

Improving Student Engagement and Growth Through Drama Workshops in Elementary School Language Education

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Abstract

In Japan, four years have passed since elementary school foreign language classes (2020) were introduced, along with the use of textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). Under the movement of work-style reform, specialized English instructors are currently teaching English in place of homeroom teachers. Due to an increase in the teaching content of the textbooks, the instructors have been struggling to motivate their pupils. Under such circumstances, this study aims to examine how drama workshops have helped pupils grow as both individuals and English learners. The participants in this study were 4th, 5th, and 6th graders from three public elementary schools in the Kansai region as part of the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs' project for fostering children's communication skills through culture and the arts. The results of the pre- and post- questionnaires and the comments on the reflection papers showed how they felt and grew through the workshops. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of incorporating drama education into elementary school foreign language classes.

Keywords

drama workshops, elementary schools in Japan, student engagement, pupils' growth

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In response to the deliberations of the Central Education Council, MEXT is currently endeavoring to enhance meticulous and systematic guidance in middle school education, particularly in the subjects of foreign languages

(English), science, mathematics, and P.E. This effort involves prioritizing specialized instruction to ensure a seamless connection to students' learning experiences. To achieve this, the government and local authorities have been actively recruiting specialized instructors, resulting in a significant surge in their numbers. Depending on the school, full-time specialized instructors are working under a demanding condition of teaching 24 lessons per week. They face challenges in delivering lessons from expanded textbooks while striving to maintain pupils' motivation for learning.

1.2 Student engagement

Student engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020) is receiving increasing attention as an approach to foster proactive learning. When student engagement is promoted, several benefits arise, such as 1) cultivating positive group dynamics and classroom culture, 2) enhancing Trust, Empathy, and Acceptance (TEA) among learners, and 3) nurturing a culture of collaboration and mutual support. Through the process of creating dramas, student engagement occurs naturally, leading to a sense of achievement in language usage beyond mere text comprehension, ultimately fostering increased motivation for learning.

In this study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How did the pupils' motivation to speak English change after participating in the drama workshops (hereafter referred to as DWS) at the three public elementary schools?

RQ2: What were the perceived growth and improvements among the pupils after engaging in the DWS?

RQ3: How did the teachers perceive the impact of DWS on pupils' motivation and the need for drama in education?

2 This Study

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

Table 1 below shows three selected public elementary schools in the Kansai region that conducted drama workshops after receiving the 2022 cultural agency project grant.

Table 1

Details of three public elementary schools

	WS Date	Grade	Class	N	Title
A	Nov. 4, 18, 22, and 24, 2022	4th	4	125	The Lion King
B	Dec. 2, 20, and 21, 2022, Jan. 13, and 26, 2023	5th	3	86	Peter Pan
C	Nov. 16, 17, Dec. 7, 8, 2022	6th	3	95	The Lion King

2.1.2 Data

The following data was collected for analysis in this study:

1. Pre and post surveys (for the pupils)
2. Post survey (for homeroom teachers)
3. Pupils' reflection sheets
4. Pupils' written comments after DWS
5. Photos and videos taken during DWS

Items 1 to 4 were collected by the homeroom teachers. Item 5 was conducted by the workshop facilitators' staff. Here, the results on items 1 and 2 are reported briefly.

3 Results

3.1 RQ1

A two-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on one questionnaire item (*Do you like to speak English?*, 5 Likert-type item), using SPSS (ver. 29), to examine the differences between schools and time periods (pre and post) at the alpha level of .05. No significant interaction effect was observed between schools and time periods ($F(2,221) = 1.280, p = .280$). However, a significant main effect of school was found ($F(2, 221) = 6.225, p = .002, \eta^2 = .053$), indicating a moderate effect size. Post hoc tests

revealed significant differences between School A and School B ($p = .013$), as well as between School A and School C ($p = .011$). Additionally, the main effect of time period was significant ($F(1, 221) = 6.245, p = .013, \eta^2 = .027$), suggesting a small effect size.

3.2 RQ2

Analysis of open-ended responses after the workshop using the KJ method revealed the presence of factors related to self-efficacy, self-directed learning, awareness of personal change, and enjoyment of drama.

3.3 RQ3

Below are some comments from the homeroom teachers.

- I saw faces that I don't normally see in the regular classroom.
- Even though we faced challenges and conflicts at times, the whole class was able to grow together.

From these comments, it was clear that the pupils had experienced significant growth through this drama workshop and had gained valuable experiences that were different from their usual routines.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In all elementary schools, the desire to speak English increased after the drama workshop. It is believed that the collaborative process of creating dramas with classmates inevitably triggers student engagement. Just sitting at a desk and studying is not enough, and working together with classmates motivates each pupil to do their best. Providing experiences where pupils can speak English, exert themselves, and have fun is considered essential in elementary school English education.

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References

- Mercer, S., & Dörnyei, Z. (2020). *Engage Language Learning in Contemporary Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.