



Research Article

EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING THROUGH DRAMATIC READING IN TEACHING ENGLISH: EVIDENCE AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN VIETNAM

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Received: July 25, 2023; Revised: August 02, 2023; Accepted: August 11, 2023

ABSTRACT

Experiential teaching is a trend applied in many subjects, including English, at the primary school level. Experiential teaching of English in primary schools can be done through many different methods, in which the dramatic reading method has been widely applied in the world and Vietnam recently. Based on the process of researching the theory of dramatic reading, this article focuses on studying the cases of teachers applying dramatic reading in teaching English at Bac Hai Primary School, District 10, Ho Chi Minh City. The research results show that through experiential teaching – dramatic reading, students can develop reading skills and attitudes of interest and be more excited with English reading skills compared to other methods.

Keywords: dramatic reading; experiential method; primary school English; using dramatic reading in teaching English in primary school

1. Introduction

English nowadays plays a role as a global language, especially in the context of globalization and the growing trade between countries. English education, therefore, also receives great attention in Viet Nam (Van, 2011). Still and all, it is not just about teaching English at tertiary levels or taking extra classes to improve foreign language skills. English has been paid attention by the State and included since elementary school. Exposure to English from an early age will increase the chances of children becoming proficient in a foreign language like their native language. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Training also determined to develop English skills as a long-term strategy (Pham et. al., 2019).

Cite this article as: Nguyen Dac Thanh, & Tra Hoang Tuan (2023). Experiential teaching through dramatic reading in teaching english: evidence at a primary school in Vietnam. *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science*, 20(9), 1622-1634.

The methods of teaching reading skills are the same for all ages. However, for children with hyperactivity, applying methods for students at higher levels to primary school students will cause boredom. Above all, learning reading skills is the skill with the minor activities of the four skills, heavy on theory, and can cause drowsiness for learners. It is because they just learn in the book, and lack experience in reality.

Teaching through experiential activities is being applied and strongly developed in Vietnam in the context of education towards the comprehensive development of qualities and abilities for students right from primary school age. It is also widely applied in English. However, there are still many difficulties in teaching reading skills to students, especially primary school students. This is because the English curriculum for primary school students has only been developed in recent years and most teachers are trained to teach middle and high school students, rather than specialize in teaching methods for elementary students.

Therefore, the field of effective teaching reading methods to apply in teaching to improve the quality of education in Vietnam has gained more attention.

1.1. The rationale for this research

Four important English skills are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each skill plays an important role in the development of students' foreign language skills. Reading is an essential skill for English. Because through reading, writing skills will be improved and the knowledge and vocabulary in reading lessons also contribute to the enhancement of listening and speaking. Nevertheless, dealing with reading lessons is often seen as difficult, especially for elementary school students. A progressive learning method would be an appreciable way to improve this. As Oxford (1990) stated, language learning strategies are particularly important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed movement, essential to developing communication skills. Drama has recently become a center of attention and is an important part of the reading curriculum in many countries (Urian, 2000). As a learning method, drama benefits students of all ages at all levels, as it provides them with the chance to promote more effective learning methods, strategies, and solutions (Booth, 1985). For all these reasons, there is a need for an investigation of the application of dramatic reading to promote student learning in reading lessons in primary school.

1.2. The scope of the study

An English learning program in a Vietnamese school will include many different skills. Many factors determine the success or failure of a subject, both on the student's side, the teacher, the school, and the external conditions. However, this study only focuses on the use of dramatic reading to increase students' learning ability in reading lessons at Primary school and some suggestions for improving the quality of reading here. From there, research can hopefully contribute to the development of education on a national scale.

2. Methods and objects

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Data collection

The data of this study was collected and processed by two methods. The first method is a literature review to analyze previous studies on teaching primary school English through Dramatic Reading using experiential teaching. The second method is direct interviews in Bac Hai Primary School. For the first method, the basic step in content analysis is to gather comparable data based on certain contents and subjects, and then arrange and analyze this data in a way that readers can comprehend (Yldrm & Şimşek, 2011). Furthermore, content analysis may be used to show study patterns and determine which topics researchers focus on in their research (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

A semi-structured interview has been developed and used to investigate students' understanding of dramatic reading and their impact on reading learning performance. When designing the interview questions, the author first assumes that students do not know about dramatic reading. Clinical and informal interviewing methods (McCracken, 1988) best fit these principles to elicit the best answers for students. In this type of interview, the researcher begins with a work instruction or a list of general topics to cover, as well as an opening statement and open-ended question designed to elicit the views of participants without making participants perceive any of the researcher's hypotheses. Then, the participants' content, feelings, and word choice become the structural mechanism for the next phase of the interview.

2.1.2. Review and Selection Criteria

ISI and Scopus sources were used to select appropriate articles for review, focusing on the experiential approach of teaching primary school English through Dramatic Reading. A variety of particular criteria connected to the database, participants, publication years, and article summary and abstracts were defined to choose the most accurate publications. First, the databases must meet the "Education" requirement, and if they have a relationship to the social sciences, they were selected. The databases were then searched using the terms "Experiential method," "Experiential method of primary school English," and "Dramatic Reading." After screening, studies that met the criteria were examined.

2.2. Participants

The study invited five pupils who were learning English at Bac Hai Primary School. They are all in fifth grade and have been studying English since the first grade. Three of them are female, while the other two are male. Four of the participants attended an after-school English class, while one only learned English in school. Two children received good grades, two received exceptional grades, and one received an ordinary grades. Each interview was audiotaped and saved for subsequent study. Because all of the kids are Vietnamese, the interviews were performed in Vietnamese so that the children could express

ideas about how to learn to read in a relaxed setting. The interviews were then translated into English for analysis.

The following actions were taken to gather and evaluate data:

- Conducting interviews with pupils at Bac Hai Primary School.
- Analyzing the interviews by identifying and categorizing common and recurring themes in the data.
- Contrasting the interview results with the findings of the literature research.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Literature review

3.1.1. Experiential learning and teaching

David Kolb (1984, 2014) gave the first clear definition of experiential learning theory with the certainty that knowledge is formed through real-life experiences (p.41). Kolb has also demonstrated that student engagement in subjects is influenced by experiential activities such as internships, service work, and participation in social activities. Besides, Kolb highlighted the difference between ELT and other traditional pedagogical methods, where knowledge is heavily theoretical and separate from reality. Instead, experiential learning helps students gain knowledge through real-life experiences about the problems they are facing (Carter et. al,1986). Each student will have different feelings about problems in life, and each student will have their ways to solve those problems.

3.1.2. Drama and reading conceptualization

Reading is defined as the process by which a reader uses their linguistic skills to decipher information from a text (Bernhardt, 2011). According to Griffin and Snow (1998), reading is the process of interpreting meaning from written texts through the reader's knowledge. According to Smith (2012), reading is a participatory activity in which readers generate hypotheses, evaluate their predictions, and utilize their knowledge to construct meaning. Reading, according to Anderson (2003), is an act of linking written symbols with audible language, building meaning while interacting with a text. Reading, on the other hand, is an action that creates meaning by integrating a reader's past knowledge with information from texts (Israel & Duffy, 2009). Reading is also viewed as an interactive process between the reader and the text, in which students engage in pre-preparation, text construction, and explanation of meaning to promote understanding (Carrell & Grabe, 2013). As a result, reading is not a monotonous one-way activity, but rather involves interaction between the reader (as students) and the text (textbook and instructional materials). Enjoyment is required in each engagement to inspire more successful interactions, especially with young children.

3.1.3. Effective reading

According to research, a competent reader understands how to apply optimal reading methods for himself. Wassman and Rinsky (1993) state that a competent reader must grasp

the reading process as well as how to interpret various forms of print content. A second student or a foreigner can practice tactics that will help them succeed in becoming effective readers in this manner. Furthermore, they emphasize two critical criteria for a good reader: a desire to overcome reading habits that restrict learners' reading abilities and readiness to practice.

3.1.4. Dramatic reading

A dramatic activity, like reading, requires students to engage with other stakeholders or aspects, analyze what others say and do, and build on their understanding. Drama, literature, and reading all have a strong connection (Kempe & Nicholson, 2007). According to Kelner and Flynn (2006), there is a tight association between drama and reading. Because dramatic reading incorporates a variety of components such as storyboards, character speech, animations, and human reactions. "Making personal meaning and sense of universal, abstract, social, moral, and ethical concepts through the concrete experience of drama" (Bolton, 1985). Therefore, dramatic reading is simply understood as a method with using both actions and emotions when reading. That means students will perform the reading with different voices (angry voice, old man voice, baby voice, high tone, low tone...) and the appropriate movements known as body language, and eye contact to transmit the lesson. So, the main information of the text is absolutely and accidentally absorbed by the students.

3.1.5. Dramatic reading benefit

Through drama, students learn to develop the language skills needed in reading lessons (Kelner & Flynn, 2006). Many studies have been conducted to prove the ability of dramatic reading to improve students' reading, speaking, listening, as well as social skills (Brown & Pleydell, 1999; Fennessey, 2006; Kornfeld & Leyden, 2005; Schneider & Jackson, 2000; Winston, 2004). Drama helps provide specific opportunities to develop literacy (Kempe & Nicholson, 2007), allowing students to use all of the meanings of decoding, understanding other people's emotions, broadening vocabulary, using appropriate syntax, analyzing discourse, generating feedback in context, and building metacognitive knowledge (Urian, 2000). Drama helps students develop skills of reading, such as contextualizing what they read in a text into their experiences, emotions, attitudes, ideas, values, and life situations (Booth, 1985). Through drama, students not only read what's in the text but actually "live" in it, a process that leads to better understanding and memory. By expressing themselves in the fictional world they have built, they can actualize their ideas through their imagination (Cremin, 1998). Furthermore, drama helps students develop verbal interpretation (Hoyt, 1992) of their reading. The benefits of drama to reading lessons are undeniable and are being studied for better application in education all around the world.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Reading teaching strategies in Vietnam

A strategy is very important in any field because it helps shape subsequent practices. In a study at a high school in Vietnam, Nguyen (2007) pointed out that all teachers see the importance of reading strategies. The teachers also said that despite many reading difficulties such as long paragraphs, specialized terms, and not being able to complete everything in a short amount of time, an effective strategy will help students overcome these (Nguyen, 2007). In addition, Nguyen (2007) and Do and Nguyen (2014) also added that teachers often focus only on the task of completing lessons, not on guiding students to handle different types of reading (Do & Nguyen, 2014). This may be a shortcoming in teaching tactics for reading that need to be improved in Vietnam. It also shows that another difficulty for students is adapting to a variety of readings in genres and the lack of a method to make learning to read easier. There is room for dramatic reading here to help solve these two difficult points.

In the study of Tran and Nguyen (2017), they pointed out 11 reading learning strategies for teaching EFL to young students in Vietnam. Which uses context and connection are the most important strategies (Tran & Nguyen, 2017). Context and connection are also two typical elements of dramatic reading because dramas always need a context to create the storylines and climax as well as elements that connect with viewers through emotion. Although this study did not show the uses of dramatic reading in improving reading for elementary school students, the findings of the study serve as a theoretical basis to show the effectiveness of dramatic reading in learning to read for young students. In the same study, Tran and Nguyen (2017) also emphasized that students love role-playing when learning to read English and this is the method that students like most. But even though students are interested in English learning methods such as role-playing, games, and group work, students still do not like learning to read English (Tran & Nguyen, 2017). Either way, role-playing arouses student interest and has a direct impact on student performance (Tran & Nguyen, 2017).

Nguyen (2018) also said that university teachers should increase students' awareness of equipping strategies to help improve their reading ability and understand how to use each strategy so that they do not just provide students with the basics of different reading strategies but also teach students how to use them effectively. This opinion shows the importance of teachers and their awareness in improving reading ability. The importance of the right strategies and tools and their application to more effective reading learning.

3.2.2. Elements affected reading teaching and learning in Vietnam

Motivation to learn English in general and reading lessons in particular can be key factors for a student's reading success (Nguyen, 2018). That is the result that Nguyen (2018) discovered through a study carried out on 286 students at Vietnam National University of Economics. In that same study, nearly all study participants identified the significant

importance of being a fluent English reader, but not many of them showed an ability to read English proficiently (Nguyen, 2018). Therefore, both motivational and effective reading learning methods should be prioritized for application in reading instruction to students.

Nguyen (2007) also agrees on the impact of motivation on student learning. In addition, Nguyen (2007) also pointed out many factors that influence learning to read such as teaching context (time, facilities, student level), professional experience of teachers, materials, and education curriculum. Most of these factors are incomplete, leading to the poor quality of learning to read in Vietnam. For example, a lesson time is 45 minutes, too short to understand a 200-300 word reading for students, older teachers lack training in effective reading strategies, and study materials are not optimized to support learning (Nguyen, 2007).

3.2.3. Using dramatic reading to promote student learning in reading lessons in primary schools

Although there is no research on dramatic reading applications in Vietnam, there are also some articles about dramatic reading achievements in reading lessons of students. In Tanner's study (2012), students had a positive effect after applying drama activities to reading such as higher scores, better self-understanding, and the ability to imagine the reading content. Students also increase interaction and collaboration with reading through drama activities (Tanner, 2012). That is also the result that Tajareh et. al. (2017) found in research on the impact of drama on young Iranian EFL students' reading comprehension. Other studies also show that dramatic reading enhances readability (DuPont, 1989; Rose, Parks, Androes, & McMahan, 2000; Booth, 1985; Brown & Pleydell, 1999, Fennessessey, 2006; Kornfeld & Leyden, 2005).

3.2.4. Reading lessons in Bac Hai Primary School before applying dramatic reading

- *Activities in the reading classroom*

In general, all children answered innocently and comfortably about their thoughts about learning reading lessons at school. Some children take time to think before responding, and some children are easily distracted and have to answer many times to correct the center of the problem. Nonetheless, these ideas are very valuable for assessing reading learning in Bac Hai Primary School. When asked what they usually do in reading class, they remember "reading and doing exercises" the most. A very general answer did not show their enthusiasm.

Student 1 said "While learning reading, the teacher will let everyone read the textbook's reading paragraph first. But usually, we have already read it at home one night in advance, in the class we just do exercises and fix our homework." It is also a way to save time for learning by allowing children to prepare in advance at home. This is as Nguyen (2007) pointed out earlier study time is quite short at 45 minutes while the reading is long and there are many other activities. Letting children read their text at home can lead to a

serious flaw in their reading strategies and methods. Instead, they just focus on the exercises and scores.

One child also mentioned that one of his friends would read the text aloud to the class. Or the whole class would read the reading together. Then the teacher explained things in the reading article such as vocabulary and sentence patterns. In the end, the whole class would do the homework, submit the homework, and correct the exercise. This is a very traditional way of teaching. It is a teacher lecture, and students listen. Teaching is very one-way. It is only suitable for completing the exercises (Nguyen, 2007), not instructing them on a correct skill enhancement strategy (Do et. al., 2014).

- *Students' feelings about reading lessons*

When asked how they feel about their reading class, although they have different answers, they generally emphasize that they do not like to learn reading, that reading is not interesting, even a child sometimes suspects why he needs to learn it. Like student 4 said, "If I learn listening or speaking, it is at least a bit more fun since I can interact with other kids, and reading and writing is boring because it's all about homework." Student 3 said, "Even though I know that I have to learn listening, speaking, reading, and writing, sometimes I feel sleepy during reading lessons and I just hope to finish class as quickly as possible." Students with traditional learning methods lack motivation. While motivation is the key factor determining the success of this subject (Russia, 2007; Nguyen, 2018). They barely remember much about their previous reading experiences, nor do they reveal many feelings about their reading lessons.

3.2.5. *Dramatic reading promotes student learning in reading lessons*

- *Feelings about dramatic reading in reading lessons*

However, when asked about the process of learning to read after applying dramatic reading, the results are completely different. Although the student has little interest in learning English and the worst results, he is more interested in learning. When asked about his experience when applying dramatic reading, all five students showed that they like this way of learning. Student 1 said, "When I use acting, I feel the classroom is happier." Student 2 shared his feelings in laughter, "There are many very funny readers. Because you want to act like characters. So, when you play the role of the old man will try to speak like an old man. Some of you even pretend to be a girl, so it is fun." The excitement is the first step in motivating students, especially for children like elementary school students.

They also said that they "can understand the story more easily, feel connected to the lesson, and remember the story longer," not just remembering the exercise. As Booth (1985) said, they have the opportunity to experience and learn many things through dramatic reading such as experiences, emotions, attitudes, ideas, values, and life situations. That is why they connect with the reading more and more interactively (Tanner, 2012).

One student expressed, “With this kind of reading, I feel like using Vietnamese so it is easier for me to understand the text, read it out loud, and remember it.” This shows that dramatic reading improves student learning skill significantly. Three out of five students also shared that they could learn something through dramatic reading like emotion and expression (student 2), understanding of context (student 4), and content and meaning of the story (student 5).

- *Difficulties in using dramatic reading*

Talking about the difficulties in using dramatic reading, the students hardly showed any difficulty or trouble with it. They just talked about how they learn. Acting or using elements of dramatic reading was very easy for them. At first, although it took them time to get acquainted, still it was not a big deal to them. There was a student who talked about the initial difficulty of having to work in groups with other children in applying dramatic reading because everyone wanted to play good roles, lead roles, and beautiful roles. They also did not like being the narrator but wanted to be a character in it. The application of dramatic reading sometimes leads to distraction during reading learning. Yet in general, the results that dramatic reading brings are undeniable.

3.3. Discussion and implications

Student's perception of dramatic reading is still quite vague. The definition of dramatic activity is "making personal meaning and sense of universal, abstract, social, moral, and ethical concepts through the concrete experience of the drama" (Bolton, 1985). However, they do not fully understand dramatic reading. Instead, they just think of it as a kind of role-playing, while the two concepts of role-playing and dramatic reading are different. The fact that elementary school students can't understand the concept and the real meaning of these two words is acceptable and understandable. Since they are too young to perceive concepts and strategies, they must be able to discern the differences before and after dramatic reading. They also realize the change in learning motivation before and after dramatic reading when all 5 children show their boredom in reading before and enjoy dramatic reading after that.

Particularly the impact of dramatic reading on children is very clear. As Urian (2000) said dramatic reading helps children understand emotional factors and context, and then gain more knowledge and improve reading skills. Students at Bac Hai Primary School show similar things when they recognize the small changes that dramatic reading brings. Thereby, they not only learned to read but also improved their social skills such as handling situations, understanding emotions, and communicating (Booth, 1985). They overcame the initial difficulties such as a lack of motivation and love of the subject, not understanding the lesson, and not remembering the lesson. As Tran and Nguyen (2017) said, role-playing arouses student interest and has a direct impact on student performance. For reading, understanding the text is the final purpose. Thus, if only paying attention to the exercises and the scores, this will lose its original meaning. Meanwhile, with dramatic reading, students at Bac Hai

Primary School show that they can understand the lesson better. This is because the dramatic elements in this method help them connect with the story more (Tanner, 2012) and live in it so they can understand it better (Cremin, 1998).

Research has realized that dramatic reading benefits students, so there should be some pedagogical implications for dramatic reading lessons in Bac Hai Primary School. Because they still think that they are just playing a role without knowing that they are applying the dramatic reading method. Accordingly, teachers can apply other sides of dramatic reading such as letting children express their thoughts, comments, and feelings after reading a drama reading; giving examples, and stories similar to readings they witness in everyday life or through books they know; using more learning tools such as technology application to let children watch and listen to dramatic readings. Dramatic reading also needs to be applied for a long time and spread across the school to see more results of dramatic reading.

Despite showing important findings as well as showing the recommendations, the research still has its limitations. Since it was only possible to interview five students in the school, this is still a very small number compared to the number of students at Bac Hai Pprimary School. This may not be the voice of representation for all of the remaining students. In addition, because the time of applying dramatic reading and observation was short, the study is impossible to explore all the impact of dramatic reading on students' reading learning.

4. Conclusion

The study addressed two issues: the relevance of the scenario-based learning method from previous studies, and the effect of this method on students at Bac Hai Primary School. The impact of dramatic reading on improving the reading learning ability of Bac Hai elementary school students is clear. The obvious positive aspects are improving motivation, easier understanding, longer memory retention, and more understanding of emotions and context. Using dramatic reading can have a positive impact and can change the quality of reading teaching in Vietnam. More studies on dramatic reading at schools in Vietnam should be conducted. Subsequent studies may apply other methods to sample more and study more subjects. Research time can also be extended for more accurate and effective results.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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**SỬ DỤNG PHƯƠNG THỨC TRẢI NGHIỆM QUA ĐỌC TÍCH CỰC
TRONG DẠY HỌC MÔN TIẾNG ANH:
MINH CHỨNG TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG TIỂU HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM**

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Ngày nhận bài: 25-7-2023; ngày nhận bài sửa: 02-8-2023; ngày duyệt đăng: 11-8-2023

TÓM TẮT

Dạy học theo phương thức trải nghiệm là xu hướng được áp dụng đối với nhiều môn học, trong đó có môn Tiếng Anh ở bậc tiểu học. Dạy học trải nghiệm môn tiếng Anh ở tiểu học có thể được thực hiện qua nhiều phương pháp khác nhau. Cách đọc tích cực (dramatic reading) đã được áp dụng nhiều trên thế giới và ở Việt Nam trong giai đoạn gần đây. Thông qua nghiên cứu lí luận về cách thức đọc tích cực, bài báo tập trung nghiên cứu trường hợp giáo viên áp dụng đọc tích cực trong dạy học tiếng Anh ở Trường Tiểu học Bắc Hải, Quận 10, Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy thông qua phương pháp trải nghiệm đọc tích cực, học sinh phát triển được kĩ năng đọc, thái độ yêu thích và có hứng thú hơn với giờ học kĩ năng đọc môn tiếng Anh so với các phương pháp khác.

Từ khóa: hoạt động trải nghiệm; tiếng Anh tiểu học; đọc tích cực; sử dụng đọc tích cực trong dạy học môn Tiếng Anh ở tiểu học