in the enhancement of their speaking abilities. While drama provides them with language input and meaningful contexts, questions can be applied to initiate interaction. Additionally, these techniques can help learners organize and clarify their thoughts so that they can express the intended meaning more effectively. Importantly, a pleasurable and relaxing atmosphere should be established to help learners gain

confidence in expressing themselves. To that end, grammatical mistakes committed by learners in using the target language should not be highlighted. Instead, the focus should be placed on their ability to convey comprehensible meaning. Through the application of these two pedagogical techniques, teachers should play a new role as facilitators by assisting learners in practicing target skills by creating effective learning situations and designing engaging activities as well as producing an environment suitable for the internalization of the targeted skills.

## **9. Recommendations for Further Research**

As the present study used a one-group pretest-posttest design, the findings might be challenged whether the increase in students' speaking scores was in fact due to the effectiveness of the teaching techniques. Therefore, further studies should be conducted to help confirm the effectiveness of drama and questioning techniques to promote language learners' speaking proficiency. Moreover, the duration of the treatment in the present study was rather short, so further studies with longer intervention should be carried out. A time series research design may also be utilized to reflect how learners' speaking ability is developed over time when the drama and questioning techniques are integrated into their language lessons.

Finally, as the sample size of the present study was rather small, the study should be replicated with a larger sample size and also with subjects who are learners of English with different demographic characteristics to increase the generalizability of the findings.

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