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ENGLISH DRAMA AS AN ACTIVITY FOR PROMOTING SPEAKING SKILLS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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Abstract. The article examines the extracurricular activity English Drama as a didactic approach to promoting speaking skills in a foreign language at the primary school level. The starting point of the paper is the observation that, within traditional foreign language instruction, pupils often have limited opportunities for relaxed and authentic oral expression, which may affect the development of speaking fluency and self-confidence. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of the communicative approach, learning through play, and embodied learning, the article presents a model of practice based on drama and theatre activities.

The paper describes a holistic process of creating a theatrical performance, including the selection of literary material, collaborative story creation, gradual development of speaking and reading comprehension, dramatization, and public performance. Particular emphasis is placed on teaching methods that encourage pupils' active involvement in the learning process and enable meaningful, relaxed, and authentic use of the foreign language in spoken communication.

Based on systematic pedagogical observations, the effects of the activity on the development of pupils' speaking competence, motivation, and self-confidence are presented, with special attention given to the inclusion of more reserved pupils. The findings confirm that drama-based activities represent an effective complement to foreign language instruction and contribute significantly to the development of speaking skills and a positive attitude towards foreign language learning in children.

Key words: foreign language speaking skills, drama-based activities in teaching, learning through play, communicative approach, primary school level

1. Introduction

The development of speaking skills in a foreign language represents one of the central yet most challenging tasks of teaching at the primary school level. During this period, pupils are still developing their basic linguistic, social, and emotional competences; consequently, their oral expression in a foreign language is often characterised by reticence, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of self-confidence. Although contemporary curricula emphasise the communicative approach and active language use, classroom practice frequently shows that pupils have limited opportunities for relaxed, authentic, and extended oral expression in regular lessons.

Due to time and organisational constraints, spoken interaction is often restricted to short, pre-structured responses, with the primary focus placed on linguistic accuracy. Such an approach may hinder the development of speaking fluency and spontaneity and does not provide sufficient opportunities for language use in meaningful and emotionally safe contexts. As a result, there is a growing need for didactic approaches that offer pupils

greater exposure to spoken language, an active role in the learning process, and opportunities to learn a foreign language in contexts that are both motivating and developmentally appropriate.

One such approach is offered by drama and theatre activities, which integrate language, movement, emotions, and collaborative learning. Drama enables learning through play, role-taking, and story creation, thereby providing pupils with a safe environment for experimenting with language and gradually developing speaking confidence.

This article examines the extracurricular activity English Drama as a didactic approach to promoting speaking skills in a foreign language at the primary school level. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of the communicative approach, learning through play, and embodied learning, the paper presents a model of practice based on drama and theatre activities. A holistic process of creating a theatrical performance is described, encompassing the selection of literary material, collaborative story creation, and public performance, as well as teaching methods that enable relaxed, meaningful, and authentic use of the foreign language. Based on classroom-based observations, the effects of the activity on the development of pupils' speaking competence, motivation, and self-confidence are discussed. The article confirms that drama-based activities represent an effective complement to foreign language instruction and contribute significantly to the development of speaking competence in children.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Importance of Speaking Skills in Foreign Language Learning in Children

Speaking skills play a central role in foreign language learning, as they enable active language use in a communicative context. At the primary school level, spoken language development is closely linked to the development of cognitive processes, social skills, and emotional maturity. Cameron (2001) emphasises that children do not learn a foreign language in isolation from other activities, but rather through holistic experiences in which language functions as a means of communication rather than an end.

The importance of an emotionally safe learning environment and pupils' active involvement in the learning process is also highlighted by Marentič Požarnik (2000), who points out that high-quality learning occurs when learners are cognitively and emotionally engaged in activities. Such learning environments foster intrinsic motivation and enable deeper understanding and more durable knowledge.

The communicative approach emphasises language use for meaning making rather than the mere accurate application of grammatical structures. According to Harmer (2007), speaking skills develop most effectively when learners are engaged in tasks with a clear communicative purpose, in which errors are understood as a natural part of the learning process.

2.2 The Role of Play, Drama, and Holistic Learning

Play represents a fundamental mode of learning in childhood, as it enables spontaneous, motivating, and emotionally safe learning experiences. Drama activities incorporate movement, facial expression, voice, and emotions, thereby supporting the principles of embodied learning, according to which understanding and memory are enhanced when learning is connected to bodily experience (Wright, 2014).

Drama as a form of play goes beyond verbal expression alone and integrates movement, facial expression, voice, and emotional engagement. This holistic approach to learning

aligns with the principles of embodied learning, which emphasise that learning is deepened when it is linked to physical experience (Wright, 2014). The connection between movement and language facilitates better retention, meaning-making, and greater fluency and confidence in spoken language use.

In such learning contexts, the role of the teacher shifts from that of a transmitter of knowledge to a mentor and facilitator of the learning process. Kramar (2009) emphasises that a thoughtful selection of teaching methods and learning formats that promote pupil activity has a significant impact on the quality of learning and the development of higher-order cognitive and communicative skills.

2.3 Drama as a Didactic Tool in Foreign Language Learning

Drama-based activities combine elements of play, collaborative learning, and emotional engagement. Maley and Duff (2005) emphasise that drama enables learners to assume different roles, which reduces anxiety about speaking and encourages greater spontaneity in spoken language use.

Contemporary didactic approaches emphasise a shift from teaching to learning, in which the learner becomes an active co-creator of the learning process. Plut Pregelj (2012) points out that collaborative learning and active learner involvement contribute significantly to the development of complex competences, including speaking skills in a foreign language.

Drama creates a safe learning environment in which the focus is placed on meaning, collaboration, and a shared goal rather than on individual linguistic accuracy. Emotional engagement and a clearly defined final objective, such as a performance, further enhance learners' motivation and willingness to actively use the foreign language in speech. Such an approach contributes to the development of fluency, self-confidence, and a positive attitude towards foreign language learning.

3. Description of the Extracurricular Activity *English Drama*

The extracurricular activity *English Drama* is carried out throughout the entire school year and typically takes place once a week. The group consists of six to eight pupils aged between eight and ten. The duration of individual sessions is adjusted when necessary, depending on the complexity of the content and upcoming performances. The small group size allows for an individualized approach, increased speaking activity for each pupil, and the creation of a safe learning environment that encourages cooperation and expression in the foreign language.

3.1 Selection of the Theme and Literary Material

The process of creating a theatrical performance begins with the selection of a theme based on pupils' interests. At this stage, pupils visit the school library together with the teacher, where, with the support of the librarian, they explore available literary materials in English that are appropriate for their age and language proficiency. From the selected materials, pupils choose three books that appeal to them most.

The selected stories are then read and discussed within the group. Following the reading, a discussion takes place focusing on the content, characters, and messages of each story, during which pupils express their opinions about which story they find most engaging and why. Based on this shared discussion, one story is chosen as the framework for further creative work.

3.2 Story and Character Development

The selected story does not represent a final script but rather serves as a starting point for further creative development. Together with the teacher, pupils develop characters, plot elements, and dialogues, adapting the story for theatrical performance. At this stage, the process of developing speaking skills in the foreign language gradually unfolds, as pupils actively participate in shaping the text, propose dialogue, and become accustomed to using English in various communicative contexts.

Once the story is conceptually complete, roles are assigned. Each pupil takes on a role that corresponds to their interests and speaking abilities, with an emphasis on gradual progression and the increasing contribution of each individual pupil to spoken interaction.

3.3 Development of Speaking Skills and Reading Comprehension

After roles have been assigned, a more intensive phase of developing speaking skills and reading comprehension begins. Pupils read their parts, work on understanding the meaning of the text, and practise pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. The development of speaking skills takes place gradually and in parallel with other activities, without pressure for complete linguistic accuracy, with the primary focus placed on meaning-making and comprehension.

3.4 Stage Design and Props

Alongside the development of speaking skills, pupils also engage in planning and designing the stage setting. Together, they consider the performance space, stage elements, and props that will support the story. Pupils actively participate in preparing props and shaping the visual aspects of the performance, which further enhances their motivation and sense of ownership of the project.

3.5 Final Phase: Integrating Speech, Performance, and Stage Elements

In the final phase, all elements of the theatrical performance are brought together: spoken language, acting, and stage design. Pupils rehearse, consolidate the text, practise movement and coordination, and work on synchronising their performance. Particular emphasis is placed on relaxed spoken expression and collaboration within the group. The process culminates in a public performance, which represents an important motivational experience and confirms the relevance and effectiveness of the drama-based approach to foreign language learning.

4. Methods and Forms of Work

Within the extracurricular activity *English Drama*, a range of teaching methods and forms of work is employed, grounded in the communicative approach, learning through play, and holistic and embodied learning. The selected methods enable pupils to actively use the foreign language in meaningful and authentic situations and support the development of speaking skills in a safe and motivating learning environment.

4.1 Communicative-Oriented Learning

The core teaching approach is communicative-oriented learning, in which spoken language is understood primarily as a means of communication rather than as the accurate use of linguistic structures alone. Pupils are continuously engaged in speaking activities related to understanding the story, creating dialogues, and role-playing. The emphasis is placed on

meaning-making, fluency, and comprehensibility of speech, while language errors are treated as a natural part of the learning process.

4.2 Learning Through Play and Role-Play

Learning through play represents a fundamental mode of work within the activity. Role-play allows pupils to assume different identities, which reduces anxiety related to speaking in a foreign language and increases their willingness to engage in oral expression. Through play, pupils naturally repeat vocabulary and language structures while simultaneously developing social and collaborative skills.

4.3 Drama and Theatre Techniques

Dramatization involves the use of theatre techniques such as improvisation, voice work, facial expression, and movement. These methods support multi-channel learning, in which language is connected to bodily experience and emotional engagement. Such an approach aligns with the principles of embodied learning, as movement and expression facilitate meaning-making, improve retention, and enhance fluency in spoken language use.

4.4 Gradual Development of Speaking Skills and Reading Comprehension

The development of speaking skills follows a gradual and spiral process. Pupils first read and understand the text and then progressively transition to spoken language use. Reading, speaking, and play are closely interconnected, enabling natural reinforcement of language without the feeling of rote repetition or memorisation. Particular attention is given to pronunciation, intonation, and speech rhythm.

4.5 Collaborative Learning and Work in Small Groups

The activity is based on collaborative learning, with pupils completing most tasks in small groups or pairs. This organisation of work allows for increased speaking opportunities for each individual pupil and encourages mutual support, attentive listening, and adaptation to others. The small number of participants also enables individual support tailored to pupils' speaking abilities.

4.6 Emotional Safety and Motivation

An important didactic element of the activity is the creation of an emotionally safe learning environment. Pupils are encouraged to express themselves without fear of evaluation, which positively affects their motivation and self-confidence. A clearly defined shared goal—the preparation of a theatrical performance—serves as a strong motivational factor and provides pupils with a sense of purpose and achievement.

5. Effects on the Development of Speaking Skills in a Foreign Language

The implementation of the extracurricular activity *English Drama* has noticeable and multifaceted effects on the development of pupils' speaking skills in a foreign language. These effects are evident both at the linguistic level and in terms of pupils' self-confidence, motivation, and willingness to engage in spoken interaction.

5.1 Increased Speaking Confidence and Fluency

Regular participation in drama activities provides pupils with frequent and repeated opportunities to use the foreign language in meaningful contexts. Spoken interaction takes place within the framework of a story, role, and action, which reduces the focus on linguistic accuracy and enhances speaking fluency. Pupils gradually express themselves more freely, with increased self-confidence and reduced anxiety. According to Krashen (1982), lowering the affective filter has a significant impact on successful language learning; in a drama-based environment, this is reflected in pupils' greater willingness to speak.

5.2 Improvement in Pronunciation, Intonation, and Speech Rhythm

The repetition of dialogues in combination with movement, facial expression, and performance has a positive effect on the development of pronunciation and intonation. Pupils do not practise speech in isolation but within a context that includes emotional engagement and bodily experience. Such learning aligns with the principles of embodied learning, which emphasise the connection between physical movement and cognitive processes (Wright, 2014). As a result, pupils develop a sense of speech rhythm, natural stress patterns, and melodic features of spoken language.

5.3 Development of Reading Comprehension as Support for Speaking Skills

The development of speaking skills is closely linked to the development of reading comprehension. Reading dramatic texts, understanding the meaning of dialogues, and gradually transferring them into spoken language enable deeper language comprehension. Cameron (2001) emphasises that effective foreign language learning in children emerges through the integration of different language skills, with speaking and text comprehension functioning as complementary and interconnected processes.

5.4 Increased Motivation and a Positive Attitude towards Speaking in a Foreign Language

Drama activities provide pupils with learning experiences in an emotionally safe and supportive environment, in which spoken language serves as a means of expression and creation. A clearly defined goal—a public performance—enhances intrinsic motivation as well as a sense of responsibility and group belonging. According to Maley and Duff (2005), drama fosters a high level of learner engagement, which positively influences pupils' willingness to actively use the foreign language in speech.

5.5 Inclusion of More Reserved Pupils

A particular strength of the drama-based approach is its ability to include pupils who are otherwise more reserved or less confident in spoken expression. Role-taking creates psychological distance, allowing pupils to speak more freely in a foreign language, as they communicate “through the character” rather than as individuals. Such experiences contribute to the gradual development of self-confidence and greater readiness to speak in other learning contexts as well.

6. Example from Practice: Adapted Drama Story *Winnie the Witch on Holidays*

Within the extracurricular activity *English Drama*, pupils aged between eight and ten prepared an adapted drama story entitled *Winnie the Witch on Holidays*, based on the original book series featuring the character Winnie the Witch. The selected story was adapted to match the pupils' language proficiency level and to enable the gradual development of speaking skills in a foreign language.

During the adaptation process, particular attention was given to a clear scene structure, short and repetitive dialogues, and the inclusion of everyday themes such as travel, staying in a hotel, friendship, and emotions. These themes are close to pupils' experiences, which contributed to increased motivation for speaking and facilitated comprehension of the text.

The working process was carried out in several stages. Initially, pupils developed reading comprehension through shared reading and discussion and became familiar with the meaning of the text. This was followed by a gradual transition to spoken language use, during which pupils practised pronunciation, intonation, and speaking fluency. Dialogues were reinforced through role-play, movement, and improvisation, enabling pupils to connect spoken language with bodily and emotional experience.

The teacher's role was primarily focused on supporting and guiding the process rather than correcting every linguistic error. Emphasis was placed on meaning-making, comprehension, and collaboration, which contributed to the creation of an emotionally safe learning environment. Such an approach also facilitated greater participation of more reserved pupils, who found it easier to express themselves in the foreign language through role-taking.

This extended example confirms that drama-based activities enable effective integration of speaking, play, and learning and contribute significantly to the development of speaking skills, self-confidence, and a positive attitude towards foreign language learning. The following sections present one practical example of reinforcing simple speaking structures and an example of including more reserved pupils in spoken language use.

6.1 Example of Reinforcing Speaking Structures

In the process of developing speaking skills, simple yet functional speaking structures were systematically reinforced, recurring multiple times in different contexts throughout the story. For example, pupils practised expressing wishes and feelings through dialogue (e.g. *"I really need a holiday."*, *"I love the sound of that!"*), polite expressions and basic conversational phrases (e.g. *"Thank you for having us."*, *"Make yourselves at home."*), as well as describing emotional states (e.g. *"He was in love."*, *"She was very happy."*).

These speaking structures first appeared in written form, were then practised in guided oral production, and finally used spontaneously during role-play. Through repeated exposure in a natural communicative context, pupils gradually progressed from reproduction to more fluent and confident spoken language use. This approach enabled the reinforcement of speaking skills without the feeling of rote learning, with primary attention given to meaning-making and speech comprehensibility.

6.2 Micro Example of Including More Reserved Pupils

For pupils who initially demonstrated greater reticence in speaking a foreign language, gradual inclusion in speaking activities through role-taking proved to be an effective strategy. Such a pupil initially participated as a narrator using very short utterances or repetitive phrases (e.g. *"The End."*, *"Wilbur was happy."*), which enabled spoken participation without excessive exposure.

Subsequently, the pupil assumed a less linguistically demanding role, in which speech could be supported through movement and facial expression (e.g. the role of the cat Wilbur, involving simple exclamations and short sentences). With the gradual increase in spoken contribution and repeated practice in a safe learning environment, the pupil's speaking confidence increased, which was reflected in greater willingness to speak beyond the drama activity itself.

7. Discussion

The presented example of the extracurricular activity *English Drama* confirms the findings of numerous theoretical frameworks that emphasise the importance of authentic, emotionally safe, and communication-oriented learning situations in early foreign language learning. Drama-based activities enable pupils to use a foreign language in contexts in which speaking is not an end in itself, but rather a means of communication, expression, and collaboration.

The analysis of the working process and the observed effects indicates that the drama-based approach effectively addresses several key challenges of traditional foreign language instruction, particularly the limited number of opportunities for spoken interaction and pupils' fear of making mistakes. The use of play, dramatization, and role-taking contributes to lowering the affective filter, as described by Krashen's theory (1982), and creates conditions for more spontaneous and fluent language use.

The findings are also consistent with the communicative approach, which highlights the importance of meaning-making and interaction in the development of speaking skills. In the described model, pupils are continuously active co-creators of the text and the dramatic action, which fosters greater engagement and responsibility for their own learning. The integration of spoken language with movement, facial expression, and emotions further supports the principles of embodied learning, which emphasise multi-channel processing of information and deeper retention.

A particular strength of the drama-based approach lies in its capacity to include pupils who are more reserved and who often withdraw into passive roles in more formal learning environments. Role-taking provides psychological distance and creates a space in which pupils can express themselves more freely in a foreign language. This gradually strengthens their speaking confidence, which may also have a positive impact on their participation in regular foreign language lessons.

Although extracurricular activities cannot replace systematic foreign language instruction, they represent an important complement by providing pupils with increased exposure to spoken language and more profound language learning experiences. The presented example confirms that drama-based activities can make a significant contribution to the development of speaking skills, motivation, and a positive attitude towards foreign language learning at the primary school level.

8. Conclusion

This article presents the extracurricular activity *English Drama* as an effective didactic approach to promoting speaking skills in a foreign language at the primary school level. Based on theoretical foundations and the description of pedagogical practice, it is evident that drama-based activities create authentic, emotionally safe, and motivational learning situations in which spoken language develops naturally and progressively.

The working process, which includes the selection of literary material, collaborative story creation, the development of speaking skills, dramatization, and the integration of language with movement and play, provides pupils with a holistic language learning experience. The observed effects are reflected in increased speaking confidence, improved fluency, higher motivation, and greater willingness to use a foreign language in spoken communication, including among more reserved pupils.

An important element of the activity is also the public presentation of the dramatic work. Throughout the school year, pupils present their work to peers, and at the end of the school year, they also perform for parents at an event dedicated to showcasing theatrical creativity. Such performance experiences further strengthen pupils' self-confidence, sense of achievement, and positive attitudes towards foreign language learning.

It can be concluded that drama-based activities do not merely enrich foreign language instruction but serve as an important complement by providing pupils with increased opportunities for spoken language use, meaningful language practice, and the development of key communicative skills. The presented model of practice is transferable to other educational contexts and offers teachers a concrete and effective approach to fostering speaking skills in children.

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