

Developing Communicative Competence through Drama-oriented Activities in an EFL Classroom

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This study aims to investigate the improvement of college students' communicative ability through drama-oriented activities in an EFL classroom and explore students' reactions towards drama-oriented activities. Twenty students enrolled in English conversation class were selected for this study. The data were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative research which sought to investigate the improvement of their communicative ability was guided by the question whether the students made significant improvement in their communicative ability during the research period. In addition, the following three qualitative research questions are addressed to describe the nature of the students reactions of the drama activities:(1)What is the nature of classroom interaction between the participants (student-student, student-teacher) in drama-oriented activities? (2)What are the participants' reactions to their classroom experience regarding drama-oriented activities? (3)How do the students perceive themselves as learners in drama-oriented activities? The findings from the oral proficiency test indicated that the subjects made a significant improvement in communicative ability during the period of the study. Data collected through wide-open and semi-structured interview showed both positive and negative responses of participants towards drama activities. Cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, and linguistic benefits from drama activities were confirmed by the majority of participants. The findings suggest that drama activities were powerful in creating an interactive environment, in which the students could experience how to use the target language spontaneously.

1. Theoretical Background

A number of language teachers and researchers (Canale and Swain, 1980; Rivers, 1987; Savignon, 1983; Wells, 1981) argue that, only through active interaction with the teacher or other learners in the target language within meaningful contexts, can learners build up communicative competence, and therefore be able to use the language spontaneously and communicatively. Drama-oriented activities in particular require the involvement of learners in the dynamic and interactive process of communication (O'Neill & Lambert, 1982; Savignon, 1991; Stern, 1980; Via, 1987). According to O'Neill and Lambert (1982), the meaning of drama is "built up from the contributions of individuals. . . [and] these contributions must monitored, understood, accepted, and

responded to by the rest of the group" (p.13). In drama-oriented activities that give students a virtual experience in functioning in extended, realistic discourse in the target language, learners are able to learn not only appropriate language use, but real communicative processes as well. Such activities as a whole stress the importance of providing language learners with more opportunities to interact directly with the target language-to acquire it by using it rather than to learn it by studying it.

Also, communicative language teaching is compatible with the 'whole language' philosophy (Stevick, 1980), which maintains that the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) should be used as a whole in real social contexts and should not be learned or taught as separated entities. Drama-oriented activities are designed to integrate the four skills, as one activity flows naturally to the next. In order to participate in the activities, the students will have to verbally express their ideas, listen to others' opinions, read related texts, and work on projects as the drama progresses.

The use of drama-oriented activities fulfills learner's multidimensional aspects in a second/foreign language classroom. Drama-oriented activities can facilitate the learner's cognitive development in creative thinking, problem solving, questioning, and negotiating (O'Neill & Lambert, 1982; Vygotsky, 1978). Group works are sources of creativity that foster new ideas and provide solutions to problems. According to Vygotsky (1978), individual learners develop thinking processes through dialogues with other individuals. As a group process, it involves learners in spontaneous situations which enable them to project themselves into imagined roles, as a way of exploring and expressing ideas.

Drama is essentially social, and involves contact and communication of meanings. By verbally and nonverbally taking part in created imaginative worlds, learners can experience how language functions in different situations (Kramsch, 1993; Paulston, 1974). Paulston (1974) has emphasized the social rules of language use as more important than a mere linguistic interaction in the target language. She points out that many communicative activities in language classrooms, though they provide useful practice in the manipulation of linguistic forms, are devoid of social meaning in the sense that they are not an accurate reflection of target language culture. In contrast, drama-oriented activities that are culturally situated may be useful in developing communicative competence if the teacher gives attention to the cultural appropriateness of the participants' verbal or non-verbal responses. Thus, through their varied use of language and in their search for the most appropriate ways to express their ideas, the learners could gain insights not only into the problems concerning the nature of the target language but also into the nature of the target culture and the human behavior shaped by it.

In addition, drama activities fulfill many of the goals of learner-centered instruction. Learner-centered instruction seeks to involve the learner more fully in the instructional

process, making a far more active use of the learner's mental powers than traditional methodologies (Newton, 1979; Nunan, 1988). Learners are no longer the passive receivers of formal knowledge about the target language conveyed by the teacher. On the contrary, they are encouraged to actively participate in activities that are designed to exploit their needs or interests. In group scenarios, learners are allowed to react in their own ways to an event or a set of circumstances that involves them. It facilitates the pooling of resources by the learners and enables them to become powerful generators of knowledge. It creates a feeling of collaborative learning that is not possible in teacher-centered classrooms. By having students collaborate with each other, the teacher gives the proper respect to the student's own linguistic resources. Each student contributes his or her part to the collective knowledge of the group while taking from this shared wealth what can best serve him or her under the circumstances.

Drama for language learning and teaching is not an innovative idea in classroom practice. Several studies have discussed a range of dramatic techniques, such as scenarios, improvisation, role-play, and simulation in second/foreign language classroom (Di Pierto, 1987; Jones, 1982; Maley & Duff, 1982; Radin, 1985; Smith, 1984). More specific drama techniques have been developed by Di Pierto (1982, 1987) for the purposes of language teaching. He proposes 'strategic interaction,' which calls upon learners to use the target language purposefully and skillfully in communication with others. It is based on the open-ended scenario (See Appendix A), in which students are free to respond to the problem presented in the scenario in their own way and devise their own personal strategies for dealing with the situation at hand. This drama technique is not built upon prepared scripts or storylines but is developed by the participants according to their impromptu responses to the events and situations created by them. The students are challenged by the surprising elements all the time as the drama unfolds. This characteristic is similar to real life experience-naturally occurring interaction.

Di Pierto (1982) identifies three dimensions of conversation language of strategic interaction: Informational, which contains the grammatical and the semantic elements; Transactional, the means by which actions are motivated in order to achieve a goal through the use of strategies and counter-strategies in solving problems; Interactional, which shows what to send in a message in order to fulfill a need and execute roles of various types.

Salah (1984) and Khanji (1987) investigated the effects of using open-ended scenario based on strategic interaction upon students of English as a second language at varying levels. They found that drama-oriented activities enhance the learners' communicative competence and encourage their spontaneous and creative use of the target language. Radin (1985) used three dramatic techniques (open-ended scenario, decision drama, and idiom drama) for students of English as a second language at Hostos Community College. These three techniques have been found to be helpful in promoting more

effective interaction among students, providing students motivation and interests, and allowing for more self-confidence on the students' part.

The study is to describe the nature of drama-oriented language classroom, explore the learners' experience in studying English as a foreign language during the research period. The data were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative research to investigate the improvement of their communicative ability was that the students did make significant improvement in their communicative ability during the research period?

In addition, the following three qualitative research questions are addressed to describe the nature of the students' perceptions of the drama activities:

1. What is the nature of classroom interaction between the participants (student-student, student-teacher) in drama-oriented activities?
2. What are the participants' responses to their classroom experience regarding drama-oriented activities?
3. How do the students perceive themselves as learners in drama-oriented activities?

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Data collection

The data were collected from college students enrolled in English Conversation class at a university in Korea. The participants were two groups of different levels. One group was at a beginning level, the other at an intermediate level, run by the same instructor, a native speaker of English. Twenty participants from two classes were selected for this study. They were 8 female and 12 male students, ranging from 19 to 26 years old.

For the quantitative data analysis, pre- and post- oral proficiency test were taken by the participants at the beginning and the end of the semester. The two tests were designed to describe a story containing some pictures.

Data for the qualitative study were collected through interviews and classroom observations. Wide-open interview (see Appendix B) and semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) were conducted at the end of research period. For interviews, each participant was interviewed on record for twenty minutes. Classroom observations were conducted once for each class at the tenth week. Throughout my observation, I jotted down notes and made detailed fieldnotes for the development of my study.

2.2 Classroom procedures

The focus of this study is on a drama technique developed by Di Pierto (1982, 1987). The management of time in the classroom was divided into three classroom activities: rehearsal, performance, and debriefing. Each activity was described as follows:

TABLE 1

The time management of drama activities in the classroom

| <i>Session</i> | <i>Activity</i> | <i>Time</i> |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Rehearsal session</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher selects or creates appropriate scenario and prepares the necessary. 2. Students form groups and prepare agendas to fulfill the roles assigned to them, while teacher acts as adviser and guide to student groups as needed, giving them words or idioms, helping them with the grammar or pronunciation and even providing possible strategies if necessary. | The time allowed for rehearsal is 12 to 15 minutes for a simple dialogue; a longer play may have to be finished as homework. |
| <i>Performance session</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students perform their roles with support of their respective groups. 2. Teacher and remainder watch and take notes during the performance. | The average is around 3 to 5 minutes per performance. |
| <i>Debriefing session</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher leads the entire class in a discussion of the students performance. 2. Tape recordings are played back and comments are made by both the teacher and the students. 3. At the end of each new script, students were required to write down all language forms and vocabulary items introduced. | The time allowed for debriefing is 10 to 12 minutes. |

2.3 Data Analysis

The pre- and post-course oral proficiency test elicited valuable speech data from the twenty students and provided information about how their communicative competence improve during the period of the study. The students' speech was scored in two phases: how clear the account was and how many communication units the account contained. The data obtained in the two tests were scored by the researcher and an independent rater. The interrater reliability was .92.

The theoretical framework for qualitative data analysis in this study followed the methods of Miles & Huberman (1994). According to Miles & Huberman, the data can

be analyzed in three flows of data reduction, data display, and data interpretation. For data analysis, I described the participants, trying to present each one in a unique picture. I tried to analyze across cases and put clusters together, categorizing the participants' salient attitudes towards dramatic activities and then displaying the clusters in tables followed by my interpretations of some salient findings.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

There were 12 male participants (60%) and 8 female participants (40%) in this study. Self-oral proficiency evaluation, obtained through wide-open interview, shows the participants' communication effectiveness in Figure 1. The scores were reported in representing communication skills on a continuum; from communication almost always effective, communication generally effective, communication somewhat effective, communication generally not effective, and not effective communication.

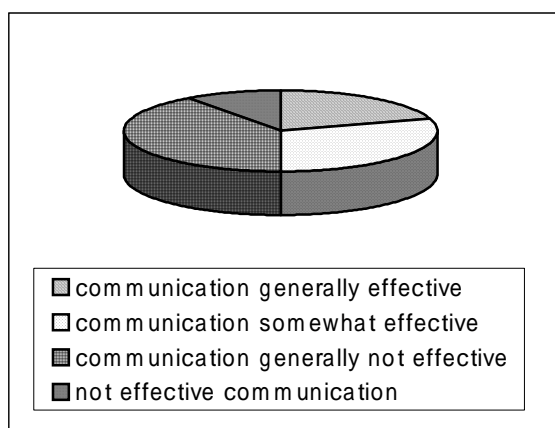


FIGURE 1. Data Display of the Twenty Students' Communication Effectiveness in English

As Figure 1 indicates, among all the subjects in this study, 4 (20%) communicated in English generally effectively; 6 (30%) communicated in English somewhat effectively; 8 (40%) communicated generally not effectively; 2 (10%) didn't communicate effectively. None of the subjects fell into the category of communication in English almost always effectively.

In order to evaluate the improvement of the subjects' communicative ability, two t-tests were conducted to measure whether there was a significant difference in quality and quantity of their oral production before and after the drama activities. The first t-test measured the difference between the students' scores in clarity and the second test measured the of communication unit score difference between the pre- and post-tests. Table 2 presents a summary of the subjects' performance in the pre- and post-oral

proficiency tests.

TABLE 2
Summary of the T-tests of the Scores of Clarity and Communication Unit
between the Pre- and Post-tests

| Variable | N | Mean | SD | Min. | Max. | t | P |
|----------------|----|-------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Speech Clarity | 20 | 17.00 | 5.75 | 6.10 | 26.90 | 13.21 | .0001 |
| Com. Unit | 20 | 0.50 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.90 | 11.00 | .0001 |

As seen in Table 2, the results for clarity score indicate that $t = 13.21$ is significant at .0001 level with $df = 19$. The findings show that the subjects made a significant improvement in speech clarity between the pre- and post- tests. And the results for communication unit score indicate that $t = 11.00$ is significant at .0001 level with $df = 19$. The findings show that there is also a significant difference in the students' speech quantity between the pre- and post-tests. The difference can be further clarified in Figure 2.

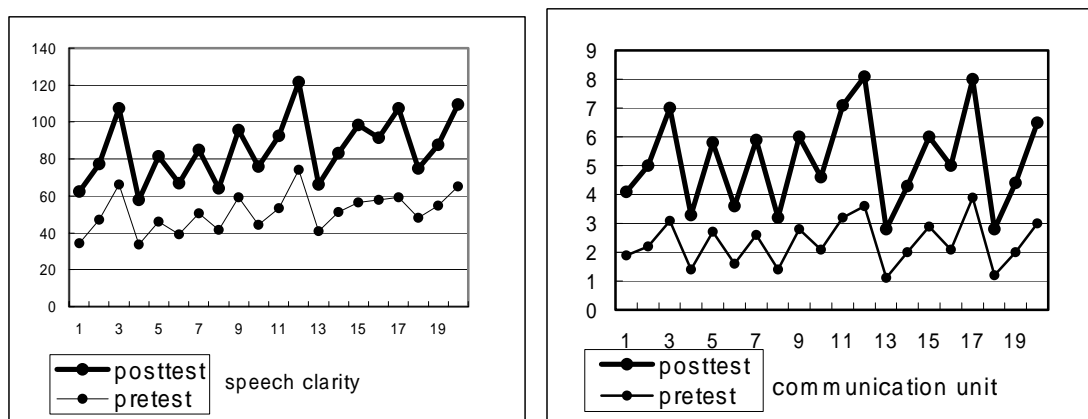


FIGURE 2. The Twenty Students' Scores of the Pre- and Post-test
in the Speech Clarity and Communication Unit

The twenty participants in the study formed ninety-four individual attitudes towards drama-oriented activities. Some of these attitudes were positive and some negative. Therefore, I categorized these individual attitudes into two major groups: positive and negative. The brief descriptions of all possible attitudes towards drama-oriented activities in a foreign language classroom were listed across positive and negative clusters respectively.

A. Categorical Descriptions of Positive Attitudes Towards Drama-Oriented Activities

Cognitive benefits

Obtaining ideas, information, and opinion from others

Stimulating thinking to problem-solving

Enhancing one's understanding of the target language through clarification

Demonstrating and confirming one's linguistic knowledge by discussion

Exchanging ideas, correcting errors, and checking comprehension

Reflecting preparedness from group work

Affective benefits

Building self-confidence

Reducing anxiety

Helping to be courageous in group

Elaborating one's interest

Encouraging a facilitative classroom atmosphere

Feeling more comfortable and relaxed in group work

Encouraging from the teacher and others' active participation

Socio-Cultural benefits

Exchanging and sharing ideas with others

Reducing competitiveness

Not comparable with achievement

Building up a sense of belonging to the group

Understanding and experiencing the target language culture

Getting to know each other personally

Linguistic benefits

Improving English speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills

Helping correct errors or mistakes

Enriching vocabulary and expression

Most of the students gave highly positive comments on learning English through

drama-oriented activities. The participants in the study perceived the benefits of drama-oriented activities from cognitive (30%), affective (26%), socio-cultural (24%), and linguistic (20%) perspectives. The followings are the salient responses of participants towards drama-oriented activities.

3.1 Student-student interaction

This study shows drama-oriented activities provide an active technique, putting students into situations that require practice in oral communication. The participants in the study, through group cooperation, showed that they could gain insights not only into problems concerning the nature of language they learn but also into the culturally-shaped human behaviors. Also, the students reported that by demonstrating one's knowledge, obtaining ideas from others, and negotiating with each other, they got to know each other personally and could allay some of the negative aspects of competitiveness; that is, they became less concerned about being evaluated by the teacher or other students when they spoke, and became more willing to participate so as to make an individual contribution to the group work.

3.2 Change of classroom climate

The study represents that drama-oriented activities create a beneficial environment for the students to learn the target language. The students who benefited from the learning atmosphere reported that they had been afraid of speaking or even studying English before, but discussing a shared concern with other students in a non-threatening and interactive setting reduced the anxiety they had prior to the drama-oriented activities in the class. In a mutual understanding and trusting relationship generated among the group members, many of the students showed a great interest in using the target language to communicate with the teacher and with other students in group-work. Self-confidence as learner increased and a new or renewed interest in studying English developed. In addition, as the dramatic activity involves a kind of motivation process in which language is preceded by a movement or a gesture, the students tended to show more expressive responses in the drama and become relatively free of their initial preoccupation with linguistic accuracy. In this way, the target language was practiced unconsciously, involving the learner in real and spontaneous use of the language.

3.3 Students' potential in speaking

The study shows that the students had great potential in using the target language for communication. Majority of the students did not have speaking or listening instruction before they entered the research site, but they had received reading, writing, and grammar instruction in high school. Therefore, the students possessed a certain level of linguistic knowledge about English, but had very little opportunity to use the language

for real communication. The students reported that they benefited from the drama-oriented activities because they could make use of vocabulary and sentence patterns they had learned, not in a formal instructional setting but in a virtual reality of dramatic situation.

3.4 Teacher's role as advisor or guide

By cooperating on the resolution of communicative problems, the teacher and the students find themselves in a variety of interactive roles. Many participants in the study reported that teacher did not act as a knowledge transmitter or authority figure that are found in most teacher-centered classrooms. Rather, the teacher remained as adviser to the students who were engaged in preparing their roles in the discourse, and provided the variety of guidance and explanation that was likely to meet the needs of individual students.

B. Categorical Descriptions of Negative Attitudes Towards Drama-Oriented Activities in a Foreign Language Classroom

| |
|---|
| <i>Cognitive concerns</i> |
| <i>Non-participation does not mean lack of thinking or understanding</i> |
| <i>Non-comparable with achievement</i> |
| <i>Affective concerns</i> |
| <i>Lack of sense of belonging to class without participation</i> |
| <i>Strong sense of competitiveness with other students in group</i> |
| <i>Shy in nature and passive in group work</i> |
| <i>Socio-Cultural concerns</i> |
| <i>Lack of opportunities to participate by active participants</i> |
| <i>Difference in preparation modes depending on group preparedness</i> |
| <i>Linguistic concerns</i> |
| <i>Lack of opportunities to concentrate on the accent and grammar accuracy feedback</i> |

Fourteen individual negative attitudes towards drama-oriented activities across twenty participants. They showed the negative attitudes towards drama-oriented activities across cognitive (43%), affective (21%), socio-cultural (29%), and linguistic (7%) concerns. Salient negative responses to drama-oriented activities were of three kinds. Some students were discouraged by other students' progress in the class. Those who have extremely low self-confidence as language learners may feel even more

frustrated when other students actively participate in the activities or show their progress in learning. Some were skeptical about learning through this approach, demonstrating the concern that the amount of knowledge acquired in drama-oriented class is not sufficient due to the limited class hours. Others complained that they could not get the teacher's feedback when they needed it. To be more productive, then, the drama-oriented class should be complemented by a constant process of monitoring on the teacher's part.

As mentioned above, the occurrence of the mentioning of both positive and negative attitudes by the twenty participants is different. The difference can be further clarified in Figure 3.

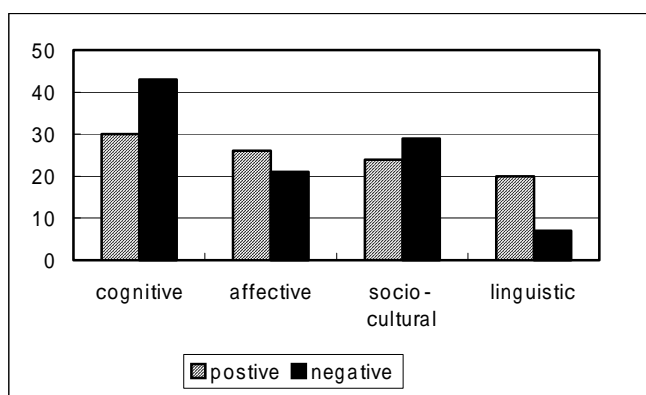


FIGURE 3. Occurrences of the Mentioning of Both Positive and Negative Attitudes towards Drama-oriented Activities by the Twenty Students

4.0 Conclusion

Second/foreign language classroom research has been interested to reveal how language learners achieve their learning goals through various methods in a limited amount of time. Classroom learning and teaching result from the interplay of the factors created by the learners, the teacher, the interaction among them, and the unique learning environment constructed by both parties. In this context, to promote a successful language learning, several considerations should be taken into constructing a more desirable classroom situation. Firstly, learners, especially adult learners, come to the language classroom as a whole person and, accordingly, with a long train of habits or affective/behavioral pattern entrenched in a set of values that were predetermined in a greater part by their society and its culture. Secondly, classroom activities should be devised in such a way that will bring a language learner out of mere passivity toward a full, active participation and eventually transform the language learning process from a mere accumulation of information towards a series of more positive and meaningful experiences.

This study has shown that drama-oriented activities are capable of stimulating the

learners' interest in the English classroom by inducing them to invent a scenario, practice its discourses, and express them both individually and collectively. Stated simply, the activities encourage both teacher and student for creativity and spontaneity. Through the dramatic activities learners not only gain an understanding of grammatical structure in a context but also experience the dynamic, and productive use of the language to influence, control, entertain, and inform, that is, as if in real communicative circumstances.

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APPENDIX A

The following are examples of open-ended scenarios:

1. Lunch at a Restaurant

Some foreigners go to a restaurant for lunch. The waiter/waitress show them to a table and give them the menu. When the waitress comes back for their order, the foreigners point out to some items on the menu. The food comes but they discover that it is not exactly what they expected. How would they react? How would the waitress react?

2. Flower Shop

You run a flower shop. You have many flowers that are about to wilt. You also have some fresh ones. Here comes a potential customer. Try to sell him or her the drooping flowers. What kind of sales pitch will you develop?

3. On an Airplane

A passenger on a plane is smoking in a non-smoking section. Passengers in this section

get angry. To solve the problem, some passengers call the flight attendant. What would the passengers say? How would the smoker defend himself? What would the flight attendant do?

4. At the Department Store

Role A: You must return a defective toaster to the department store. Unfortunately, you have lost the purchase receipt and you have only your lunch hour to take care of the matter. Prepare yourself for an encounter with the salesclerk.

Role B: You are a salesclerk in the hardware department of a large store. You have been ordered to be careful in accepting returns of merchandise that may not have been purchased at the store. Prepare yourself to deal with someone who is approaching you with a toaster.

5. At the Post Office

Role A: The letter you are to mail must arrive safely but not necessarily in a hurry. Prepare to ask the postal clerk about the rates and then decide which rate would be appropriate for your help.

Role B: You are a postal clerk trying to service a crowd of people who are mailing their tax reports at the last moment. Here comes a customer with questions about postal rates. Prepare yourself to handle his or her questions expeditiously.

APPENDIX B

Wide-Open Interview

Date _____ Time _____ Interviewee

1. Personal data

1. Could you tell me something about yourself, e.g., your age, your areas of interest, your personality, and your previous experience of learning English?
2. What are your goals and purposes of learning English in this course and why?
Please explain.
3. How's your own feeling about yourself as a person and yourself as a learner?

4. How do you evaluate your English proficiency? Please evaluate your four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), with a 1 to 6 scale where 1 means Very Poor and 5 means Very good.
5. Why do you volunteer to participate in this study? In what ways do you believe this study might be of help?

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview

1. How do you feel about participating in the drama-oriented activities?

Possible probes:

- What kind of feelings do you think you would have in drama-oriented activities?
- How nervous did you feel when participating in drama-oriented activities?
- In what ways do you think you can benefit in drama-oriented activities?
- What is your reaction toward rehearsal/performance/debriefing session?

2. How much did you enjoy participating in drama-oriented activities?

Possible probes:

- Do you participate actively or inactively in drama-oriented activities? Why?

Please explain.

- Would you like to participate in more drama-oriented activities?
- What have you enjoyed most about your classes? What have you disliked?

3. What is your opinion of other students or teacher in drama-oriented activities?

Possible probes:

- What are you concerned about most in your interaction with other students and teacher in drama-oriented activities?
- What is your reaction toward a teacher in your class? Is there any difference between the teacher and other English course teacher if you had any.

4. How would you evaluate your own performances?

Possible probes:

- Do you think it was better/worse than you thought it would be?
- Do you think it would improve your communication skills?

5. Are there any other comments you may have about the drama-oriented activities you participating in this semester?