

# EXPLORING THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ENGLISH DRAMA PROJECT CLASS IN SUPPORTING SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AT THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates the perceptions of drama project on speaking performance of English major students at Thainguyen University. To achieve the desired aims of the current study, the researcher employed qualitative methods with twenty-nine students at School of Foreign Languages. They were involved in one drama project class over 15 weeks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. The findings revealed that most of the students perceived EDP as an effective approach and acknowledged its role in supporting their speaking performances. They expressed significant improvements in pronunciation, intonation, fluency due to frequent practices. However, some challenges were also faced by the students, including nervousness, and self-doubt. This study offers valuable insights and suggestions for students, educators, and future researchers.*

**Keyword:** *drama project, speaking performance, English major students, perception, improvements.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, project-based learning (PBL) has been part of educational practice, when it was heavily impacted by the communicative strategy (Du & Han, 2016). Among a wide range of project-based activities used in language learning, drama projects have been recognized as an engaging and effective strategy for promoting language use and communication. Researchers in drama education such as Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote have highlighted the role of drama in fostering communication, imagination, and emotional engagement in the learning process (Bolton, 1984; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). Through activities such as script reading, rehearsal, and performance, students are encouraged to practice pronunciation, intonation, and expressive language in authentic contexts.

By allowing students to participate in subject specific discourse in high relevant circumstances, drama is thought to be a method for engaging students in interactive pedagogy and active learning (Shraiber & Yaroslavova, 2015).

At School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, the English Drama Project (EDP) course is designed to provide students with opportunities to practice English through theatrical performance. In this course, students collaborate in groups to develop and perform English dramas, engaging in activities such as

script preparation, role assignment, rehearsal, and final performance. These activities require frequent oral interaction, which may help students improve their speaking fluency, pronunciation, and confidence in using English.

However, the effectiveness of such pedagogical approaches depends not only on the instructional design but also on students' perceptions and learning experiences. Studies done on the usage of PBL within the English language classroom have increased in recent years, however, there still exist gaps from students' perspectives. Therefore, this study aims to explore students' perceptions of the English Drama Project subject in supporting their speaking performance at Thai Nguyen University.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Literature Review

PBL is an instructional approach in which students learn by engaging in projects. These projects are complex tasks built around challenging questions or problems, requiring learners to participate in design, problem-solving, decision-making, and investigative activities. Students work with a considerable degree of independence over an extended period, ultimately producing realistic products or presentations.

### **2.1.1. Drama Project**

Drama is a term that can be defined in a variety of ways. Hubbard et al. (1986) describe this term as "a diverse range of oral activities that incorporate an element of creativity," but they also state that "most importantly, it should be a communicative activity in which the student makes the choice." Moreover, drama is not only a performance, but it is a final product or output of a whole learning process (Fuentes, 2010, p.321)

At Thainguayen University, Drama Project is a two-credit course for students majoring at English Language or English Education. In the project, students in groups of four or five are required to write a play, practice it, and perform it at the end of the term.

### **2.1.2. Speaking performance**

Speaking performance is known as the visible ability of students to speak in a meaningful and understandable way when interacting with others in real time. Among its interrelated dimensions are fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, lexical breadth, and interactional competence. Foundational definitions emphasize the grammatical, lexical, and discourse level abilities necessary for effective communication (Brown, 2004; Luoma, 2004). In brief, speaking performance in an EFL context; therefore, requires not only linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) but also the perceptual-cognitive ability to process and produce spoken language appropriately. This allows learners to express ideas, respond to others, and participate in meaningful exchanges that are necessary for academic, professional, and everyday communication.

This study uses widely accepted speaking performance components that measure both linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness in order to give a thorough and multifaceted evaluation of learners' oral skills. Previous studies have highlighted the following components as crucial markers of overall speaking quality.

The benefits of drama in enhancing speaking performance has recently emerged as a promising teaching technique. Afana (2012) showed that educational drama intervention has a positive

impact on enhancing ninth graders' speaking skills at UNRWA schools in Gaza. Furthermore, Borgde (2007) realized that drama activities are helpful in teaching German to various groups of students.

### **2.1.3 Students' perceptions**

Perception is a result of experience about object, event, and relation which is obtained through concluding specific information into meaningful messages (Setiawan, 2014). Furthermore, it is a process of a sign which is organized to make structural picture about a situation, and it can conclude about the result of someone's observation about something in the area, so people can make positive or negative feedbacks or responses about the information. Those things happen after someone watches or observes some phenomenon in their area or environment. Therefore, it can be concluded that students' perception is derived from the information they learn, which is subsequently witnessed through phenomena. This enables students to react positively or negatively to the knowledge they have learned.

## **2.2 Methodology**

### **2.2.1 Participants**

Twenty-nine first-year students who were studying at School of Foreign Languages, Thainguayen University in the first term of academic year 2025-2026 participated in the research. They were opted because the researcher was assigned to teach them. The age of the participants was around 19 to 21 years old. All of the participants demonstrated English proficiency at the IELTS band score level of 6.0 to 7.0.

### **2.2.2 Procedures**

At TNU, participants were randomly selected into Group A and Group B in the first meeting of the EDP class. After that, Group A & B were also randomly divided into six smaller groups numbered from 1 to 3 and from 4 to 6 in Group B. Due to the subdivision, in the following parts, the researcher would like to replace the term "small group" by "team" to avoid confusion with group A and group B.

In other words, Group A consisted of teams 1,2,3 and teams 4,5,6 belonged to Group B. When this

step was accomplished, the students in Group A were allowed to go home. Group B were informed the Project, after that they were asked to read stories or novels at home to select the one they were most interested in and to write a draft for the first scene of the play after they had been guided the way to write a drama scene. In the meetings, the researcher also informed them the way to work together.

Due to meetings' time allowance, the researcher did not have time to check their writing at class; thus, after each meeting, the teams had to accomplish the assigned work before the next meeting, and they were required to email the researcher their work before the following meeting. The researcher checked their scenario and gave the teams comments and guided them to do next steps in the homework checking process which usually lasted for about 30 minutes at the beginning.

### **2.2.3 Data Collection Instrument and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants. In (Payne, 2004), the author illustrated that semi-structured interviews were used because of its flexibility, which enables participants to elaborate on relevant themes and introduce new ones. At the request of the participants, the interviews were held in either Vietnamese or English. *What is your opinion of the EDP course?* was the guiding question posed to the participants. The researcher first familiarized herself with the data by reading the interview transcripts. She then undertook a systematic analysis of the data by creating preliminary codes. Following that, the researcher went over the coded data to hunt for patterns or overlaps.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Results**

#### **3.1.1. Students' opinions about the effectiveness of EDP in supporting speaking their performance**

When questioned about the EDP class, participants expressed favourable attitudes toward this one. They also agreed that such classroom activities supported their language learning by enhancing vocabulary and grammar

development, fostering collaborative learning, and improving confidence as well as interactive communication skills.

Most of the students found EDP to be a helpful tool for supporting their speaking performance. They emphasized the substantial role of drama in enhancing their speaking skills, particularly in expanding vocabulary, refining pronunciation, improving fluency, and boosting overall confidence. Furthermore, several students reported that participation in the EDP class facilitated the development of self-assurance through consistent practice and engagement in improvisational activities during performances.

*"It really gets us involved in speaking through role play. It feels more real than other kinds because everything happens in real time—you can't just redo it—so it feels more serious. Plus, we have to speak in front of a lot of people."* (S1)

*"I feel like my speaking skills are really improving. I'm learning new words, picking up how to say them correctly, and getting better at pronunciation overall."* (S10)

*...I learn a lot of things from this project. I gain confidence. After working on drama project, I have developed my confidence in speaking in public...."*(S11)

#### **3.1.2. Students' preferences of the effectiveness of EDP compared to other activities**

Most of the students reported that drama project was helpful and more effective compared to other activities since in EDP, they were not only required to use various aspects of speaking but also involving creativity and collaboration which helped the students more comfortable to use English. Furthermore, they expressed how they broke the language barrier and emotional enhancement.

*"I'd say it's the most effective speaking activity in the classroom. When we were in EDP class, we could really break the language barrier. We also got a clear sense of the context first, and could even memorize most of the dialogues."*(S17)

*"I love acting so much, I take it personally effective because I enjoy it every minute and every moment."*

*It helps me a lot to develop my speaking abilities.”(S6)*

*“When I take part in EDP class, I feel it’s much more fun and interesting. I enjoy doing things together, so speaking and preparing with others is way better than normal activities.”.(S12)*

### *3.1.3. Students’ Challenges and difficulties during the Drama project*

The most commonly reported challenges among students were nervousness and a lack of confidence. Many struggled to speak in front of large audiences and were required to adjust their tone, volume, and facial expressions. Additionally, memorizing lengthy lines and delivering them naturally was also identified as a significant difficulty in the EDP.

*“It’s about the confidence. We need to practice more, so that we are confident enough to do our play. Many people are watching us, we need to build confidence from the practicing.”(S3)*

*“I am very lack of confidence and I cannot speak loudly but we are being forced to do so.”(S1)*

### **3.1.4 Specific Aspects of Speaking Skill that improved through EDP**

Students found pronunciation and intonation are the most significantly enhanced skill. Additionally, some participants expressed their vocabulary were improved by reading, comprehending and practicing the dialogue frequently.

*“I think my pronunciation got improved because my lecturer and my friends often corrected them during the practice”(S7)*

*“Rehearsals made me have more confidence. Before working on drama project, I seldom dared to speak English. However, the project encouraged me to be confident in speaking on stage and in front of other people. It taught me many things which I could bring to apply in my life such as speaking skills.”(S27)*

*“I would say fluency has definitely improved—especially in being able to speak at length and handle longer dialogues more effectively.”(S2)*

## **3.2 Discussion**

Based on the results, the majority of the students had positive perceptions about EDP who served as a tool for supporting their speaking performance. Most of them illustrated that participated in EDP class helped them practice speaking in an interactive way and improve various aspects of their communication abilities. These findings are similar with the previous study from Nezami (2018) which revealed that positive attitudes of the students in EDP class.

Furthermore, the interactive aspect of EDP encouraged collaborative learning and feedbacks, creating a supportive learning environment. This aligned with the research of Alasmari and Alshae’el (2020) which claimed that collaborative learning from drama project support students to engage and foster their language.

These findings are also consistent with those reported by Gill (2013), which indicated that students showed the interest in EDP class as they provided opportunities to practice and enhance oral skills while also increasing confidence in speaking English.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

According to the study's findings, EDP class is advantageous and it could enhance students' speaking abilities for the below reasons. First and foremost, EDP gave students lots of chances to practice speaking English gradually. Second, it provided the students with functional context to use their speech as well as their vocabulary. Third, it improved students' emotional aspects, which encouraged them to talk and gave them greater self-assurance. Finally, research skills and learner autonomy were highlighted as advantages of employing project-based education with a dramatic focus. It's worth noting that the project-based learning and acting processes demonstrated students' cooperative working abilities, which will eventually help them in other areas of their education.

It is recommended that students should experience various dramatic activities during school and teachers should be trained on how to implement the drama approach effectively. Further research is

needed to investigate the effectiveness of the EDP in improving the overall English proficiency of learners.

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