

Eleventh-Graders' Perceptions of Learning Speaking with Drama Activities: A Case Study

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Abstract- Drama activities with the nature of creativity and imagination can bring the learning environment within four walls of classroom out into life-like contexts, thus enhancing language learners' communicative competence. After drama activities had been applied to three speaking classes at one public high school in Vietnam with the convenience sample of 125 eleventh-grade students, the researcher carried out a survey to examine how these participants perceived the benefits and difficulties of learning speaking with drama-based lessons. Based on the questionnaire results, the study indicated that most of the students felt interested and enthusiastic in drama activities, especially role-play and improvisation; besides, they also realized the positive effects of these activities on their speaking ability, pronunciation, fluency, self-confidence, and creativity. Yet, shyness, immature language input, limited time, L1 use were main problems of doing drama activities in the speaking classrooms perceived by the students. The paper was concluded with some practical recommendations.

Index Terms- *Eleventh-graders, perceptions, speaking, drama activities, Vietnam*

INTRODUCTION

Today's teaching methodology admonishes to catch learners' attention, to be engaging, but let them get involved in their education to the maximum at the same time. In an effort of enhancing learners' speaking motivation and performance, drama activities are seen as an alternative method these days (Aldavero, 2008; Atas, 2014; Conejeros & Fernandez, 2009; Gill, 2013; Khaemane, 2011; Thongnuan, 2011; Trivedi, 2013; Truong, 2019). For example, Khaemane (2011) suggests that dramatic activities could make the activities meaningful and lively for learners and at the same time they have more fun when getting involved in the activities. Also, Thongnuan (2011) discloses that learners can effectively improve their speaking skills through the dramatic activities because they can express their personal characters like their emotion, facial expression, tone, acting appropriately and they can use those conversations in real life. However, some language teachers seem to feel reluctant to use drama activities in class. They may not feel creative, do not have much experience, or do not know what to do and how to do; therefore, they will not take risk of trying this teaching method

(Truong, 2019). It is understood that most drama activities require acting, which is a big challenge for those who are shy when they must perform in front of their classmates. Additionally, large-sized classrooms can restrain the success of drama activities in terms of chances for learners to take part in the activities. Also, drama is a time-consuming activity, especially with role play and simulation, which is difficult to set accurate timings for drama activities (Maley & Duff, 2005). Nonetheless, language teachers should note that drama activities can bring a lot of benefits to learners' speaking learning. First, drama activities can offer a meaningful communicative context for speaking, and foster learners' linguistic skills through using language resources necessarily (Trivedi, 2013). Second, drama activities are used in real conversations, where learners can express their ideas and feelings while listening to their classmates' ideas and emotions, so drama activities are authentic (Aldavero, 2008). These types of activities promote learners' fluency in conversation and also help them remember new vocabulary. When the language is used and applied in an activity or a game, a communication is established and this verisimilitude with reality can make learners' speaking fluency, retention of words and listening comprehension enhance. Learners are encouraged to speak when given the chance of communication during drama activities. In addition, Aldavero (2008) advocates that learners improve their collaborative work and self-confidence in the classroom. They feel more comfortable with the language they use in drama activities, in which learners with an advanced level can employ more complicated dialogues, while weak learners just develop simple conversations. Besides, imagination and creativity are essential ingredients in classroom drama activities. Performing a drama, learners stand in someone's shoe to explore the thoughts and feelings of another person by responding and behaving as that person would do in such situation (Atas, 2014). Finally, drama activities remove the focus from textbooks. Activities given in textbooks traditionally pay much attention on grammatical accuracy, but, isolated sentences (Richards, 2006). An attractive alternation is using drama activities to have a context for learning English and meaningful language production, forcing learners to use their language resources in their own ways, making speaking learning learner-centered and meaning-centered rather than grammatically controlled.

In common, there are four main types of drama activities, including (1) mime, (2) improvisation, (3) role-play, and (4) simulation. Mime is a dramatic action in which players use body motions rather than words to share experiences with audiences. “*The expressions of our faces, the gestures we make and even proximity or the way we sit, for example, may send powerful messages about how we feel or what we mean*” (Maley & Duff, 2005, p. 42). Mime aims to the paralinguistic features of communication. In other words, mime highlights and underlines the importance of non-verbal aspects of communication. The term improvisation is defined as “*the spontaneous response to the unfolding of an unexpected situation*” (Hodgson & Richards, 1979, p. 2). Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we face a reality and react accordingly. Improvisation is an effective technique to use in language classrooms since it motivates learners to participate in authentic situations actively. Improvisational exercises can involve whole class or smaller groups which are more popular forms. For example, a whole class improvisation can put the participants at a grocery store where some of them are the sellers and others are the buyers. Spontaneous improvisation gives learners practice language and communication in unfamiliar sudden cases. If learners participate in a creative and dramatic classroom environment like improvisation, they become more skillful in responding appropriately, expressing ideas, sharing what they know and understanding language better. Role play is the most well-known and used type of drama activities, including roles or characters, relationships among characters, as well as relationships between characters and the environment, and the situation in which the characters exist and interact (Maley & Duff, 2005). Role play provides an interesting way for learners to learn and appreciate language in meaningfully communicative contexts via learners’ repetitions. Maley and Duff (2005) show that “*the number of*

purposeful repetitions of the script involves learners in ‘deep processing’ of the language in the way which is usually impossible in normal lesson” (p. 229). It is clear that in role play activities, learners have a collaborative learning atmosphere—one of important factors that create successful communication of the learners in their speaking classrooms. While in role play, learners just pretend they are in a certain surrounding, in simulation, the class will build a realistic environment in which to carry out their play. Simulation always includes an element of role play (Ladousse, 1987). Simulations are drama activities that often mirror real life. They are often problem-solving activities and learners bring their personality, knowledge and experience into these activities. Harmer (2007) reckon that learners simulate a real-life encounter which perhaps they have not faced in their daily life but it can occur in the future, such as a business meeting, an interview or a conversation in a plane cabin, a hotel foyer, a shop or a cafeteria. Classroom simulation generates learners’ problem solving and decision-making skills. It also motivates learners and engages them in the learning process as it provides a specific situation within which learners can practice various communication skills like asserting oneself, expressing opinions, convincing others, arguing, eliciting opinions, group problem solving, analyzing situations and so on (Smith, 1984). In this study, the researcher focuses on these four types of drama activities in the speaking classes.

To check the effectiveness of drama activities on high school students’ speaking learning, the researcher makes an attempt to seek how the eleventh-graders perceive about benefits and limitations of these activities in their speaking classrooms. Accordingly, one research question is formulated as follow: *How do the eleventh-graders at An Lac High School perceive about the benefits and challenges of drama activities in their speaking lessons?*

B. Training Procedures

The training program was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023. The students were taught speaking skill with the application of drama activities (including mime, improvisation, role-play, and simulation) via six units numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 extracted from the textbook *English 11* which had been published by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. The methodology this textbook was claimed to be learner-centered approach and the communicative approach with task-based teaching being the central teaching method. Below is the description of the training course (Table 1).

METHOD

A. Participants

The study recruited the participation of 125 eleventh-grade students from three classes (Class 11A3, 11A4, and 11A12) at An Lac high school, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam thanks to convenience sampling technique. In fact, the researcher was in charge of these three classes, all of which were experimented with drama-based speaking lessons. Among these participants, there were 70 females (56.00%) and 55 males (44.00%). Their age range varied from 16 to 18 years old. Their English proficiency was expected to reach A2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) after they finished high school.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF TRAINING CONTENT

Unit	Theme	Speaking Task	Drama Activity Types	Descriptions
1	Friendship	Talk about a friend (physical characteristics, character)	Mime; Improvisation; Role-play; Simulation	-The researcher divided the class into small groups of four-five students. -The researcher informed that the training would last 8 meetings.
2	Personal Experiences	Talk about past experiences and how they affected life	Mime; Improvisation; Role-play; Simulation	-The researcher introduced the nature and manner of each type of drama activities at the first meeting.
3	A Party	Talk about parties and how to plan parties	Mime; Improvisation; Role-play; Simulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mime: acting out an idea or story through gestures, body movements</i> • <i>Improvisation: giving a response quickly to a sudden situation</i> • <i>Role play: acting a role in an imaginary situation</i> • <i>Simulation: setting class as in real life to deal with actual situations</i>
4	Volunteer Work	Talk about one volunteer work	Mime; Improvisation; Role-play; Simulation	-The researcher let the students choose and prepare two out of six topics

6	Competition	Talk about types of competitions or contests in Vietnam	Mime; Improvisation; Role-play; Simulation	randomly. In each meeting equivalent to each unit, the two groups would perform their assigned topics. Each drama activity would last 10-15 minutes. The groups might deliver their script for the audience to notice better prior to performance. -The researcher gave constructive feedback, reflected, synthesized the outcomes of the whole class at the last meeting.
8	Celebration	Talk about one of the famous holidays in Vietnam	Mime; Improvisation; Role-play; Simulation	

C. Research Instrument

The researcher decided to utilize a questionnaire which is known to be one of the easiest methods to manage, even with large numbers of subjects (Dörnyei, 2010), helping researchers save time processing the data and gives them a clearer prediction from respondents' choice (Dörnyei, 2007). The questionnaire consisted of nine main questions (Qs: 1-9) designed in type of multiple choices, in which some of the questions were based on Likert-scales of perceptions. In detail, Q1 was to determine whether the students had interest in drama activities applied to their speaking learning in general, while Q2 was about the students' enthusiasm when participating in drama activities compared to other previous speaking activities. Q3 and Q8 were

to check the students' evaluations about the extent of effect (Q3) as well as the overall benefits (Q8) of learning speaking with drama activities, respectively. The next four questions Q4, Q5, Q6, and Q7 were used to measure the students' evaluations about the contribution of each specific drama activity type to their speaking classes, including mime, improvisation, role-play, and simulation, respectively. Q9 was added to check the students' perceptions about some problems they encountered during drama activities in their speaking lessons. From Q4 to Q9 as the open-ended questions, more than one choice was acceptable and there were also blanks for the respondents to leave their other ideas at the end of each question.

FINDINGS

A. Comparison of the Students' Attitudes among Drama Activities

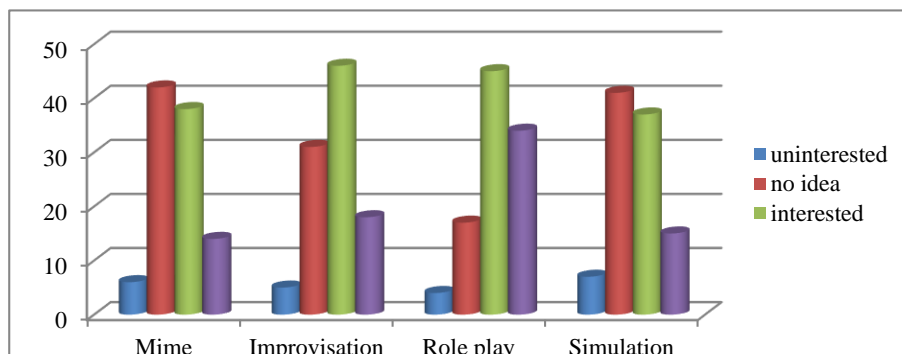


Chart 1. Students' interest in drama activities (Q1)

While students' general attitude towards drama activities was optimistic, their interest was different among four types: mime, improvisation, role play, and simulation. The following chart shows the differences more clearly. From the chart above, role play interested the greatest number of the students (79%). More impressively, there were up to 34% of the students who were very interested in it. This activity was the most dominant among four types of drama activities. In academia, participating in role play, students are provided interesting learning environments to explore and appreciate language in practical communicative contexts. Hence, it can be one distinctive feature

leading most of the students to choose role play. Next, 54% of the participants had positive attitudes to improvisation. It is noted that improvisation is often organized as a language game which creates interesting learning state. The same 52% of them found mime and simulation interesting or very interesting, whereas a minority of the students (7%) felt uninterested in simulation. The next was mime (6%), then improvisation (5%), role play was the least uninteresting activity (only 4%). Some students may not be confident when performing in front of their teachers and friends and therefore, the activities were found unattractive to them.

B. Students' Enthusiasm for Drama Activities in Comparison with Other Activities in General

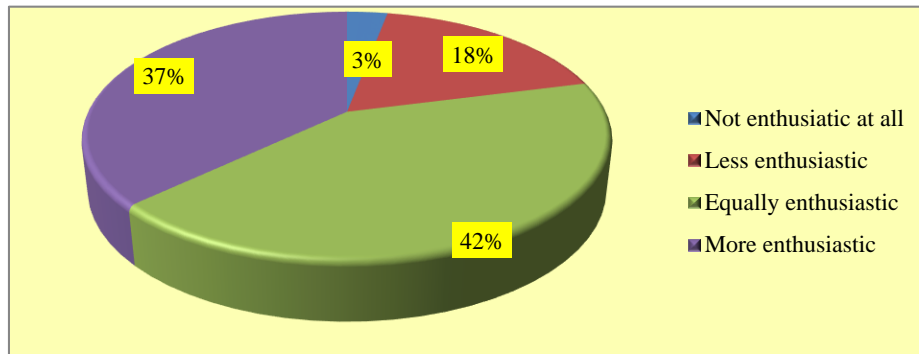


Chart 2. Students’ enthusiasm in general for drama activities in comparison with other activities (Q2)

Q2 focused on the extent of students’ involvement in drama activities in general in comparison with other activities such as question and answer, prepared talk, storytelling and so on. Chart 2 above reveals that nearly half of the students (42%) shared equal enthusiasm to participate in drama activities and others. Yet, the percentage of students who expressed their extraordinary enthusiasm for drama activities was not low. There were up to

37% of them who displayed this feeling. Unlike other speaking activities, drama activities could enable the students to get out of themselves to practice speaking English in authentic situations and roles. This engaged the students a lot. In contrast, some students (18%) did not really participate enthusiastically in them. The little rest of the students (3%) were not enthusiastic in drama activities.

C. Students’ Evaluation about the General Effect of Drama Activities in their Speaking Skill

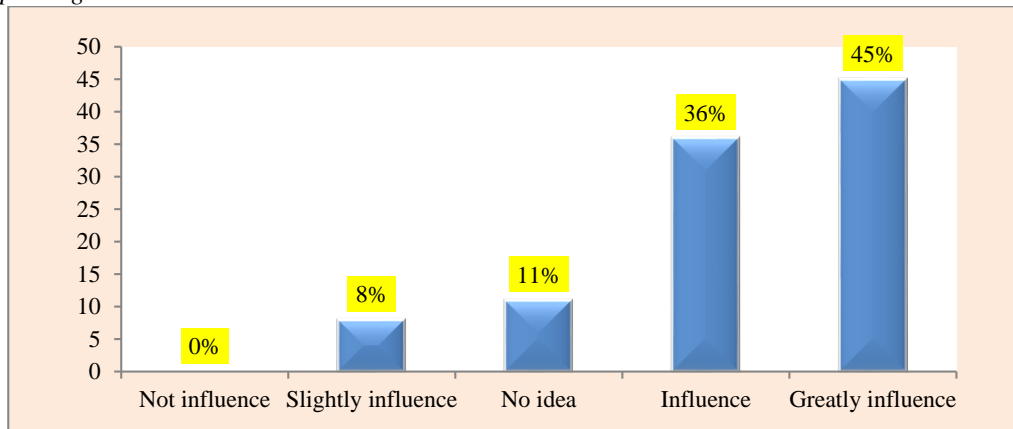


Chart 3. Students’ evaluation about the general effect of drama activities in their speaking skill (Q3)

As illustrated by Chart 3, a majority (81%) of the students agreed that drama influenced their speaking learning. The biggest number put their choice for “greatly influence” (45%) and the rather smaller one chose “influence” (36%). In fact, drama activities were frequently applied by teachers in speaking classes and thus, had certain effects on students’ learning. Theoretically, drama activities might foster their activeness, creativity and imagination. The students also learn many useful things when working with others and viewing their friends’ performances.

However, not all of the participants concurred with this view point. 8% of them thought that drama activities just slightly influenced their speaking skill. Moreover, some of the students (11%) had neutral idea on this question. It is proved that the students’ evaluation about the effects of drama activities was various, but in general, a large number of them thought that drama activities influenced their speaking learning.

D. Students’ Perceptions about Benefits of Mine

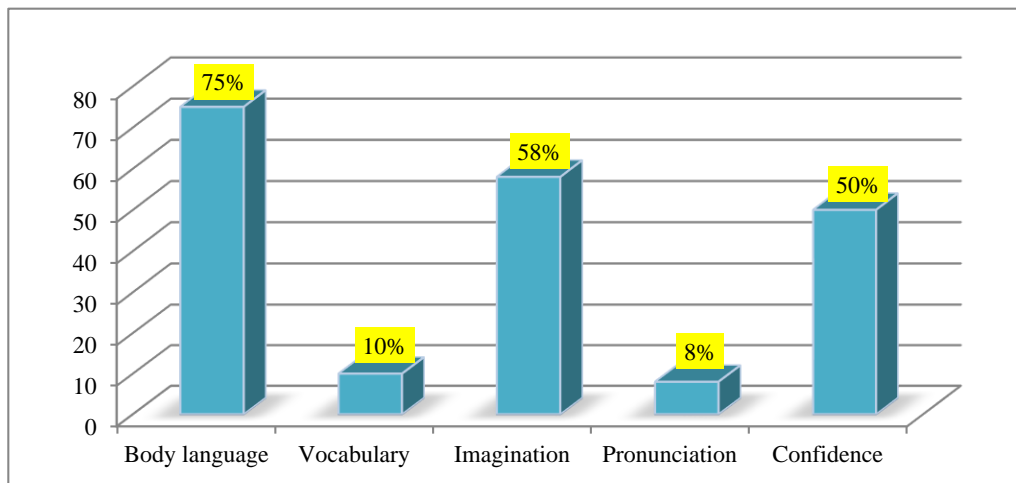


Chart 4. Students' evaluation about effects of mime (Q4)

As Chart 4 displays, there were up to 75% of the students approving that mime helped them use body language better. It is easy to understand because in mime, the students employed body language as a special instrument to express their ideas. Second, the aspect "imagination" made up 58% in the chart. In principle, students who perform mime need to imagine clever actions and

audiences imagine meanings concealed in that performance to give corresponding answers. Third, half of the participants admitted that mime built up their self-confidence. Two rest aspects "vocabulary" and "pronunciation" were voted by a smaller number of the students (10% and 8%, respectively).

E. Students' Perceptions about Benefits of Improvisation

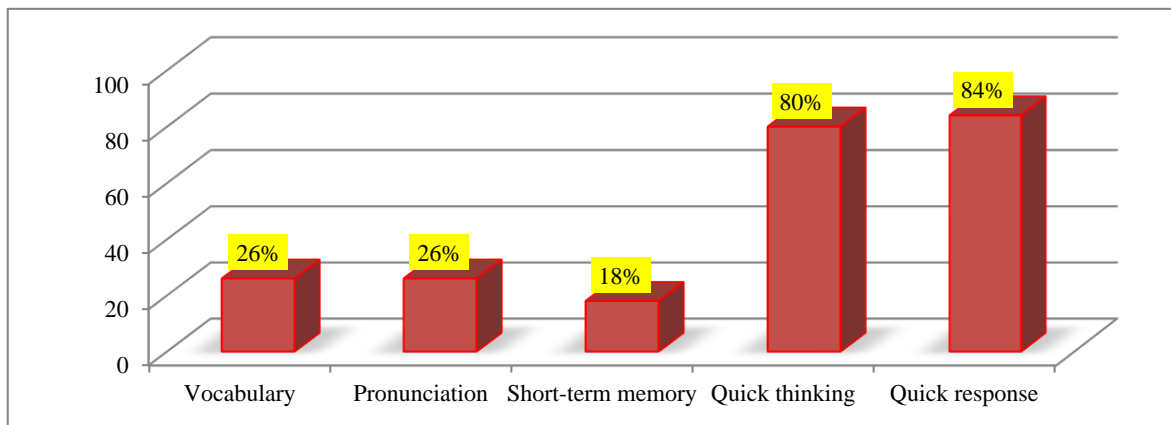


Chart 5. Students' evaluation about effects of improvisation (Q5)

Improvisation, meanwhile, is a favorable activity to study vocabulary, pronunciation, short-term memory, quick thinking and quick response. The chart above illustrates that through improvisation, the students developed their quick response ability most (84%). Next, 80% of the students agreed on the advantage of enhancing "quick thinking". Obviously, the nature of improvisation is spontaneity. Students' reactions and words are not set beforehand. They have to think quickly and respond as

fast as possible in limited time. In addition, improvisation is also a good method to learn vocabulary and pronunciation which withheld the same 26% of the students' support. "Short-term memory" was also chosen by 18% of the students because one of principles in improvisation is that students cannot repeat what their friends said, so they have to remember what have been used to give a totally new speech.

F. Students' Perceptions about Benefits of Role-play

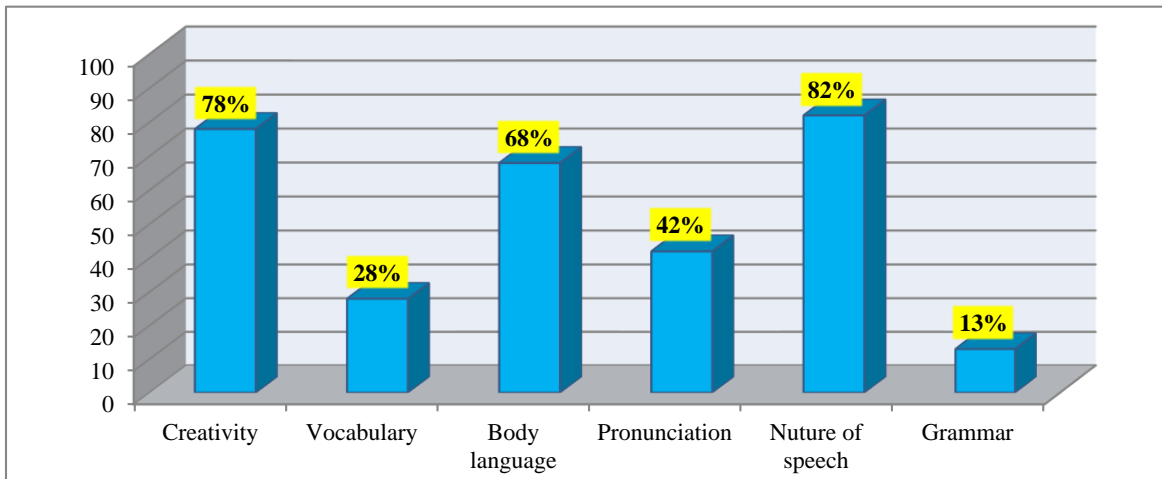


Chart 6. Students’ evaluation about effects of role play (Q6)

As shown in the chart above, the students learnt many things via role play (Q6). Most of them (82%) found role play useful in learning natural speaking. Students become characters in different situations so they practice communicating naturally as in real life such as making appropriate English accent, imitating voices and intonations. There were a lot of students choosing “creativity” and “body language” as well (78% and 68%, respectively). Because none of the risks of real world are present, students create their own characters freely. Behaviors are not

controlled and students bring to the creative situations their own knowledge, skills, and experiences. Moreover, role play also enhanced students’ pronunciation (42%), and vocabulary (28%). It provides proper environment to learn words or phrases so that students can use English in an effective way.

G. Students’ Perceptions about Benefits of Simulation

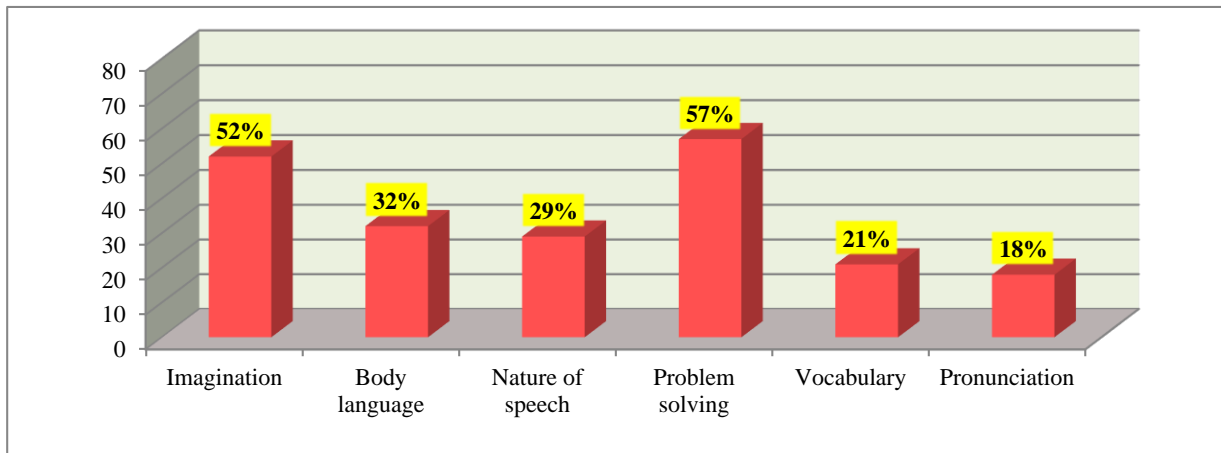


Chart 7. Students’ evaluation about effects of simulation (Q7)

More than half of the students thought simulation promoted their imagination. This number was approximately equal with the percentage of the students thinking of “problem solving” (57%). While role play is a powerful tool to enact students’ creativity, simulation focuses more on their imagination. Students imagine that they are in such situations and what needs to do to deal with possible problems. In various contexts, for example, they decide how to deal with shopping,

buying a movie ticket, or booking a hotel room, etc. Several learners also learnt how to use body language well (32%) and speak naturally (29%) through simulation. Moreover, some of the students studied about vocabulary (21%) and pronunciation (18%) effectively in meaningful contexts of simulation.

H. Students’ Perceptions about Benefits of Four Drama Activity Types in General

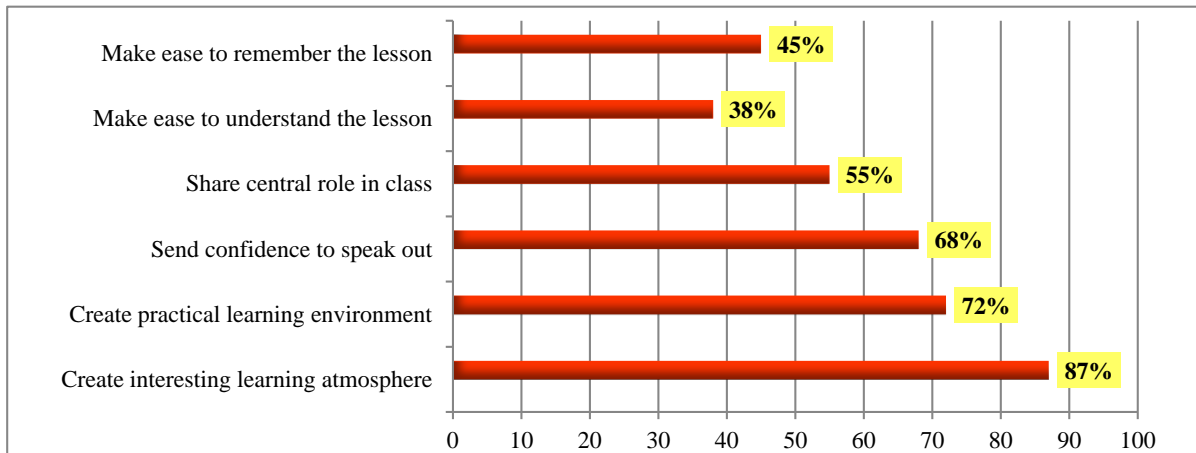


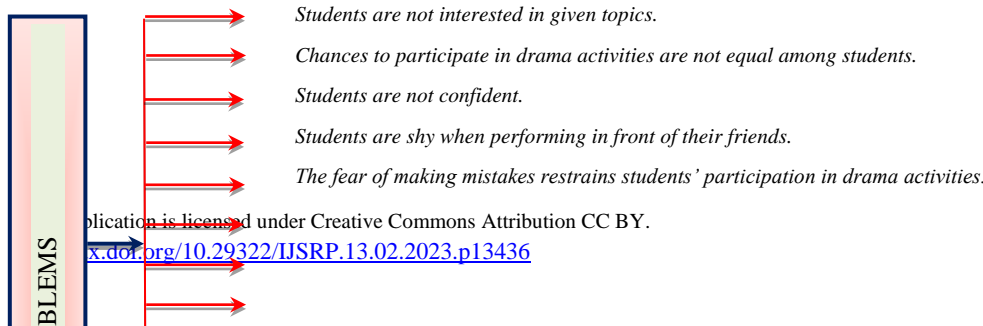
Chart 8. Students’ evaluation about benefits of four drama activity types in general (Q8)

According to the data presented in Chart 8, there were 87% of the students who agreed that drama created an interesting learning atmosphere. Drama activities are often organized as language games in classrooms. Therefore, the competitive atmosphere makes lessons more exciting. The term “create practical learning environment” made up 72% in the chart. Drama activities provide learners opportunities to practice English in its proper contexts. Students are put in authentic situations and roles; hence, they apply knowledge meaningfully. Next, more than half of the students (68%) admitted that they were more confident in speaking thanks to drama activities. 55% of them thought they shared central role in class. Drama activities often involve whole class or group works. All members have their duty in completing the common task and become active participants with their own roles. Finally, some students which accounted for 34% and 45% agreed that drama made ease to understand and remember the lesson. In language classrooms using drama activities, language is explored from both verbal and non-verbal aspects and in a contextual approach, so students can understand it easily. Furthermore, students become center of lessons and adopt knowledge from their own experiences. Consequently, their long memory is dug.

I. Students’ Perceptions about Problems in Doing Drama Activities

The students stated that there were some problems facing them in drama activities as portrayed in Chart 9 below. Not all students were really interested in given topics. Uninteresting, unfamiliar or difficult topics can make them bored or have no ideas for their performances. As expressing in Q9, they wanted teachers to provide various topics so that the activities can be more vivid. Next, drama activities occasionally made the gap among students bigger because of unequal chances to participate in drama activities. Over half of the participants approved of this. Some active students dominated most time while others have fewer opportunities. In addition, there was a common problem

that many students (87%) were shy when performing in front of their friends. To eleventh-grade students, their classmates are not strange anymore but the fear of making mistakes and losing face could make them not speak up until they are asked to do. While many students tried to use body language as much as possible when making dramas, some (22%) found difficulties to employ it. Because of cultural bias, Vietnamese learners sometimes show shyness and lack of confidence when employing gestures, postures, facial expressions or eye contact. As a consequence, they had a fear of public speaking and cannot speak naturally. There were 60% of the participants who did not speak but read what they learnt by heart. When becoming a character, some students felt embarrassed and did not express all ideas and thoughts in their mind, sometimes they were previous learned knowledge. Rather, limited vocabulary also restrained 93% of those who wanted to participate in drama activities, especially in mimes. On the other hand, improvisation often resulted in pronunciation or grammar mistakes within most students (e.g., 94% in pronunciation, 90% in grammar). Giving rapid responses occasionally resulted in focusing more on fluency than on accuracy. Role-play also has disadvantages. According to a majority of the students, it is a time-consuming activity, especially when students needed to write scripts and choose customs. Besides that, the students had difficulties in giving a common solution in role play and simulation because conflicts are unavoidable if there are so many ideas and suggestions for one common problem. 85% of the students also admitted that they spoke Vietnamese a lot during their work. It is a major disadvantage of team working activities. In academia, discussion is popular and essential in drama activities. Naturally, the students preferred to use their mother tongue which made them feel more comfortable and easier to discuss with their teammates. It is not only a considerable problem for students but also a major concern for every language teacher, especially when they are in speaking classes.



Students speak unnaturally.

Students do not have good use of body language.

Students do not show/ express all ideas and thoughts in their mind.

Students forget to apply previous learned knowledge.

Students' vocabulary is limited.

Students make grammar and pronunciation mistakes in improvisations.

Role plays are time-consuming.

It is difficult to come to a common solution in team working.

Students do not pay much attention in others' performances.

Students speak Vietnamese a lot during the activities (especially in preparation and discussion).

Chart 9. Students' Perceptions about Difficulties in Doing Drama Activities (Q9)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the quantitative results obtained from 125 questionnaire samples indicated that most of the eleventh-graders felt interested in drama activities. However, the number of the students engaged in role play and improvisation was larger than in mime and simulation. The main reason for this was there were still several students who have not done mime and simulation so they had neutral idea. Nevertheless, students had positive attitudes towards drama activities in comparison with other speaking activities, overall. They considered that the drama activities enhanced their speaking ability, confidence, creativity, collaborative work, and use of body language for their English speaking to some extent. On the other hand, these high school students also revealed some unexpected problems during drama activities. Many of them thought that they were not confident enough to perform in front of class. Pronunciation and grammar mistakes were still popular in improvisation. Another problem appearing when students working in groups was that they used Vietnamese a lot during the activities. Especially, drama activities also required much time and caused noise.

Teachers who directly guide students to do drama activities play a crucial role in making drama activities effective. First, the activities should start from simpler to more sophisticated ones so that some weak students are not reserved and find it easy to do them. Secondly, as the students suggested in the questionnaires, it is expected for teachers to apply drama activities more often in speaking classes so students will have more opportunities to take part in them and improve their speaking skill. Next, attractive topics are very essential to keep students' intense interest. Sometimes teachers' given topics are not really relevant to students' life; hence, they feel bored and even ignore the activities. Therefore, teachers should discuss drama topics with their students and choose everyday conversational topics that are not only familiar to real life but also relevant to the lessons. Furthermore, another important thing is gentle feedback of teachers after students' performances. Gentle correction not only improves students' learning but also helps them to overcome the fear of making mistakes. To students, they should be willing to take risks and confident to take different roles in dramas. Moreover, they can suggest teachers some favourite topics which make them feel interested and involve in drama activities more enthusiastically.

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