

# Exploring the Potential Benefits of Drama in Elementary English Education: A Case Study in Japan

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the potential benefits of using drama in English education in the context of Japanese elementary schools through observation and analysis. In 2009, foreign language activities were introduced in the 5th and 6th grades of Japanese elementary schools, and then English has become a school subject since 2020. Many elementary school teachers have been struggling to find ways to teach English effectively. In Europe and the United States, drama is implemented in education. The Japanese government has been implementing a public project for children by providing artists. Using this project, a public elementary school held a series of drama workshops for its pupils. They practiced and performed a play of *The Lion King* in English. Unlike their regular classes, they successfully co-created their drama collaboratively by thinking on their own and challenging themselves to extend their limits. At the end of the project, the pupils wrote an essay on their drama experiences, and the teachers reflected on the effect of drama. The study concludes that the use of drama is educationally beneficial for both the pupils and the teachers.

## Keywords

drama education, elementary schools in Japan, case study, workshop

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In Japan, many people seem to think that theater or drama is not for laypeople and that its educational use is limited to something special like school plays. However, in Europe and North America, creative drama, Drama in Education (DIE), process drama, and other forms of drama have been introduced (Koyabashi, et al., 2006).

In second language acquisition, Stern

(2006) claims that drama activities increase the communicative competence of second language learners. In addition, in the field of child development, creative dramatics encourages the maturation and growth of creative capacity.

### 1.2 Purpose

In Japan, due to misconceptions about drama, there are only a few cases in which it has been incorporated into education, so there is still room for research on its use in elementary school English teaching. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the effects of incorporating drama into elementary school English education.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

The participants were 70 pupils (aged 11-12) from two 6th grade classes (35 pupils per class) at a public elementary school in Osaka, Japan. They participated in the drama workshops sponsored by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan.

### 2.2 Data

The drama workshops lasted for a total of four days (i.e., September 3, November 12 and 19, December 3, 2022) including four 100-minute classes, including a final presentation of about 30 minutes. At the final presentation, the principal, teachers from the city board of education, teachers in the school, and students from each other's class watched the final presentations. A few days after the play ended, the pupils wrote a 400-word essay in Japanese, their first language.

## 2.3 Procedure

The workshops generally were conducted in the following order (Ikari, et al., 2022).

(1) Reviewing the story (characters, history of the story, overall flow, etc.)

The title of the workshop was *The Lion King*. At the beginning of the workshop, the instructor gave pupils an overall understanding of the whole story and its characters.

(2) Deciding the role

Pupils chose the role they wanted to play. If there was any inconvenience, it was resolved within the workshop.

(3) Introducing songs and dances

Singing and dancing were often done as a whole class and this helped to create class unity.

(4) Introducing dialogues for each scene

Pupils with roles in each scene came onto the stage, and the instructor introduced their lines orally.

(5) Connecting scenes

The play consisted of several scenes. Scene changes were practiced many times to prevent confusion in switching from scene to scene.

(6) Deepening the scenes

Deepening the scene meant that each individual understood and entirely acted out his or her role, bringing the scene to life. This method was intended to create individuality, assimilate with the role, and understand the character deeply.

(7) Doing rehearsals

In rehearsals, pupils performed the play from beginning to end. The instructor told the pupils that they may forget the lines, but that once the play has begun, they must work together to finish it, and the show must go on.

(8) Final performance

They completed the presentation by themselves without anyone's help.

## 3 Results

The pupils wrote in their essays what they had learned and felt from participating in the drama. The following are some of their comments translated into English:

- On usual days I would have been embarrassed, but not today. For some reason, I felt good. I felt refreshed.
- In the beginning, everyone did not understand what was going on. We just tried our best to imitate. As we did this, I felt that our hearts became one.
- It got more fun with each line learned, and everyone was spirited and crisp in the rehearsal before the last performance. When everyone shouted "Roar!" together, I was really moved.
- It was difficult to memorize English dialogues. But with friends, I was able to learn them easily. When I said my lines with the movement, they came one after another.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

By working with their classmates, the pupils had to overcome several challenging hurdles such as English, acting, singing, and dancing. It was a precious experience for the children to feel that "if you work hard, you can achieve anything" and "you can change yourself." The fact that many of the pupils was not able to read the English script made them anxious; however, the instructor asked them whether they had understood the script as well as what made the characters say their lines. Through this instruction, the pupils had a greater understanding of the meaning of their lines.

As a final note, the experience of using English actively to create something together with their peers, rather than just studying textbooks, will have an impact on the pupils' subsequent learning of English.

## References

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