

## Study on the Influence of Technology-Assisted Role-Playing Activities and Traditional Theatrical Performances on Foreign Language Learning

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### Abstract

This study investigated the influence of technology-assisted role-playing activities on foreign language learning. Its objectives were as follows: 1. To elucidate the opinions of foreign language learners regarding role-playing activities; 2. To explore learners' experiences of engaging in technology-assisted role-playing activities; and 3. To investigate the influence of technology-assisted and traditional role-playing activities on learners' learning methods. The participants of this qualitative study consisted of non-language major university students in Taiwan. Data was collected through focus group interviews, individual interviews, and non-participant observations and subsequently subjected to a content analysis. The results revealed that (1) The high and low achievers exhibited different responses to the role-playing activities; (2) Low achievers tended to choose technology-assisted methods to present their theatrical performances; (3) The attractiveness of new technologies prompted the learning motivations of some learners; (4) Some learners chose to do on-stage theatrical performances in order to enhance their own capabilities and obtain a sense of achievement; and (5) Some learners perceived that technology-assisted theatrical performances could help them overcome the psychological hurdle of stage fright. The results are discussed and instructional strategies for learners and instructors alike are proposed, as are recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** foreign language learning, technology-based assistance, theatrical performance, adult education

### 1. Introduction

Since foreign language learners often lack opportunities to practice or apply the foreign language they are learning in their daily lives, in addition to not engaging in long-term communications in the foreign language, the learners' learning motivations are often impeded. Improving learners' speaking and listening abilities is nonetheless an important target of foreign language instruction. However, while instructors understand that learners have more opportunities to interact with one another in small classroom environments with fewer students, in actual practice, many instructors have to instruct large numbers of learners simultaneously. Therefore, the question of how to enable learners to proactively engage in learning within a limited course duration is an issue faced by instructors. The use of theatrical performances and activities in instruction is one way of allowing students to practice their speaking skills. This approach not only allows instructors to encourage learners to express themselves in a foreign language, but also serves as a better medium than traditional instruction for practicing in real-life situations (Magos&Politi, 2008).

When engaging in dialogues between characters in theatrical performances, and in understanding the context of the story and the responses when simulating dialogues with one another, learners must comprehend the situation surrounding the dialogue as well as the relationships between the characters. Theatrical performance is thus a popular and attractive instructional activity as it enables learners to enhance their speaking skills. With today's advanced technologies, many instructors have employed the latest technologies to implement theatrical performance-based instructional activities. This study aimed to compare traditional theatrical performances and theatrical performances involving the use of new technologies, as well as to investigate their effects on learners. The results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for instructors in planning theatrical performance-based instructional activities in their curriculums.

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Furthermore, recommendations regarding how instructors can implement and learners can engage in theatrical performance-based instructional activities are provided to assist teachers and students in achieving optimal instructional outcomes.

Based on the aforementioned research motivations, the objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To elucidate the opinions of the foreign language learners on the implementation of role-playing activities.
2. To explore learners' experiences of engaging in technology-assisted role-playing activities.
3. To investigate the influence of implementing technology-assisted and traditional role-playing activities on learners' learning methods.

## 2. Literature Review

Theatrical performance is a technique applied in the communicative approach to instruction (Magos & Politi, 2008). In order to enhance learners' interest in learning a foreign language, instructors often encourage them to express themselves fluently in a foreign language in a class where there are many learners. Therefore, dramatization activities involve dialogues and situations, which provide the driving force for learning and, thus, show that dramatization is a means of developing one's foreign language communication skills. At the same time, instructors must face the challenge of finding effective ways to guide learners to achieve the aim of learning through such activities. Many researchers have explored the effects of theatrical performance-based instructional activities on students' learning outcomes. For example, role-playing not only enables students to broaden their understanding of new roles, but also allows them to better understand others and, in turn, develop improved empathy, teamwork, and communication skills (Dorathy & Mahalakshmi, 2011).

Due to advancements in technology and changes in learning environments, instructional methods are constantly being innovated (Panev & Barakoska, 2015). Many instructors have introduced new technologies into traditional instruction, and at present, the applications of technology in foreign language instruction encompass a wide range of aspects. Some scholars have emphasized online learning and applied online role-playing through the use of online software in their curriculums (Dracup, 2012; Hou, 2012; Russell & Shepherd, 2010). Moreover, Zhang, Beach, and Sheng (2016) applied online role-playing for collaborative argumentation and showed that asynchronous role-playing was more beneficial than synchronous role-playing in this regard. Cornelius, Gordon, and Harris (2011) argued that role engagement and anonymity are extremely important components in synchronous online role-playing, as both factors encourage learners to further understand the different methods for responding to or describing different situations in the target language, in addition to providing learners with opportunities to engage in teamwork and cooperation.

In addition, some scholars have used newly developed apps for instruction (Nguyen, Hwang, Pham, & Ma, 2018). The results showed that using these newly developed apps in familiar situations can promote cooperation between students. Hamzaoglu and Kocoglu (2016) utilized podcasting as an instructional tool to improve the speaking anxiety of foreign language learners. Their results indicated that students who used podcasting had a lower level of speaking anxiety than those who did not use podcasting. Yeh, Tseng, and Chen (2019) adopted online peer feedback as a means of elevating the speaking performance of foreign language learners. Many studies have shown that the application of new technologies is helpful for learners (Ahn, & Lee, 2016). However, Hunt, Neill, and Barnes (2007) argued that there are still hurdles to overcome in the application of information and communication technology (ICT) in the teaching of languages. With regard to online assessment in languages, the authors stressed that "teachers are vital for planning, guidance and extra support."

From the preceding review of the literature, it can be seen that theatrical performance is a popular teaching method in the field of foreign language instruction. The application of new technologies entails an extension of traditional instructional methods that not only requires appropriate software and hardware, but also emphasizes instructors' guidance and course designs, while the outcomes of using these technologies have to be observed and validated after they have been used by the instructors and learners.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Research participants

The participants in this study consisted of 12 non-English major university students in Taiwan who learned English as a foreign language and took an English listening and speaking course. Among these students, those who completed the paper-based TOEFL test with a score of more than 457 points were defined as high achievers, while those with a score of less than 457 points were defined as low achievers. All of the participants were required to engage in the course's small group role-playing activities.

### 3.2. Qualitative research approach and analysis

This study adopted the qualitative research approach. The researchers' instructional logs and the students' learning outcomes, as well as the contents of their interviews, were analyzed in order to investigate the outcomes of incorporating role-playing activities into foreign language instruction. The research period spanned a semester, and the participants were divided into two groups. One group engaged in traditional role-playing activities, that is, performing a stage drama live in the classroom. The other group utilized filmmaking equipment to film their role-playing performances, followed by using computers as well as production and editing software to produce a short film. The film was then shown in the classroom or uploaded to a website. All the participants had to memorize their scripts and perform their roles as a team. Throughout the research period, three focus group interviews were held, in which the participants answered semi-structured research questions, giving their feedback and opinions on the effectiveness of the dramatic play activities in improving their foreign language listening and speaking skills, as well as their learning experiences. After the researchers had recorded the participants' opinions, the protocol analysis approach was employed to analyze the contents of the interviews.

In addition, in-depth interviews with each participant were conducted in the form of standardized interviews and focused or semi-structured interviews. The researchers and the participants (labelled A through L) engaged in interviews in which the questions were designed according to the objectives of this study. Afterwards, the contents of the interviews were transcribed and coded. A composite method that combines content analysis and editing analysis was used for data analysis.

Furthermore, non-participant observation was used to obtain observational research data. The researchers observed the participants throughout their English course, and then recorded the observed classroom performances of the participants, so as to validate the data analysis results of the interviews.

## 4. Research Findings and Discussion

In this study, the data obtained through focus group interviews, in-depth interviews, and classroom observation was analyzed to explore the effects of the methods of implementing role-playing activities on the learners' foreign language learning outcomes. The results showed that the role-playing activities, regardless of whether they were implemented as traditional theatrical performances or role-playing activities involving the use of new technologies, had facilitated the learners' foreign language learning. The differences between the two methods were in their effects on the learners' psychological feelings and the intensity of their actual practice. The research findings were as follows:

1. The low achievers preferred the short filmmaking approach due to the lower psychological stress associated with it.  
If you ask me to choose between doing the theatrical performance or short film, I would choose the latter because I can't speak English fluently or speak or perform in front of a crowd. It also makes me extremely nervous and I would forget my lines, so that's why I would choose to make a film instead. Shooting a film also involves making many takes until we feel satisfied, but there's only a single take on stage. (B)  
I prefer the method of shooting and making a short film. This is because I get to have repeated chances to get my lines correct. Moreover, the film can be edited until it is perfect. (D)  
I prefer the filmmaking method, because I think that I will become nervous on stage and my performance may not be very good. On camera though, I don't experience that stage fright and I am also able to perform better. (A)
2. Some high achievers chose the short filmmaking approach as they wanted to learn filmmaking techniques in lieu of foreign languages.  
I would choose the filmmaking approach because it allows me to learn how to shoot and edit films, as well as adding and presenting the details of the film. (L)
3. Some of the foreign language learners chose the traditional theatrical performance approach because they were able to perceive an evident increase in their own capabilities after going through rigorous practice and presentations, thereby achieving a sense of achievement.

When we present the performance as a stage drama in front of our peers, various unforeseen situations are bound to happen. Thus, before going on stage, we must learn how to improvise. Even though there are things out of our control, but for me personally, this is a hard-to-come-by experience. In addition, after comparing both methods, I felt a greater sense of achievement after performing live. This is because during filming, I know that I can do retakes, and there is a lack of a "go for broke" feeling, so the experience doesn't feel as special. (C)

I prefer the stage drama approach because it gives us students an opportunity to communicate with each other. Theatrical performances require us to understand a script to its fullest. As humans, our body language is also more helpful for learning and making a deeper impression. Theatrical performances also allow us to inject more life into our English, as we can harness our creativity to make it more interesting. (H)

4. The attractiveness of new technologies is also a factor that promoted the learning motivation of some learners.

I choose the filmmaking approach since I am a girl who is interested in photography. Photos can capture wonderful moments and become keepsakes. The completed works can also serve as a reference for the juniors. The most important aspects for me are the reasons and motivations for shooting the film, as well as the ideas that we wish to express. (G)

5. As it is difficult to overcome the psychological hurdle of stage fright, some high achievers also preferred the filmmaking approach.

Since some of us may be shy, our performances would be easily affected if we were to present the theatrical performance on stage. Shooting a film allows us to have more flexibility and less exposure to stage fright. (E)

6. Even though the filmmaking approach reduced the learners' opportunities to practice, there was still a finished product. Compared to the traditional dramatization approach, the learners' amount of practice was lower.

I choose the filmmaking approach because I can learn other things apart from English throughout the shooting process. Even though a lot of my peers slacked off during the process, I think it's still a fun and interesting method for those who wish to learn. (I)

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestion

In terms of enhancing the listening and speaking abilities of foreign language learners, creating scenarios through the implementation of dramatization activities provides opportunities for learners to interact with one another. Small group collaborations enable learners to practice their listening and speaking skills at the same time while sparking their motivation to practice a foreign language, thereby deepening their experiences of interacting with their peers in a foreign language, as well as boosting their morale in learning. In terms of the differences between the implementation of theatrical performance-based instructional activities and technology-assisted short filmmaking in foreign language instruction, the results of this study revealed that both approaches were helpful for foreign language learning, although they had somewhat different effects.

Advancements in audio-visual technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have promoted the interest of foreign language learners in new technologies. They perceive that short filmmaking does not require them to perform on stage in front of an audience and that they thus will experience less psychological stress. By using filmmaking software, the learners are able to edit segments of their performances and add music, subtitles, and sound effects during post production. When they present their work on screen or online to an audience, they receive interesting experiences as well as immediate feedback. However, the promotion of learners' listening and speaking skills through this approach is relatively limited. By utilizing new technologies, some learners have discovered ways to reduce their practice efforts. For example, they can shoot small segments and then edit them into a complete segment in post-production. Relatedly, some learners focus more on improving their visual presentations than on improving their speaking skills. Therefore, instructors should take note of these situations as they can reduce the learners' willingness to practice their speaking skills. At the same time, some learners may prefer the short filmmaking approach due to the psychological hurdle of stage fright. As such, the approach can provide practice opportunities and inspiration for those foreign language learners with extreme stage fright.

On the other hand, traditional theatrical performance-based instructional activities require great teamwork and cohesion. The learners are more nervous when performing in front of an audience, an experience which differs from that of speaking in front of a camera. However, this approach encourages learners to invest more time and effort into practice, and is more effective in terms of enhancing their speaking skills. Foreign language learning requires the accumulation of long hours of practice, and positive learning experiences can help learners to continue their efforts in a more proactive manner. From the perspectives of instructors, in addition to the differences in the responses of high achievers and low achievers to the instructional activities, learners' abilities to express themselves in front of an audience, as well as psychological factors, can affect their learning outcomes. Therefore, it is important to understand learners' characteristics in order to select the appropriate instructional strategy. For foreign language learners, the development and elevation of their foreign language skills not only require learning motivation, but also courage, as having the courage to challenge oneself provides opportunities for learning progress.

### 5.1. Directions for future research

This study defined high and low achievers of a foreign language based on their paper-based TOEFL score, with 457 as the cutoff point. With regard to the directions for future research, foreign language oral exams can be added to the research framework, as well as further investigation on the learners' degree of improvement in their speaking skills in the role-playing activities. Furthermore, theatrical performance-based instructional activities not only emphasize learners' speaking skills, but also involve psychological aspects, such as interpersonal relationship and communication management, as well as the influence of learners' psychological stress from being in front of people on their foreign language learning outcomes. These are issues that researchers can further investigate in future studies.

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