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Hazwah Puadi Ilyas

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Drama in the EFL Classroom: Critical Review of the Literature

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Drama in the EFL Classroom: Critical Review of the Literature

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This article presents critical review of three empirical studies on the use of drama in language learning. Results of those studies are very supportive to integrate drama into EFL. Also, the results of the studies are in agreement with the ideas stating that drama can give positive contributions to students' language proficiency. In fact, apart from improving students' language skills, drama can promote collaboration and negotiation. Given the advantages of using drama in the EFL classroom shown by those studies, there is little information concerning the use of drama in the Indonesian EFL.

Keywords: drama, EFL, critical review

Artikel ini tentang tinjauan kritis tiga penelitian empiris tentang penggunaan drama dalam pembelajaran bahasa. Hasil dari penelitian tersebut sangat mendukung penggunaan drama dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris untuk penutur asing (EFL). Hasil penelitian tersebut juga sama dengan gagasan yang menyatakan bahwa drama dapat memberikan kontribusi positif terhadap penguasaan bahasa. Pada kenyataannya, selain meningkatkan kemampuan bahasa siswa, drama dapat mempromosikan kolaborasi dan negosiasi. Meskipun banyak keuntungan penggunaan drama dalam EFL yang ditunjukkan oleh penelitian tersebut, informasi tentang penggunaan drama dalam EFL di Indonesia masih belum banyak.

INTRODUCTION

The role of literature in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom has been acknowledged by many authors (e.g. Campbell, 1987; Ilyas, 2016; Melin, 2010; Picken, 2005; Shelton-Strong, 2012; Yang, 2002). The term EFL herein also refers to ESL (English as a Second Language). EFL teachers can design classroom activities which can, for instance, promote tolerance & critical thinking (Ilyas, 2016) and language acquisition (Shelton-Strong,

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2012). In a study conducted by Yang (2002) on using science fiction in the EFL classroom, the author found that:

All students said that discussion based on reading a novel was more substantial than other hypothetical problems students needed to solve in other language courses. They said that the novel offered futuristic dilemmas and conflicts which parallel those in present-day society in some way. One student said that when others commented differently from him, he was very eager to counter-argue. (p. 56)

Drama, which belongs to literature, can be beneficial in the EFL classroom. Since drama has characters with their own characteristics, it can be used for classroom discussion, for example. Apart from encouraging speaking skills, such an activity can encourage students' critical thinking if followed by reasoning. However, compared to other fictional works such as novel and poetry, drama might not be popular in the EFL classroom. This article, therefore, touches this issue. It starts with how authors perceive drama in EFL. Then it reviews empirical studies on drama used in language learning context, followed by my critical reflection on the studies. In so doing, I expect there would be more studies investigating the use of drama in the EFL classroom.

DRAMA IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Authors' Beliefs in Drama in EFL

Hubbard, Jones, Thornton and Wheeler (1986) propose a definition of drama as "a wide range of oral activities that have an element of creativity present" (p. 317). They emphasized the oral and creative side of drama. In terms of oral activities, drama can take several forms when employed in a language classroom. Mime, role-playing, simulation, various forms of dialogues and dramatized story-telling are some examples of drama techniques (Davies, 1990). Mime, a short play without speech, can also be used in the EFL classroom. An English teacher can create a guessing game by asking students to guess what activity the mime is performing, for example.

Some authors argue that drama is potential to promote students' language proficiency in both first and second language classroom (e.g. Booth, 2005; Culham, 2002). In the second or foreign language classroom, students being asked to perform drama need to understand what the drama is about and what the characters in the drama are like by reading its content. This can improve their reading skill. When later they perform the drama, they need to speak clearly, thus improving their pronunciation.

Brash and Warnecke (2009) consider another form of drama, roleplay. They argue that roleplay has some advantages such as providing opportunities for all learners, making them feel relaxed and brave to make mistakes. They state:

Playing a role takes students away from routine activities and rehearsed language patterns in tutorials and focuses their energy on their own

experiences, thus also catering for different types of language learners. Absence of error correction during the activity challenges students to sustain communication for a longer period because participants experience a real need to communicate as opposed to acting out set communication patterns. Students dare to take risks and are willing to make mistakes. (p. 102)

Several authors have identified the benefits of drama. Their opinion needs to be proved by empirical research. As regards, the two sections below deal with the issue.

Empirical Studies on Drama in EFL

There have been some studies investigating the use of drama in the EFL classroom (Ntelioglou, 2011; Miccoli, 2003; Rew & Moon, 2013). Their studies show positive results of integrating drama into foreign/second language learning. The studies are reported below, followed by my critical review in the next section.

Rew and Moon (2013) conducted a study on the use of what they called a simple scripted play, a kind of dramatized storytelling. The study aimed to investigate the Korean primary students' learning of target expressions using English drama. To perform a one-hour play, students did some preparation for seven weeks, starting from reading and discussing the text in the first week to doing a rehearsal for each group in the seventh week. A pre-test and 2 post-tests were conducted, with post-test 1 aiming to see the improvement of the mastery of 37 target expressions and post-test 2 finding the students' ability to use the expressions in a different context.

The findings, according to Rew and Moon (2013), indicate some points. Firstly, English drama was effective for students to learn specific expressions, shown by the difference of mean score between pre-test (6.22) and post-test 1 (13.79). Secondly, both male and female students obtained similar benefits from English drama, challenging the myth stating that female students are better than male students with regard to drama. Thirdly, drama was beneficial for not only students with high English proficiency but also those with low English proficiency. Fourthly, students can use the expressions learned in drama in different situations, shown by the result of post-test 2.

Ntelioglou (2011) conducted ethnographic research investigating students' experiences in a drama-ESL classroom. Even though the real purpose of this research was to find how "drama pedagogy can be used to improve their (students) experiences of learning" (p. 596), this review focuses specifically on its role in ESL (English as a Second Language). The research was conducted at a Canadian high school for adults where drama-ESL was a compulsory course. There were 50 students in the course ranging from late 20s and early 30s. They came from several countries such as Iran, Iraq, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, China, Ethiopia, Russia, Bangladesh and Korea. In the research, the author had some challenges. They were students' absenteeism, students' inexperience with drama and their disinterest with drama.

As the focus of the research was investigating students' experiences of learning using drama, there were two points discussed: drama performances as identity texts and Multimodality & second language learning. What it means by 'drama performance as identity texts' is that the performance students create often describe their lives. With regard to this,

Ntelioglou (2011) found that students involved in creating the drama put their own stories and experiences using the new language. Multimodality in this research deals with the various “modes of meaning-making and communication (audio, visual, linguistic, spatial, performative, etc.)” (p. 596). Regarding this, the author argues that the course “provided a meaningful basis for the use of multiple modes of meaning-making” (p. 606). For example, students read the script, performed it, and wrote their own script. These activities show students’ various ways of meaning-making.

Miccoli (2003) conducted a case study investigating the use of drama in a university in Brazil. She said her idea was spurred by interactionist Di Pietro & actor Via and two scholars, Mezirow and Schon, who promote reflection in learning. Her study, therefore, aimed to see the effectiveness of drama combined with reflective activities; the data were gathered using portfolio, which encouraged reflection, and interview. The class lasted for 110 minutes with 37 students participating in the research. The students had to perform a play by the end of the term. The activity was divided into three stages: preliminary, intermediate and production. While in the preliminary stage, students were encouraged to have trust each other, in the intermediate stage they learned about and discussed the play before doing the final stage.

In her article, Miccoli presented what she named ‘learners’ voices,’ which was the excerpts from students’ portfolios. The excerpts can tell some information: students felt uncomfortable with the class in the beginning, their motivation to learn English increased, they improved their confidence by saying that they were ready to speak in front of people, they improved their language, they felt fine when having to work in group and they gave positive impression of acting (drama).

Reflections on the Studies

In general, Rew and Moon’s (2013) study is successful to show the benefits of drama in the EFL classroom. There are three noticeable results stated by them; however, information explaining what causes the results seems implicit. The first result is that drama is effective for students to learn specific expressions. According to the authors, there were reading & discussing processes and 7-week preparation before students performed the drama. There may be some explanation why students could internalise the target expressions. Firstly, students already understood the meaning of expressions during reading and discussing processes, and secondly, their understanding was reinforced by memorising process for seven weeks and drama performance. Memorisation plays a role in this regard, so it can be concluded that memorisation is still important in language learning. However, memorisation without understanding is like parroting, which is criticised in education nowadays since it cannot promote deep learning and critical thinking.

Another result of Rew and Moon’s (2013) study is that drama was beneficial for all levels of English proficiency. However, to what extent it is beneficial was not clearly explained by them. One possible answer why it is beneficial may be because drama was fun or they liked drama. It can be difficult to get benefits of a classroom activity if students do not like or enjoy the activity. Unfortunately, there was no information how students perceived drama in the beginning when the authors introduced this to students. One factor that needs to be taken into

account is how to encourage passive or shy students to get involved with drama performance. Besides, students with low level of English proficiency might find long sentences difficult.

As mentioned, the study by Ntelioglou (2011) did not focus on exploring ESL students' language improvement. There are, however, some findings of this ethnographic study which can be related to language learning context. For example, it is informed that students can learn vocabulary and improve their pronunciation. The characteristic of drama which requires clear pronunciation helps improve this aspect. Another finding is that through drama-creation activity, students can collaborate and negotiate. Even though collaboration and negotiation may not be directly related to language skill, since it is done in students' new language - English - it helps improve their language proficiency and promote communication skill. Finally, the study also reports that through the drama-ESL course, students' reading and writing skills improve. Writing skill improvement is from the activity asking students to create their own drama.

There are some insights that can be inferred from the findings of Ntelioglou's research considering the use of drama in the EFL classroom. First of all, drama can increase students' vocabulary and improve their pronunciation. Similar to the study by Rew and Moon (2013) stating that students can internalise target expressions through drama, the internalisation of vocabulary should be done by making students really understand what words/expressions mean. This can be done through classroom discussion. The role of teacher is pivotal, and both studies inform the teacher's involvement in making students understand the meaning of words/expressions. Second, drama can promote collaborative learning. When collaboration is conducted in a target language, students can increase their speaking skill, apart from promoting communication skill. Besides speaking, drama can promote reading and writing. Writing skill can improve if students are allowed to create their own drama.

The study conducted by Miccoli (2003) investigating drama and reflective portfolios shows that they can be used for emancipatory and transformative learning. This is shown by students' voices. However, excerpts showing the direct benefit of language learning are only a few as it may not be the main objective of the research. The excerpts provided, for example, simply touch the issue of vocabulary and speaking. It is understandable since doing the drama involves speaking and vocabulary understanding. Other positive benefits such as motivation and confidence improvement can be considered as the supporting factor of language learning.

The insights which can be derived from the findings of this study regarding the use of drama in EFL consist of two points. Firstly, similar two previous studies, drama in the EFL classroom can be beneficial to improve students' speaking skill and vocabulary. Secondly, drama can go beyond the classroom. It can help increase students' confidence when talking in front of people and their motivation to succeed, especially in language learning.

The three studies have been creative in exploring drama in the EFL classroom and shown positive effects drama can contribute to promoting language skills, improving vocabulary and pronunciation, encouraging collaborative learning and increasing students' confidence and motivation. Besides this, drama is beneficial for all levels of English proficiency. What has not yet been exploited might be the use of drama in the EFL classroom to encourage students' critical thinking and creativity, two skills in need of this 21st century.

CONCLUSIONS

Many authors have identified the importance of using drama in the EFL classroom. Empirical studies have also been supportive in integrating drama into EFL. The three studies reviewed above all deal with drama followed by its performance. As mentioned, there are some types of drama. Making simple dialogues and role play can be considered as drama. Therefore, drama in different forms needs to be explored.

In the Indonesian EFL context, there has been very little information with regard to the use drama. Studies on drama in Indonesian EFL need to be conducted to find students' perceptions, its effectiveness in English language teaching, and its relation with improving language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) and language components (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, etc.). Besides this, studies on drama in Indonesian EFL could be connected to the teaching of democracy, critical thinking and creativity. These three qualities have been officially listed in the educational objective of this country. Moreover, the teaching of English at schools could be more creative, fun and interesting.

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