

# **A Comparative Study of the Influence of English Drama Course on English Oral Ability of Primary School Students-- A Case Study of Two Primary Schools**

Wang Yihua, Feng Yang

English Language School of Zhejiang International Studies University, Hangzhou, China, 310023

okyy998@163.com

## **Abstract**

English drama course is a school-based course selected by some primary and secondary schools. Hangzhou New Century School has offered two class hours of English drama course every week in addition to the regular English teaching, while Hangzhou Jindu Changtian Primary School only offers traditional English course, and both schools have offered English classes since Grade One. Through the investigation and comparison of 268 fifth-grade primary school students in these two schools, it is found that the New Century School English drama teaching mode is vivid and diverse, which is deeply loved by the students. The students' oral practice time, drama role play times, spoken ability and confidence and enthusiasm of English learning are greatly higher than those of students in Jindu Changtian Primary School. The average oral test score of students in the New Century is 77.60, which is 85% higher than that of Changtian Primary School; the oral accuracy, pronunciation and intonation, fluency, and the score and total score of independent performance of drama roles for students in the New Century are also in significant advantages, and the performance score is three times higher than that of students in Jindu. Therefore, it is suggested that English drama courses or extracurricular interest activities should be widely offered in primary schools, and drama teaching method should be actively adopted in English teaching, so as to fully mobilize students' enthusiasm for English learning, promote the development of oral English ability and cultivate the spirit of innovation and team cooperation.

**Keywords:** English drama course; Oral ability of primary school students; Comparative study

## **1. Introduction**

Educational drama comes from drama in education, which teaches subject knowledge through drama and integrates theatrical elements in education (Zhang Xiaohua, 2017). English drama education originated in England and has been fully developed and widely used in basic education in Europe and the United States and other countries (Tingting Li, 2018). In the 1960s, Heathcote, a British drama education scholar, first proposed the concept of drama-in-education (Drama-in-Education). Drama-in-Education is a kind of multi-perspective interactive teaching, starting from activating multiple senses, strengthening observation, triggering imagination and creativity, and then developing higher-level thinking, which is characterized by equality, openness and dialogue. It requires teachers to use theatrical methods, such as: improvisation, role-playing, situational dialogue performance, textbook drama rehearsal, reading text in roles, and imitation to carry out teaching work (Feng Dongyan & Feng Shengyao, 2019).

Inspired by the influence of European and American countries, China began to try to integrate English

drama into the teaching system, which has evolved into a popular English teaching and learning method in recent years through absorption and localization. The reform of China's new curriculum standards put forward the "experiential" teaching, emphasizing the student-centered classroom. However, at present, drama-in-education in China is categorized under arts education and regarded as a non-mainstream teaching category, with no clear and independent curriculum standards and complete and mature teaching materials to support it. Drama-in-education in China mainly focuses on literary appreciation, in which the teaching center is around the analysis and evaluation of dramatic texts in a purely literary way, with a single teaching format and a lack of the most essential aspects of drama education such as the practical aspects of performance (Wang Qiang et al., 2016). Moreover, most of the studies of English drama mainly focus on improving students' creativity and performance ability, without concentrating on the improvement of English application and English cultural awareness (Chen Yuanyuan, 2017).

In recent years, some private primary schools in China, such as Hangzhou New Century Foreign Language School, have set up a school-based English drama curriculum for students in grades one to six twice a week, and have introduced foreign drama teaching materials for localized exploration and practice. The drama program is designed and arranged by Chinese and foreign teachers in cooperation with each other. The school's English drama program has been widely recognized by students and parents, and has become a highlight in the enrollment of high-quality private schools.

In this context, the researcher wished to explore and analyze the impact of the English drama class on the development of primary school students' oral English skills by conducting a comparative study between this school and Jindu Changtian Primary School, a high-quality public primary school in Hangzhou that does not have an English drama class. Although the two primary schools are public and private respectively, they are both local quality primary schools with better student population and teaching quality.

The study was conducted on the fifth grade students of these two schools. Through English speaking ability tests, questionnaire surveys and group interviews, the study explores the effects of the English drama class on the development of primary and secondary school students' speaking ability and provides valuable reference cases for frontline primary and secondary English teachers to reform their classroom teaching of oral English.

## **2. Research Contents and Methods**

### **2.1 Research question**

The main questions explored in this study are: (1) What is the impact of English drama course on the oral English development of primary and secondary school students? (2) Are there any limitations? What should the teachers pay attention to in teaching? (3) Is it of value for promotion in primary schools?

### **2.2 Research objects**

Three fifth-grade classes of the students from Hangzhou New Century School and Hangzhou Jindu Changtian Elementary School were randomly selected for the survey, all of whom began learning English in the first grade. New Century School offers 2 credit hours of English Drama class per week in addition to the regular English curriculum, while Jindu Changtian Elementary School offers only the regular English curriculum.

### **2.3 Research methods**

In this study, questionnaires and interviews were used to find out the recognition and opinions of teachers and students of the two primary schools on the English drama class. Tests were used to find out the students' English speaking ability in the two primary schools, and mathematical and statistical methods and qualitative analysis were adopted to compare and analyze the relationship between the English drama class and the students' English speaking ability to answer all the research questions.

## 2.4 Research tool

(1) A *Questionnaire (students) on the Impact of the English Drama Curriculum on Primary School Students' Speaking Ability* (27 questions in 5 dimensions) and an *Interview Outline (students and teachers) on the Impact of the English Drama Curriculum on Students' Speaking Ability* (5 topics each) were developed to investigate the influence of the English drama curriculum on primary school students' speaking learning and students' perceptions of the English drama curriculum.

(2) The Primary Oral English Proficiency Test was developed to test and analyse the relationship between the oral proficiency of the respondents in two primary schools and the English drama curriculum. The questions were based on the Cambridge PET Speaking Test (ESOL Examinations Division, 2014), with the addition of an English drama character self-acting item, and the test lasted 8-10 minutes. The scoring criteria included 25 marks out of 100 for each of the four areas of oral response accuracy, tone of voice, fluency and independent performance of the drama role.

The test scale and questionnaire have been tried and expertly modified, and the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient is greater than 0.85, which has a high degree of reliability.

## 3. Results and Analysis

A total of 268 students from three randomly selected classes in each of the two schools in Grade 5 were tested and surveyed, 137 from New Century School and 131 from Jindu Changtian Primary School.

### 3.1 Results and analysis of questionnaire survey

A total of 268 questionnaires were distributed in the two schools, of which 137 were distributed in New Century School and 134 were returned, with a 97.81% return rate; 131 were distributed in Jindu Changtian Primary School and 124 were returned, with a 94.66% return rate.

Hangzhou New Century Foreign Language School offers an English drama course from Grade 1. Grade 5 students have already had extensive experience in English drama performances. Jindu Changtian Elementary School does not offer English drama course, but the survey found that only 26.4% of the students had no experience with English drama at all, and nearly 50% had taken drama training courses outside of school. 20% of the students had the experience of performing on stage, but most of them were still shy and felt nervous when they went on stage.

The questionnaire was administered on three dimensions: self-evaluation of speaking level, students' preference for the drama course, and students' expectations of the drama course, the results of which are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Main Findings of the Two Schools

Survey Items	Survey subjects	New Century	Jindu Changtian	Difference(%)	Significance P Value
1.Number of people who are more confident about their spoken English (%)		97, 72.39	73, 58.87	11.52	.000
2.Number of people who are afraid to speak in poorly spoken English (%)		22, 16.42	35, 28.23	-11.81	.000
3. Number of people who enjoy and participate in English drama performances(%)		102, 76.12	58, 46.77	29.35	.000
4.Number of participants in English drama		16, 11.94	53, 42.74	-30.80	.000

training outside of school(%)				
5.Number of students wishing to have 1 English drama class per day(%)	107, 79.85	82, 66.13	13.72	.000
6.Number of people who believe that English drama courses are effective in improving speaking and acting skills and fostering a sense of teamwork(%)	113, 84.33	86, 69.35	14.98	.000
7. Average number of short plays in English that can be performed per person	5.7	0.41	1290.24	.000
8.Average weekly practice time(hour)	3.9	0.63	519.05	.000

Seventy-two per cent of students in the New Century felt more confident in speaking English, 13 per cent more than the 59 per cent in Jindu Changtian, while 16 per cent of students in the New Century felt less confident in speaking English, 12 per cent less than the 28 per cent in Jindu Changtian. 76% of students in the New Century enjoyed participating in English drama performances, 29% more than Jindu Changtian's 47%, and 84% of students in the New Century felt that English drama course were effective in improving their speaking and acting skills and fostering teamwork, 15% more than Jindu Changtian's 69%. 80% of New Century students would like to have an English drama class every day, 14% more than the 66% in Jindu Changtian; the average number of English short plays a student can perform in the New Century is 5.7, with an average of more than one play performed per year, 13 times more than the 0.41 in Jindu Changtian. The average number of hours of extracurricular oral language practice per week for students in the New Century is 3.9 hours, with an average of more than half an hour per day, five times higher than the 0.63 hours in the Jindu Changtian.

It can be seen that the students in the New Century have a high rate of confidence in speaking English and fewer are afraid to speak due to poor oral English. The majority of students believe that English drama course are very effective in helping them to overcome their fears, form a good oral self-esteem, develop an interest in English, improve their speaking and acting skills, and develop a sense of teamwork, which is closely related to the fact that they spend more than half an hour a day practicing spoken English outside the class.

At the same time, the number of students taking English drama training outside the school in the New Century is 12%, 31% lower than the 13% in Changtian, which indicates that the number of students taking extracurricular interest classes after private schools offer special courses will decrease significantly, while the number of students taking extracurricular training will increase significantly if public primary schools are not allowed to offer interest classes. This shows that the cultivation of special interests is a public demand, and that the parents do not feel gratitude for the reduction of the burden of public primary schools, which deserves deep consideration by the education policy-making department.

## 3.2 Results and analysis of interviews

### 3.2.1 Interviews with teachers

In a group interview with five randomly selected English teachers from each school, the teachers at Changtian Primary School said that drama course belonged to the category of extracurricular development and interest cultivation, which could not be mentioned in the same breath with the main subject, and that it was difficult to offer them in public primary schools at present. New Century teachers believed that English drama course could be taught through lively and fun activities, encouraging students to speak up and improve their fluency, and not only helping students broaden their knowledge of different histories, cultures, literature, etc., but also integrating various listening, speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills effectively and skillfully to expand students' comprehensive abilities. Students not only took full advantage of class time in the school-based

curriculum, but also had the opportunity to rehearse plays in their spare time. This course was a great way to improve class cohesion, cooperation and develop potential and teamwork. English drama course not only helped the students practice spoken English, but also led students to actively think about what kind of scenario made sense. Did they enjoy the character? How would they express it? and so on. Students could exercise their social skills while creating a script to add their own understanding, connecting themselves through the topic and taking responsibility. Teachers should encourage their students, even if they didn't present it well, It's the courage to express themselves that matters.

### 3.2.2 Interviews with students

The group interviews with 20 randomly selected students from each of the two schools revealed that the students believed that they could learn more authentic English in the English drama course by being more amusing and exaggerated, and that they liked the foreign teachers because of their humorous and exaggerated expressions and more authentic speaking. Regardless of whether the English drama was offered as a curriculum or as an interest activity, they would like to have a class every afternoon to rehearse their drama.

The children were most interested in the jungle expedition and adventure theatre genres, followed by fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White, Sound of Music cabaret, and traditional Chinese cultural stories such as Journey to the West and Wu Song fighting a tiger. Students were less interested in Shakespeare's plays such as Romeo and Juliet. Many students liked to pick their favorite plays and rehearse them in groups, hoping that each group member would have a different job to do, write, revise and rehearse, and that each participant would be the protagonist; however, they did not like the teacher's uniform script and designated protagonist. Some students had too few opportunities to perform and felt unappreciated and neglected.

Boys were far more expressive and active than girls. And many girls were somewhat neglected because they were shy and less expressive. Sometimes the teachers criticized the timid students because of their strict requirements, resulting in students being scared to cry.

The researchers believe that the purpose of English drama course or activities is to develop students' English speaking and acting skills, not to perform for the sake of performing. Teachers should give every child the opportunity to perform and show off, and should provide different forms of guidance according to the characteristics of each student. For example, for introverted students, encouragement and guidance can be used as much as possible, while for reckless and impulsive students, criticism and correction can be used.

### 3.3 Test results and analysis of students' oral English proficiency

The Oral English Proficiency Test for Primary Schools was used to test the oral proficiency of the respondents in the two schools. The scoring criteria included the accuracy of oral answers, intonation of voice, fluency and independent performance of dramatic roles, with 25 points each, out of 100 points. The results were as follows:

Table 2. Comparison of Test Results of Oral Proficiency between Two Schools

Test Object	New Century	Jindu Changtian	Difference	Significance
Test Items	Average Score	Average Score	(%)	P Value
Accuracy rate	16.74	12.36	35.44	.000
Pronunciation and intonation	20.36	11.67	74.46	.000
Fluency	18.03	12.55	43.67	.000
Role performance	22.47	5.28	325.57	.000
Total average	77.60	41.86	85.38	.000

It can be seen from the table above that both students in Grade 5, who started learning English in Grade 1, were taught English drama for 2 hours a week in addition to traditional English at New Century School, while

only traditional English was taught at Jindu Changtian Primary School. The average score of the New Century School students in the oral test was 77.60, which was 85% higher than the 41.86 scores of Jindu Changtian Primary School. The differences in the four areas of accuracy, intonation, fluency and dramatic role-playing were significant, especially in dramatic role-playing, which was more than three times higher than the total score. The impact of the English drama course on the students' English speaking ability was clear to all.

The test results also objectively confirmed the results of the previous questionnaire interviews, which showed that the English drama program had a great effect on the development of the students' oral language skills.

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendation

### 4.1 Conclusion

(1) It was found that the English teaching model of the New Century School, which offered English drama course, was richer than that of Jindu Changtian School in terms of students' speaking practice time, number of drama role played, personal speaking ability, and confidence and motivation in learning English.

(2) The average score of the New Century School students in the oral English proficiency test was 77.60, 85% higher than the 41.86 of Jindu Changtian Primary School students. The differences in the four areas of accuracy of response, intonation of voice, fluency, and independent performance of dramatic roles were significant, especially in dramatic role-playing, which was three times higher than the total score.

(3) English drama course were very popular among primary school students, which increased their interest in learning English, effectively promoted the development of oral English skills, and improved their acting ability and cultivated a sense of teamwork.

(4) The survey found that 43% of students in public primary schools that did not have English drama course had participated in extra-curricular English drama interest classes; over 60% of the students in both schools wished to have one English drama performance lesson or activity in the afternoon every day, and wished to be able to make up their own drama, so that every student could be the main character.

### 4.2 Recommendation

(1) It is recommended that English drama course be widely conducted in primary and middle schools. The schools that are temporarily unable to do so can conduct through after-school interest activities. At the same time, drama role-playing and memorization of lines can be used to motivate the students to take the initiative in learning English and to learn English boldly through acting games.

(2) The purpose of the English drama course or activity is to develop students' oral and acting skills, not to perform for the sake of performing. The teachers should give every child an opportunity to fully perform and demonstrate, encourage the child to make a breakthrough, to make bold attempts, to intuitively perceive, to create independently, to design their own actions and lines, and to involve the whole class with no one left behind. The teachers should not only focus on oral English practice, but also on cultivating students' teamwork and creativity, respecting and accommodating students, and de-activating protagonists so that all children can have ample opportunities to practice acting.

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### **Biography**

Wang Yihua, undergraduate of English Language School of Zhejiang International Studies University, Research interests: English teaching.

Feng Yang( correspondence author), Lecturer (PhD), of English Language School of Zhejiang International Studies University, Research interests: English teaching.