



The Effect of English Drama in Enhancing Vocabulary Among Primary School Students in Guangzhou, China

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the effects of drama-based instruction on vocabulary development and learning motivation among primary EFL learners in Guangzhou, China. Although drama pedagogy has received growing attention, empirical evidence focusing specifically on measurable vocabulary acquisition remains limited in China. A quasi-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design was conducted with 20 Grade 5 students over a seven-week intervention. Additionally, 100 students from Grades 3 to 6 completed a questionnaire assessing five dimensions of motivation toward drama-based vocabulary learning. Results indicated a statistically significant and large improvement in vocabulary test scores, $t(19) = -11.52, p < 0.001$. Questionnaire findings revealed generally positive motivational responses, with intrinsic enjoyment and social support rated highest, while perceived long-term usefulness was comparatively lower. These findings suggest that drama-based instruction promotes vocabulary development through contextualized engagement and collaborative interaction. The study provides empirical support for integrating drama pedagogy into primary EFL vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: *English Drama; Learner Motivation; Primary Education; Vocabulary Learning*

Background

Vocabulary knowledge is foundational to young learners' English development because it underpins comprehension, communication, and participation in classroom activities (Nation, 2022). Yet in many Chinese primary schools, vocabulary instruction continues to be shaped by examination-oriented practices such as memorization and isolated word learning, which limit opportunities for meaningful use (Hu, 2002; Gao & Feng, 2022). These approaches may help children recognize words for tests but often fail to build the depth of knowledge required for retention and communicative application. Recent curriculum reforms in China emphasize meaningful input, experiential tasks, and communicative competence, reinforcing the need for instructional approaches that move beyond mechanical vocabulary learning (Ministry of Education, 2022). Drama-based instruction has gained attention in this context because it embeds language within stories, characters, and interaction. Research indicates that drama can provide meaningful contexts for language use and support learner engagement (Stinson & Winston, 2011), and many schools in Guangzhou have begun introducing drama through enrichment lessons or extracurricular programmers. However, despite its growing presence in practice, empirical research examining how drama affects vocabulary learning or shapes primary learners' motivation remains limited in Chinese primary education (Schmitt, & Schmitt 2020).

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the impact of a seven-week drama-based instructional program implemented in a primary school in Guangzhou. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

How does English drama affect primary school students' vocabulary learning?

How are primary school students motivated to learn English vocabulary through drama?

By integrating a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with a multidimensional motivational survey, this study aims to provide empirical evidence for the cognitive and affective effects of drama-based vocabulary instruction in primary EFL education.

Literature Review

Vocabulary Learning method and Young Learners in EFL Contexts

Vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts has gradually shifted from traditional form-focused approaches to more communicative and strategy-oriented practices. Nevertheless, vocabulary teaching in many primary classrooms remains largely influenced by grammar–translation traditions, emphasizing memorization and direct translation. In resource-limited settings, such practices continue to dominate. Tahir *et al.*, (2023), based on a survey of 56 Malaysian ESL primary school teachers, found that participants tended to rely primarily on explicit instructional approaches, particularly rote memorization in vocabulary teaching, while Kusumawati and Arifin (2024) similarly identified repetition and translation as dominant techniques among Indonesian primary learners. These findings suggest that conventional, low-tech methods remain central to vocabulary instruction in many EFL primary contexts. Beyond instructional techniques, research has increasingly examined vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), defined as learners' techniques for acquiring, storing, retrieving, and using lexical items. Lei *et al.*, (2022) demonstrated that explicit strategy training, including word cards and semantic mapping, significantly improved vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners. Likewise, Zuhairi and Mistar (2023) found that metacognitive and cognitive strategies were positively associated with vocabulary size. While these studies highlight the value of strategic awareness, their applicability to younger learners warrants careful consideration, as metacognitive control is still developing at the primary level (Lei, & Qin, 2022; Lei, & Reynolds, 2022; Schmitt, & Schmitt 2020).

In addition to strategy-based instruction, increasing attention has been given to embedding vocabulary learning in meaningful and contextualized activities. Storytelling, songs, role-play, drama tasks, and games create opportunities for repeated exposure and active use in communicative settings. From a cognitive perspective, vocabulary development is strengthened when learners encounter words multiple times and process them in meaningful contexts that promote deeper engagement (Nation, 2022; Webb & Nation, 2017). Young learners particularly benefit from multimodal and experiential input, as concrete experiences and emotional associations support stronger semantic connections (Kress, *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, Achchilage and Mohammed (2022) found that narrating picture books significantly supported English vocabulary learning and retention among young learners, highlighting the value of contextualized and story-based language exposure in early vocabulary development.

Vocabulary learning is also shaped by affective variables. Anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes may reduce young learners' willingness to participate in classroom interaction. According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, emotional barriers can impede the intake and internalization of linguistic input. Empirical evidence from Chinese primary schools further indicates that foreign-language anxiety negatively predicts English achievement (Hu, Zhang, & McGeown, 2021). Supporting the importance of affective factors in language learning, Khan *et al.*, (2024) highlighted the positive role of foreign language enjoyment in reducing anxiety and enhancing motivation, suggesting that positive emotional experiences can facilitate the language-learning process. Taken together, existing research underscores the importance of vocabulary instruction that integrates repeated contextual exposure, meaningful engagement, and affective support. However, many instructional approaches address cognitive and emotional dimensions separately. There remains a need for pedagogical models that simultaneously promote active vocabulary use, contextualized learning, and a psychologically safe learning environment for young EFL learners. Drama-based instruction has gained increasing attention for its potential to address these interconnected needs.

Drama-Based Instruction and Its Effects on Vocabulary and Motivation

Drama-based instruction integrates contextualized language input, embodied action, emotional involvement, and social interaction, which together support vocabulary development. Activities such as reading scripts, role-play, story enactment, and performance require learners to use vocabulary meaningfully, aligning with the four strands of effective vocabulary instruction (Nation, 2022). Scripts provide meaning-focused input, rehearsals offer repeated practice, and performances create authentic opportunities for communicative output.

A substantial body of international research provides converging evidence for the effectiveness of drama-based instruction in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and learner motivation in EFL contexts. Studies conducted in Malaysia, Indonesia, Poland, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia consistently demonstrate that learners exposed to drama-integrated pedagogy achieve greater vocabulary gains and stronger retention than those receiving conventional instruction (Hutagalung, Lai, & Adams, 2020; Nanda & Susanto, 2021; Yumurtacı & Mede, 2021; Brachaczek & Polok, 2023; Alshraideh & Alahmadi, 2020).

Across early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary settings, drama activities such as storytelling, role-play, script enactment, and simulation embed lexical items within meaningful communicative contexts while increasing repetition and depth of processing. Empirical findings indicate that situating vocabulary within narrative performance enhances semantic consolidation and recall (Mede & Vardar, 2021; Brachaczek & Polok, 2023). In addition to cognitive gains, research consistently reports heightened engagement, reduced anxiety, and greater willingness to use newly acquired vocabulary in communicative interaction (Nanda & Susanto, 2021; Yumurtacı & Mede, 2021). Similar motivational benefits have been observed in other interactive instructional approaches, with Ratna *et al.*, (2023) finding

that gamified learning was more effective than rote learning and generated positive learner perceptions, supporting the broader value of enjoyable and participatory learning environments. The convergence of findings across sociocultural contexts and developmental stages suggests that drama-based pedagogy represents a developmentally adaptable and pedagogically robust approach to vocabulary learning. Its effectiveness appears transferable across educational levels, indicating broad applicability within EFL instruction.

Within the Chinese EFL context, drama-based pedagogy has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. Existing research indicates that drama activities can enhance classroom participation, oral expression, and learner engagement, particularly in primary and secondary English classrooms (Chen, 2019, 2020; Gao & Feng, 2022; Liu, 2022). Micro-drama lessons, story enactment, and performance-based tasks are frequently reported to stimulate interaction and create more dynamic learning environments. However, compared with the expanding international evidence, vocabulary-specific empirical research remains comparatively limited in China. While improvements in general language use and classroom engagement are commonly documented, explicit measurement of vocabulary acquisition and retention has received less systematic attention. Many studies focus on speaking proficiency, instructional design, or teacher perceptions rather than controlled intervention-based evaluation of lexical outcomes. In urban contexts such as Guangzhou, drama has been explored as an innovative instructional approach. Nevertheless, studies that explicitly examine its impact on vocabulary development, particularly among primary school learners, remain relatively underrepresented. This indicates the need for structured empirical investigations that evaluate both vocabulary performance and learner motivation within authentic classroom settings.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative one-group pretest–posttest design to examine the impact of drama-based instruction on students' vocabulary development. In addition, a cross-sectional questionnaire survey was conducted to explore students' motivational responses to English drama activities. Although the design does not include a control group, it provides preliminary evidence of the instructional effectiveness within an authentic setting.

Sampling and Participants

The study was conducted at Z Primary School in Guang Zhou, China. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 fifth-grade students from the school's English drama interest class to participate in the intervention and to complete the vocabulary pretest and posttest. In addition, 100 students from Grades 3 to 6 were randomly selected to complete the questionnaire that assessed students' responses to learning vocabulary through drama-related activities. All participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that responses would be kept confidential.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study: a vocabulary test and a questionnaire. The vocabulary test assessed students' receptive and partially productive knowledge of twenty-five target words embedded in the drama lessons. Both the pretest and posttest included identical item types, namely picture recognition, word–meaning matching, and sentence completion. Each test required approximately 25 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was designed to measure students' motivation toward learning vocabulary through drama-based activities. A 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was developed to measure five motivational dimensions as Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaire Items Across Motivational Dimensions

Dimensions	Item numbers
Intrinsic enjoyment	B1, B2
Social support	B3, B4, B8, B9
Usefulness and opportunities	B5, B6, B10, B11
Self-efficacy	B7, B12
Cognitive and learning outcomes	B13, B14, B15

Procedure

The study was conducted over a nine-week period within a school-based English drama program. At the beginning of the research period, a motivation questionnaire was administered to 100 students. Prior to the instructional phase, the 20 participating students completed a vocabulary pretest to assess their baseline knowledge of the selected target words.

The intervention was then implemented over seven weeks through structured drama-based activities. Target vocabulary items were introduced explicitly and practiced through script reading, role-play, guided rehearsal, and short performances. These activities provided repeated and contextualized exposure to the target words and encouraged active use in meaningful communicative contexts.

At the end of the intervention, the 20 students completed a post-test under comparable conditions to measure vocabulary development.

Results and Discussion

The vocabulary test results demonstrated a clear improvement following the drama-based instructional intervention. As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, students' mean pretest score was 11.45 (SD = 2.89), whereas the mean posttest score increased to 15.70 (SD = 3.84), reflecting an average gain of 4.25 points. A paired-samples t-test confirmed that the difference was statistically significant, $t(19) = -11.52$, $p < .001$ (Cohen's $d \approx 2.58$), indicating a substantial positive impact of drama-based learning on vocabulary acquisition. The consistently higher post-test scores suggest that most learners benefited from repeated exposure to target words through drama activities.

Table 2. Paired Samples Statistics

	Test	Mean	N	SD	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test	11.45	20	2.892	0.647
	Post-test	15.7	20	3.84	0.859

Table 3. Paired Samples t-Test Results for Vocabulary Pre-test and Post-test

	Test	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig.
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-test & Post-test	-4.25	1.65	0.369	-5.022	-3.478	-11.517	19	<0.001

To complement the vocabulary results, questionnaire data about motivation were collected from 100 students in Grades 3–6. Table 4 summarizes the mean scores of the five motivational dimensions. All component means were above the midpoint of 3.0, indicating generally positive attitudes toward learning vocabulary through drama. Intrinsic enjoyment recorded the highest mean ($M = 3.96$), followed closely by social support ($M = 3.92$), suggesting that students were particularly motivated by the engaging and collaborative aspects of drama. Self-efficacy ($M = 3.78$) and cognitive/learning outcomes ($M = 3.77$) also received favorable responses, reflecting perceived gains in confidence and understanding. Usefulness and opportunities were the lowest-rated dimension ($M = 3.49$), indicating some uncertainty about drama's long-term academic or communicative value. Nonetheless, overall motivation remained firmly positive.

Table 4. Comparison of Mean Scores Across Five Motivational Dimensions ($N = 100$)

Dimensions	mean
Intrinsic enjoyment	3.96
Social support	3.92
Usefulness and opportunities	3.49
Self-efficacy	3.78
Cognitive and learning outcomes	3.77

The results of the study demonstrate that drama-based instruction exerted a substantial positive effect on vocabulary learning among primary school students. The significant increase in posttest scores indicates that embedding vocabulary in dramatic contexts provided learners with repeated opportunities for meaningful and contextualised use. This finding is consistent with Nation's Vocabulary Learning Framework, which highlights the importance of repeated, meaningful encounters for strengthening retention and facilitating the development of vocabulary knowledge. The integration of movement, role-play and narrative likely contributed to deeper cognitive processing and more stable retrieval pathways, helping explain the considerable gains observed within a relatively short instructional period.

The motivational responses offer further insight into the mechanisms underlying these gains. High scores in intrinsic enjoyment and social support suggest that drama created a positive affective climate that encouraged participation and reduced anxiety. This pattern aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that low anxiety and high motivation enhance the effectiveness of language input by allowing learners to process and internalize linguistic material more efficiently. Students benefited not only from the enjoyment and novelty of drama activities but also from the collaborative nature of the tasks, which provided opportunities for peer interaction and shared meaning construction. This collaborative dimension reflects constructivist principles, where learning is facilitated through social engagement and joint problem solving.

Although overall motivation remained positive, students reported several challenges associated with drama-based learning, including difficulty memorizing lines, comprehending sections of the script, and coping with nervousness during performance. These task-related challenges are common in drama-based EFL contexts and may increase cognitive load for some learners. Such difficulties may also influence how students perceive the long-term usefulness of drama, especially when performance demands create uncertainty about how well drama-related tasks connect to examination goals.

This may help explain why the usefulness and opportunities component received the lowest mean score in the questionnaire, even though the measurable vocabulary gains demonstrated clear learning benefits. When learners struggle with script comprehension or performance preparation, they may view drama as less directly linked to academic achievement, despite its demonstrated effectiveness in supporting vocabulary acquisition. The slightly lower mean in perceived usefulness suggests that students may not

immediately recognize how creative, performance-based activities contribute to formal assessment goals, a pattern often observed in exam-driven EFL contexts. Overall, the findings indicate that drama-based instruction supports vocabulary learning through both cognitive and affective pathways. Contextualized exposure, multiple encounters and embodied performance appear to promote strong vocabulary retention, while enjoyment, confidence and social interaction create a motivational environment that encourages active engagement with new language. These complementary effects help explain the significant improvement observed within a short time frame. When drama is integrated purposefully into vocabulary instruction and aligned with curricular objectives, it can function not only as an engaging classroom activity but also as an effective approach for enhancing foundational vocabulary knowledge in primary school EFL settings.

Conclusion

This study examined the effect of drama-based instruction on vocabulary learning and motivation among primary school students in Guangzhou. The findings demonstrated that the drama-integrated approach led to significant improvement in students' vocabulary performance within a short instructional period. The motivational results further indicated that students held favorable attitudes toward learning vocabulary through drama, particularly in relation to enjoyment, peer support and confidence. These affective factors, together with repeated contextualized exposure to vocabulary during drama activities, appear to have contributed significantly to learners' overall progress. The study provides several pedagogical implications for primary EFL instruction. First, drama can serve as an effective means of introducing and consolidating vocabulary, as it enables learners to encounter target words in meaningful, memorable and socially engaging contexts. Second, incorporating drama activities into regular English lessons may help build a positive learning environment that encourages participation and reduces anxiety, thereby supporting more effective language input. Finally, teachers can enhance learners' perceptions of the usefulness of drama by explicitly linking classroom activities to curricular goals and assessment expectations.

Despite the encouraging findings, several constraints should be acknowledged. The absence of a control group limits the strength of causal claims, as improvements may partly reflect testing familiarity or developmental progression. Additionally, the relatively short intervention period did not allow for examination of long-term retention effects. The reliance on self-reported motivational data may also introduce response bias. Future research should employ randomized controlled designs with larger samples, incorporate delayed post-tests to examine retention, and investigate which specific drama techniques most effectively enhance vocabulary learning.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Each participant willingly participated after receiving adequate information about the study, and all collected data were handled in a confidential manner.

Conflicts of Interest: Not Applicable.

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