



Empowering Rural Education in China: Unveiling the Impact of Drama-Based Pedagogy on Grade Six English-Speaking Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The purpose of this research is to investigate the impact of drama-based pedagogy on the English-speaking proficiency of rural Chinese sixth graders. Aiming to improve educational outcomes in rural areas, this study seeks to reveal the effectiveness of drama pedagogy as a distinctive teaching strategy designed to enhance English-speaking learning results and overall language skills. **Method:** Employing a quasi-experimental design, the intervention consisted of a structured drama programme tailored to meet the

linguistic needs of the participants. Pre- and post-intervention assessments conducted to measure changes in English-speaking proficiency. **Results:** The findings indicated that participants who experienced drama-based pedagogy demonstrated a better grasp of English-speaking proficiency, encompassing areas such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. Notably, improvements in vocabulary and pronunciation particularly pronounced when compared to peers who did not receive this type of instruction. **Conclusion:** These results underscore the potential of drama-based pedagogy to address language acquisition challenges in rural contexts and highlight its role in fostering dynamic and engaging learning environments. This study offers valuable insights into innovative teaching methods aimed at improving English-speaking proficiency in resource-constrained settings, ultimately advocating for the integration of drama-based pedagogy into rural education programmes.

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Introduction

As a globally prevalent language, English serves as a vital communication tool for international exchanges and cooperation, rendering oral English instruction of significant importance (Li, 2023). However, in rural China, various socioeconomic and educational factors have resulted in unequal educational resources between rural and urban areas, leading to substantial challenges in the English proficiency of sixth-grade students. Rural

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communities encounter barriers such as limited English resources, fewer opportunities for language exposure outside the classroom, and a reliance on traditional teaching methods (Gao, 2023). Within China's current educational system, English is a core subject, with primary school English serving as the foundation. If students accumulate a solid knowledge of English in primary school and effectively develop various language skills, they are likely to engage in subsequent learning activities more smoothly, enhance their English learning outcomes, and ultimately achieve their language learning goals.

Traditional teaching methods in primary school English tend to emphasise rote memorisation of vocabulary and sentence structures, relying heavily on mechanical theoretical explanations and repetitive exercises. This approach often fails to achieve optimal teaching outcomes and may hinder students from successfully completing basic learning tasks. Li (2023) notes that the initiative for oral English teaching in rural areas is insufficient, with unclear goals, limited teaching time and environments, simplistic teaching methods, and a lack of rich content. The objective conditions and teaching environments in rural primary schools significantly affect students' oral English learning. Consequently, it is imperative for rural English teachers to focus more on exploring oral English instruction to enhance the speaking abilities of rural students (Xie, 2023). Teachers must transcend traditional teaching paradigms, encouraging students actively engage in oral training and addressing issues related to inadequate oral expression skills.

This approach aims to achieve a comprehensive development of students' abilities. However, the current state of rural English teaching reveals a deficiency in the design of oral activities within the classroom, with students lacking diverse learning experiences under a single teaching mode (Gao, 2023). There is a clear desire among students for increased opportunities for oral communication through varied activities (Huo, 2021). In light of these challenges, there is an increasing recognition of the necessity for innovative teaching methods that effectively meet the language needs of rural students and empower rural education. Drama-based pedagogy presents a promising approach, offering a dynamic and interactive platform for language learning (Zhang, 2024). Educational drama represents a novel method of teaching, integrating drama and theatre techniques into the classroom to enliven the learning experience.

This approach seeks to optimise English teaching effectiveness and enhance students' overall English competence by fully engaging their potential. In practice, teachers must recognise and reflect on their own pedagogical shortcomings, actively exploring innovative and evidence-based methods, particularly those involving educational drama strategies. By incorporating elements such as role-playing, improvisation, and acting, drama provides students with opportunities to engage with English in real-world contexts, fostering language skills in a supportive and inclusive environment (Djafar & Yunus, 2023; Razzaiq et al., 2022). For learners at any stage, the ultimate aim of studying English is to apply their knowledge and skills in real-life situations, facilitating communication and gaining valuable insights. Integrating drama-based pedagogy into primary English classes not only invigorates teaching but also enhances student interest in learning English.

It immerses students in dramatic roles, enabling them to comprehend the emotions and nuances of dialogue, while simultaneously enhancing their communicative abilities and English expression skills in authentic scenarios. This integration is particularly effective in

promoting students' speaking proficiency. Teachers can utilise various performance format such as dialogue enactment, improvisational exercises, and collaborative performances to encourage students to engage with the material actively, deepening their understanding of English concepts. This method can effectively enhance students' pragmatic language skills and overall competence. While the effectiveness of drama-based teaching methods has well documented across diverse educational contexts globally, there remains a paucity of research examining the impact of drama on English proficiency specifically within rural primary schools in China (Yue, 2022).

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the effectiveness of drama-based pedagogy in improving the English proficiency of sixth-grade students in rural primary schools in China. By focusing on Year 6 a critical period in students' language development this research seeks to demonstrate the potential of drama as a teaching tool for enhancing English language achievement in rural settings. Employing a quasi-experimental design and rigorous evaluation methodologies, the study aims to provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of drama pedagogy and its role in empowering rural education in China. By illuminating the impact of drama-based pedagogy on English-speaking proficiency in these areas, the research intends to inform educational policy and practice, advocating for the adoption of integrated and innovative teaching strategies to enhance English-speaking proficiency in resource-limited contexts.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework Supporting Drama-based Pedagogy

In the early 1980s, American language educator Stephen Krashen introduced the concept of comprehensible input within his monitoring theory, positing it as the cornerstone of second language acquisition theory (Holtzen et al., 2022; Huang & Su, 2023). In further elaboration, prior literature identified four essential characteristics of optimal language input: it must be comprehensible, enjoyable, relevant, and plentiful, free from overly complex syntax. According to past studies, the input hypothesis alone could not ensure successful second language acquisition without substantial opportunities for learners to produce language. Swain's output hypothesis complements Krashen's framework by asserting that language learning is contingent upon learners engaging in language production. While learners require ample input that is both interesting and comprehensible, they also need to generate language output to refine their practical usage skills. Thus, oral classroom activities play a crucial role in balancing the relationship between language input and output.

Sociocultural Theory and the Zone of Proximal Development

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underscores the significance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development and learning. This theory posits that learning is inherently social, unfolding through collaboration, dialogue, and shared experiences. Key components of sociocultural theory include mediation, scaffolding, internalisation, and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The collaborative nature of drama activities aligns with these principles, enabling students to engage in regular learning within their ZPD, thereby maximising their learning potential. Together, these

theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for understanding the principles and practices underpinning drama-based pedagogy. By employing these concepts in teaching, educators can harness the power of immersive techniques to foster more engaging and profound learning experiences, ultimately enhancing language proficiency (Hammar, 2022).

Previous Research

A review of existing literature reveals that both domestic and international scholars have focused on drama-based pedagogy as an effective teaching method, particularly within the domains of language instruction, including English and Chinese. From perspectives of disciplinary development and student growth, researchers have proposed drama as a supplementary strategy in language course instruction (Nguyen, 2022). Global studies indicate that integrating drama activities into language learning programmes can significantly enhance students' speaking abilities, as well as their interest, motivation, and engagement in learning English. Wen (2020) asserts that drama-based pedagogy is interactive and immersive, making language learning more appealing, contextualised, and effective. This approach allows students to utilise language in authentic environments, thus improving not only their linguistic skills but also their confidence and self-efficacy. Research conducted by Xiao (2019), Bao (2020), Li (2022), and Ma (2022) further demonstrates the positive effects of drama-based teaching methods on enhancing the oral English abilities of primary school students.

When drama-based pedagogy implemented, learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) experience improvements in fluency, pronunciation, and overall language competence. Studies by Ailder (2023), Nguyen (2023), Akinradewo (2022), Altweissi and Maaytah (2022), Kara (2022), and Bravo Valdés (2021) confirm that drama activities positively influence students' spoken English proficiency. Furthermore, findings indicate that students develop a more positive attitude towards learning when participating in drama-based courses. The body of research on drama-based pedagogy reveals that its application in English classes at various educational levels not only enhances students' oral English skills but also positively influences their overall speaking proficiency and interest in learning the language.

Nevertheless, primary and secondary schools continue to face challenges, including a lack of resources for educational drama teachers, insufficient professional guidance in drama-based pedagogy, and inadequate standardised curricula and evaluation criteria. Moreover, the absence of supportive government policies and funding exacerbates these difficulties, limiting teachers' ability to explore drama-teaching methods effectively (Castro-Bedriñana, Chirinos-Peinado, & Castro-Chirinos, 2022; Fu, 2018; Ghnaim et al., 2023; İzci & Sertdemir, 2022). Notably, most studies do not consider the context of rural schools, indicating a significant gap in research regarding the impact of drama-based pedagogy on rural students' English-speaking abilities, warranting further investigation. According to prior studies, the evaluation of English speaking encompasses five dimensions: grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation, and fluency. These criteria can use to assess students' oral proficiency; there is a scarcity of literature, which examine the specific aspects of drama-based pedagogy in improving oral English. A comprehensive review of the literature highlights that the primary subjects associated with

drama-based pedagogy in China are Chinese and English.

However, frontline educators generally possess limited understanding of drama-based pedagogy, and many are still in the exploratory phase, resulting in a lack of scientific and standardised application of drama teaching methods. Consequently, there are few practical studies, which focus on implementing drama-based pedagogy in primary school classrooms, especially in terms of enhancing students' English pragmatic competence. Therefore, exploring action research on the application of drama-based pedagogy in primary school English instruction holds both theoretical and practical significance within the broader context of educational reform and exploration. This study aims to investigate the theoretical foundations of drama pedagogy and its applicability within the unique context of rural education in China. By synthesising findings from previous research, this study will evaluate the effectiveness of drama-based approaches in enhancing English proficiency among rural primary school students, while also examining which specific aspects of spoken English proficiency have improved. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of language education and rural development, with the expectation of informing educational policy and practice in China and beyond.

Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the impact of drama-based pedagogy on the English-speaking proficiency of sixth-grade students in rural primary schools in China. Quasi-experiments aim to replicate the rigour and structure of true experiments while lacking random assignment (Cook & Wong, 2008). This approach is particularly well suited for educational research, allowing for comparisons between groups while accounting for pre-existing differences. Two classes with similar English proficiency scores selected: one served as the experimental group, participating in drama-based instruction, and the other as the control group, which continued with traditional teaching methods. A 14-week quasi-experiment conducted, involving pre-tests before the intervention and post-tests afterwards. The scores from both groups were then collected and analysed.

Participants

The research conducted in a rural primary school located in a northern province of China. This school chosen due to its limited exposure to English and fewer learning resources compared to urban institutions, providing a unique context for assessing the influence of drama-based pedagogy. Such a setting is particularly valuable for examining the effects of drama-based instruction, given the limited language stimulation available to students. Total 70 sixth-grade students participated in the study. Ethical considerations necessitated obtaining informed consent from both the students and their guardians prior to involvement. The selected classes were chosen to ensure minimal proficiency in English and homogeneous backgrounds, thereby facilitating the observation of any language gains resulting from the drama activities. This specific rural primary school selected its potential to illuminate the challenges faced by students in rural settings and to

assess the extent to which drama-based pedagogy could address educational disparities.

Intervention

The syllabus for the experimental group developed in accordance with the 2022 Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in China, combined with the English textbooks published by the People's Education Press. The lesson plans aimed to create a balanced approach to language learning, incorporating drama activities to foster a meaningful and engaging learning environment. This approach allowed students to practice real-life communication and improve their speaking skills. The curriculum for the experimental group focused on integrating drama activities to enhance oral proficiency, fostering a communicative and participatory learning atmosphere. Specific components included dramatic activities such as role-playing in the "Let's Talk" and "Story Time" sections of each unit, alongside vocabulary games designed to bolster speaking ability and vocabulary retention. The control group received traditional language instruction without the incorporation of drama-based techniques. This provided a comparative basis to assess the unique contribution of drama pedagogy to students' English-speaking proficiency.

Instrument

To assess English-speaking proficiency, both pre- and post-intervention evaluations conducted. Pre-intervention assessments established baseline competency levels, while post-intervention assessments measured improvements. The evaluation comprised metrics focusing on various dimensions of speaking, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. These measures selected based on established language proficiency frameworks and aligned with the learning objectives of the drama course, using criteria from the speaking component of Cambridge English: Young Learners, Flyers. The assessment lasted approximately nine minutes and involved a panel of three English teachers from the school serving as examiners. They utilised scoring criteria based on prior literature, which chosen for their comprehensiveness in evaluating speaking skills across multiple dimensions. The decision to adopt these parameters strategically considered, given their broader applicability compared to other standards in assessing English-speaking abilities through various criteria.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis conducted on the pre-test and post-test English performance scores from both the experimental and control groups. Descriptive statistics mean scores and standard deviations for each group's pre- and post-tests calculated to provide an overview of score distributions. The mean scores summarised the central tendency of the data, indicating the average English proficiency levels for both groups. Standard deviations computed to gauge variability within the scores. Inferential statistics is the Wilcoxon signed-rank test employed to compare the mean scores of each group before and after the intervention, determining any statistically significant improvements in English proficiency. The Mann-Whitney U test used to compare post-test scores between the

experimental and control groups, identifying significant differences in performance across the five assessed aspects. Choosing appropriate statistical tests is crucial for ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings. The analysis of paired data necessitated careful consideration of data distribution. Since the post-test scores did not meet normal distribution assumptions, non-parametric tests deemed appropriate. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test selected due to the preliminary analysis indicating non-normality, providing a robust alternative for data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations rigorously evaluated throughout the study. Written informed consent obtained from all participants and their guardians. Measures implemented to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of the collected data, reassuring participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative consequences. The methodology employed in this study aims critically assess the efficacy of drama-based teaching methods in enhancing English-speaking proficiency among sixth-grade students in rural Chinese primary schools. By utilising a quasi-experimental design, this research seeks to provide empirical evidence supporting the positive effects of drama-based approaches on language learning outcomes in the context of rural education in China.

Results

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Test of Experimental Group

Item	Number	Pre-Test		Post-Test		p-Value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total	35	7.26	1.837	9.60	3.079	.000
Pronunciation	35	1.74	0.561	2.69	0.993	.000
Grammar	35	1.34	0.539	1.60	0.812	.003
Vocabulary	35	1.43	0.558	2.14	0.733	.000
Comprehension	35	1.57	0.558	1.74	0.780	.014
Fluency	35	1.17	0.382	1.46	0.550	.002

Table 1 presents the pre- and post-test scores of the experimental group for each language proficiency item, detailing the mean score, standard deviation (SD), and p-value for each category. The most notable improvement observed in the total score for oral English proficiency, which rose from a mean of 7.26 before the intervention to a mean of 9.60 afterwards ($p < .001$). Specifically, students demonstrated significant enhancements in pronunciation, with average scores increasing from 1.74 to 2.69 ($p < .001$). Improvements were also evident in grammar, vocabulary, and fluency, all showing statistically significant gains. Although comprehension improvements were significant as well ($p = .014$), they were less pronounced compared to the advancements in the other language proficiency areas. Overall, these findings indicate that drama-based teaching interventions effectively address the challenges of language learning in rural primary school settings, resulting in

substantial improvements in students' oral English skills across various linguistic dimensions.

Table 2

Pre- and Post-Test of Control Group

Item	Number	Pre-Test		Post-Test		p-Value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total	35	7.49	2.705	7.69	2.731	.159
Pronunciation	35	1.74	0.741	1.77	0.77	.317
Grammar	35	1.40	0.553	1.46	0.611	.157
Vocabulary	35	1.49	0.507	1.54	0.561	.157
Comprehension	35	1.57	0.778	1.60	0.736	.655
Fluency	35	1.26	0.505	1.31	0.53	.317

Table 2 displays the pre- and post-test scores of the control group across various language proficiency items, including the mean score, standard deviation (SD), and p-value for each category. The average pre-test scores for all language proficiency items reflect baseline proficiency levels in the control group prior to any intervention, with scores ranging from 1.26 to 1.74. Following the observation period without any intervention, the post-test scores revealed a slight improvement in oral English ability across language proficiency items. However, as indicated by the p-values, these improvements were not statistically significant. Collectively, these findings suggest that the observed enhancements in English proficiency within the control group were not significant and might attributed to random fluctuations or other variables, given the absence of any intervention. In contrast, the experimental group, consisting of sixth graders from rural primary schools who participated in the drama-based pedagogy intervention, demonstrated significant improvements in their English-speaking ability. This highlights the effectiveness of the intervention for students in rural China.

Table 3

English-Speaking Proficiency of the Post-Test between Experimental and Control Group

Item	Number	Experimental Group		Control Group		p-Value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total	35	9.60	3.079	7.69	2.731	.008
Pronunciation	35	2.69	0.993	1.77	0.770	.000
Grammar	35	1.60	0.812	1.46	0.611	.606
Vocabulary	35	2.14	0.733	1.54	0.561	.001
Comprehension	35	1.74	0.78	1.60	0.736	.451
Fluency	35	1.46	0.505	1.31	0.530	.175

Table 3 presents a comparison of the post-test English ability scores between the experimental group and the control group, including mean scores, standard deviations (SD), and p-values for each language proficiency item. The experimental group demonstrated a significantly higher total score for oral English ability compared to the control group, with a p-value of .008. This suggests that students who participated in the drama pedagogy

intervention exhibited superior overall proficiency in their English speaking skills relative to their peers who did not receive the intervention. The improvement in pronunciation outcomes was particularly notable, with a significant difference observed between the experimental and control groups ($p < .001$). The experimental group showed a more pronounced enhancement in pronunciation skills compared to the control group. Significant differences were also evident in vocabulary scores, with the experimental group outperforming the control group ($p = .001$). This indicates that students engaged in the drama pedagogy intervention exhibited greater proficiency in vocabulary acquisition. However, no significant differences found in the following areas, Grammar: $p = .606$, Comprehension: $p = .451$ and Fluency: $p = .175$. While the experimental group performed slightly better in these aspects, the differences were not statistically significant. These findings underscore the effectiveness of the drama-based pedagogy intervention in enhancing the English-speaking abilities of sixth graders in rural primary schools in China, particularly in the domains of pronunciation and vocabulary. The approach presents a viable, efficient, and impactful strategy for language learning, representing a paradigm shift in language acquisition. By actively engaging students through dramatic activities, educators can foster meaningful improvements in language skills and overall proficiency. These results highlight the potential of innovative pedagogical strategies to address language-learning challenges in resource-constrained settings and advocate for their integration into rural education initiatives in China and beyond.

Implications of the Results

The implications of these findings strongly support the role of drama-based pedagogy in addressing the language learning needs of rural settings. By incorporating drama activities that actively engage students in using the language, educators can create a dynamic learning environment that fosters communication skills. Furthermore, the significant improvement in students' English proficiency highlights those drama-based approaches can play a crucial role in advancing the goals of rural education in China. This pedagogy equips rural students with the necessary language skills and confidence to communicate effectively, thereby enhancing their academic performance and expanding their opportunities in a globalised world. In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that innovative teaching methods, such as drama-based pedagogy, can significantly improve linguistic competence and consequently enhance academic skills in English, even in resource-constrained environments. These findings carry important implications for educational policy and practice, advocating for the integration of creative and engaging pedagogical strategies in rural education initiatives both in China and beyond.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of drama-based pedagogy in enhancing English-speaking proficiency among Grade 6 students in rural primary schools in China. The data indicate that drama-based pedagogy in foreign language classes leads to measurable improvements in vocabulary and pronunciation. Educators who create vibrant learning environments through drama-based activities enable language learners to unlock language skills across multiple dimensions, fostering discovery and deeper understanding. The significant improvements observed in

pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition are particularly noteworthy, as these areas often present challenges for language learners, especially in resource-limited contexts. Drama-based pedagogy provides an environment that supports and facilitates learning in engaging and stimulating ways. This immersive setting allows learners to rehearse and refine their English language skills effectively. Additionally, drama-based pedagogy fosters essential interpersonal skills such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking alongside language mastery. Through role-playing, acting, and improvisation, students can express their ideas, negotiate meaning, and think creatively. This approach encourages a balanced understanding of the language, extending beyond mere competence to encompass a more holistic language experience.

Challenges and Limitations

While the results of this study demonstrate that drama-based pedagogy can enhance English-speaking abilities, several limitations might be acknowledged. Regarding language processing, the data indicate that the intervention had moderate effects, particularly yielding greater improvements in vocabulary and pronunciation compared to grammar, comprehension, and fluency. This suggests that the design and development of drama programs may need to be refined to better foster these components of language proficiency. Additionally, the generalizability of the findings is constrained by the relatively limited sample size and the specific context of rural primary schools in China. This specificity may affect the applicability of the results to broader educational settings or diverse learner populations. Future research should consider a more extensive sample and varied contexts to validate and expand upon these findings.

Implications for Educational Practice

Nonetheless, the implications of this study's findings for educational practice are significant. Integrating drama-based pedagogy into language learning offers educators the opportunity to create inclusive and engaging learning environments that accommodate diverse learning styles. Furthermore, the demonstrated efficacy of drama-based interventions in enhancing English language outcomes supports the integration of innovative teaching strategies within Chinese rural education programmes and more broadly across the globe. This approach advocates for both equity and excellence in education, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive in their language learning journeys.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Moving forward, future research should explore the long-term impact of drama-based pedagogy on language proficiency and academic performance. It is also essential to investigate the feasibility and scalability of implementing these approaches across diverse educational contexts and settings. By fostering consistent innovation and responsive teaching, educators can provide high-quality language instruction that supports the success of all students in an increasingly global, diverse, and interconnected world. In conclusion, this study offers compelling evidence of the efficacy of drama-based pedagogy in enhancing English education in rural China, specifically improving the English-speaking

proficiency of sixth-grade students. The structured implementation of drama-based courses resulted in significant improvements, particularly in pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition. By actively engaging students in interactive drama activities, educators can create dynamic learning experiences that foster language development, cultural understanding, and critical thinking skills. While the findings highlight the transformative potential of drama-based pedagogy, it is crucial to acknowledge certain limitations. The intervention's limited impact on grammar, comprehension, and fluency suggests a need for greater emphasis on these aspects within the drama curriculum. Additionally, the unique characteristics of rural primary schools in China may limit the generalizability of these findings to other educational settings. Nonetheless, the implications for educational practice and policy are significant. By integrating drama-based pedagogy into language teaching, educators can create inclusive and engaging environments that cater to various learning styles while addressing student diversity. The success of these innovative teaching practices makes a strong case for their broader implementation, with many regional education offices advocating for such interventions as part of equity and excellence initiatives in rural education. Further research warranted to investigate the lasting effects of drama-based pedagogy on language development and academic achievement. Additionally, initiatives should focus on promoting best practices and building educators' capacity meaningfully integrate drama-based pedagogy into their teaching through ongoing innovation and lesson improvement.

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