



Enhancing middle school students' speaking skills through drama-based activities

Ortaokul öğrencilerinin konuşma becerilerinin drama tabanlı etkinliklerle geliştirilmesi

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Abstract: This quasi-experimental study aimed to examine the influence of drama-based activities on middle school students' speaking skills. The study was conducted with 48 students (n = 48) and carried out over a six-week instructional period. Drama-integrated speaking lessons were performed in the experimental group, while the control group received traditional instruction. Quantitative analysis showed greater gains in speaking performance of participants in the experimental group, particularly in fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Regarding qualitative data, both interviews and student reflections and interviews revealed that students had positive perceptions towards drama. They underlined drama as engaging, relevant, and supportive. Moreover, students reported increased confidence, motivation, and stronger peer interaction through role-playing and collaborative dramatization. Based on these findings, it can be interpreted that drama not only develop language skills but also creates affectively rich environments conducive to spoken language development in EFL contexts. These results point to the pedagogical value of integrating drama into language instruction and offer practical implications for classroom implementation in similar educational settings.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, drama-based activities, speaking skills, young learners, middle school students

Özet: Bu yarı deneysel çalışma, drama temelli etkinliklerin ortaokul öğrencilerinin konuşma becerileri üzerindeki etkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, 48 öğrenci (n = 48) ile gerçekleştirilmiş ve altı haftalık bir öğretim süreci boyunca yürütülmüştür. Deney grubunda drama ile bütünleştirilmiş konuşma dersleri uygulanırken, kontrol grubu geleneksel öğretim yöntemiyle eğitim almıştır. Nicel veriler, deney grubundaki katılımcıların özellikle akıcılık, telaffuz ve kelime dağarcığı alanlarında konuşma performanslarında daha yüksek kazanımlar elde ettiğini göstermektedir. Nitel veriler ise, öğrenci görüşmeleri ve yansımalar yoluyla elde edilen bulgular, öğrencilerin drama temelli etkinliklere ilişkin olumlu algılara sahip olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Katılımcılar, dramayı ilgi çekici, anlamlı ve destekleyici bir öğrenme yöntemi olarak değerlendirmiştir. Ayrıca, rol yapma ve işbirlikli dramatizasyon uygulamaları, öğrencilerin özgüvenini ve motivasyonunu artırmış, akran etkileşimini güçlendirmiştir. Bu bulgular doğrultusunda, drama uygulamalarının yalnızca dil becerilerini geliştirmekle kalmayıp, aynı zamanda Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce bağlamında sözlü dil gelişimini destekleyen duygusal açıdan zengin öğrenme ortamları oluşturduğunu göstermektedir. Sonuçlar, drama entegrasyonunun dil öğretimindeki pedagojik değerini vurgulamakta ve benzer eğitim ortamlarında sınıf uygulamaları için uygulanabilir öneriler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce, drama temelli etkinlikler, konuşma becerileri, çocuk öğrenciler, ortaokul öğrencileri

1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, developing speaking skills is a vital issue. The literature shows that traditional methods limit students' opportunities for authentic oral communication because they mostly focus on grammar and written exercises (Goh & Burns, 2012). In response, educators have increasingly sought student-centered methodologies that encourage collaboration, autonomy, creativity, and real-world interaction.

At this point, drama comes to the fore because drama-based activities provide pedagogical and emotional benefits to the student (Angelianawati, 2019; Moghadam & Ghafarsamar, 2018). Drama-making is a dynamic and performance-oriented strategy that reflect real-life communication, such as improvisation, dialogue, and role-playing, and encourage spontaneous language production (Kovac, 2016). These activities not only develop language fluency, they also create meaningful contexts in which students use language to express ideas, negotiate meanings, and interact authentically. Studies have shown that drama-making contributes to the fluent self-expression of individuals and can improve self-confidence, motivation, and learner autonomy (Gałazka & Trinder, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019).

Recent studies also show that drama improves the speaking performance of EFL learners. For example, Tseng (2018) and Sirisrimangkorn (2018) report that students who participate in drama activities have greater self-awareness and self-confidence, and that these students show improvement in fluency, pronunciation, and discourse management. Tseng (2018) highlights students' increased consciousness of appropriate language use and collaborative learning. Similarly, comparing drama with traditional methods, Effendi (2015) found that drama instruction performed better in developing students' ability to express their thoughts. Despite these promising findings, there remains a significant research gap regarding the dual impact of drama-based pedagogy on both linguistic sub-skills and emotional engagement, particularly in EFL settings in state secondary schools. Much of the existing literature focuses on broad speaking gains without disaggregating fluency, pronunciation, or vocabulary outcomes, and studies often overlook students' emotional and motivational responses to drama in sustained classroom contexts. Furthermore, middle school learners represent a uniquely sensitive group developmentally, where anxiety, peer judgment, and motivation can significantly influence language learning—yet these factors are underrepresented in drama-related EFL research.

By addressing these gaps, the present study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of drama's pedagogical value. The following research questions were formulated to explore both the measurable speaking gains and the learners' subjective experiences. The first question investigates how drama-based activities affect core components of speaking proficiency, while the second and third questions address students' attitudes, emotional responses, and perceptions of classroom interaction. This dual focus allows for a richer interpretation of drama's role in language instruction. To address these gaps, the present study investigates the impact of drama-based activities on the speaking performance of middle school EFL students, with an emphasis on both linguistic and affective outcomes. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do drama-based activities improve middle school students' speaking skills compared to traditional instruction?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of middle school students toward the use of drama-based activities in English speaking lessons?

RQ3. How do drama-based activities influence students' affective engagement, including motivation, confidence, and peer interaction?

1.1. Drama-Based Learning in Language Education

Drama has emerged as a transformative strategy in foreign language education. It promotes interactive learning, genuine communication, and cultural immersion. Contrasting with traditional, memorization-heavy techniques, drama-based instruction fosters language development through dynamic social interaction and imaginative use (Shang et al.,

2024). By fostering immersion, drama encourages learners to participate in meaningful dialogues, thereby enhancing their linguistic competence in a low-anxiety environment (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014). Due to its interactive feature, drama allows students to discover cultural nuances and develop pragmatic language skills in context.

Drama-based activities enable students to express themselves creatively and increase their active participation in class. These approaches typically encompass a variety of activities such as improvisation, role-playing, and scenario-based interactions, and can be easily integrated into language teaching programs. Students participate in processes such as staging, text creation, and performance by working together, which enables them to produce the target language naturally (Dawson & Lee, 2018). These activities increase learning motivation beyond language skills and contribute to students developing a more positive attitude towards the course (Hulse & Owens, 2019). can use drama techniques as an effective tool to bring real-life communication situations into the classroom (Guryay, 2016). When these activities are planned correctly, they add enjoyment and participation to the learning process, increasing students' interest in the course and ensuring more productive results (Batdı & Batdı, 2015). Moreover, drama offers structured opportunities for language use in contextually meaningful ways.

One notable benefit of drama to foreign language education is its role in alleviating language learning anxiety. Drama-based education has a collaborative and supportive environment, which provides students with a psychologically safe space to experiment. This environment encourages learners to take risks and engage more freely in communication. According to researchers, emotional engagement and empathy are of vital importance in second language development, which is why they emphasize that drama has the ability to facilitate interpersonal connections (Sadiqzade, 2024). Drama-based learning takes students out of a passive position and turns them into active participants. This transformation encourages not only language skills but also critical thinking, creativity, and cultural sensitivity (Winston, 2012).

Drama techniques act as a conduit between theoretical language frameworks and their practical application. Role-playing and body language help students discover not only the target language but also different aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication (Piazzoli, 2008; Topaloğlu, 2016). These interactive applications support individuals in providing immediate and flexible responses in various communication contexts, thereby improving both fluency and communication strategies. Students participate in multi-layered learning experiences that transcend language by embodying different identities and cultural perspectives (Luo et al., 2024). This promotes intercultural understanding and deepens students' linguistic awareness.

In teacher education, drama can be powerful tool for training effective practitioners. When preservice teachers are engaged with drama methodologies, they master innovative instructional practices and develop the ability to come up with creative solutions that work for different student profiles (Horasan Doğan, 2017). When integrated into the teaching process, drama enables the creation of an inclusive and student-centered classroom atmosphere where students with different language proficiency levels can learn together (Karyawati & Wijaya, 2021). In Turkish context, preservice English teachers view drama as a functional tool that increases student participation and supports communication (Baykal et al., 2019). The literature also indicates that preservice teachers who regularly participate in drama workshops experience increased pedagogical self-confidence and demonstrate improvement in their teaching skills (Doğan & Cephe, 2018). Especially in interaction-based and project-oriented learning environments, drama fosters student autonomy, encourages collaboration, and increases motivation (Grosu, 2019).

Nevertheless, integrating drama into mainstream language education has certain challenges. In certain contexts, educators lack the knowledge and experience necessary to use performance-based methods effectively. Despite recognizing their potential, teachers often require continued professional development to implement drama effectively (Toksun, 2017; Hışmanoğlu & Çolak, 2019). For instance, in Turkey, drama activities are typically confined to introductory or concluding segments of lessons rather than forming the core instructional approach (Toksun, 2017). A similar pattern exists in Malaysia, where pre-service teachers incorporate performative elements like songs and skits to maintain attention but continue to prioritize structural grammar instruction (Othman & Kiely, 2016).

1.2. Drama and Oral Competence

While the previous section outlined the broader pedagogical and affective benefits of drama-based instruction, the present section narrows the focus to its specific influence on oral competence in EFL contexts. Speaking remains one of the most challenging and anxiety-inducing skills for learners, particularly in environments that lack opportunities for authentic communication. In this context, drama emerges as a uniquely positioned approach that not only facilitates language use but also empowers students to speak with confidence, fluency, and purpose. The development of oral competence in EFL education has been approached through a variety of innovative strategies aimed at enhancing learners' communicative performance. While technology-mediated practices such as mobile-supported collaborative dialogues (Cai & Zhang, 2023), Instagram-based grammar tasks (Teng et al., 2022) or flipped instruction to reduce anxiety (Qiu & Luo, 2022) have gained popularity, drama-based pedagogy has simultaneously garnered scholarly attention for its unique contribution to spoken language proficiency. Unlike approaches that primarily focus on accuracy or input-driven instruction, drama provides an experiential and socially interactive learning environment that nurtures fluency, spontaneity, and confidence.

In language education, drama functions not only as a means of presenting content but also as an interactive platform through which learners engage with language meaningfully and contextually. Especially in speaking-oriented instruction, drama techniques are considered effective because they promote purposeful language use while reducing learners' fear of making mistakes (Altun, 2019). Through activities such as role-play and improvisation, learners adopt new identities and interact with the target language in creative, authentic ways. Since students act as both performers and audience members, they gain expressive agency and critical reflection (Taylor, 2016). Similarly, Kumar et al. (2022) argue that when drama techniques are integrated into English instruction, there occurs an increase in students' speaking fluency and self-confidence. Aladini and Jalambo (2021) and Marfuah and Patmasari (2020) also suggest the use of drama in teaching, pointing to marked gains in fluency, accuracy, and comprehensibility.

Drama-based instruction is essential for interactional competence and pragmatic awareness. According to Kao et al. (2011) and Zhang et al. (2019), tasks involving improvisation and storytelling encourage students to construct meaning and improve their speaking. Studying with high school students to investigate how drama affects speaking skills, Nguyen (2023) reported an improvement in learners' ability to manage spoken interactions and higher motivation. Similarly, Masoumi-Moghaddam (2018) demonstrated that rehearsing and performing modern plays led to significant improvements in university learners' conversational abilities.

Beyond linguistic gains, drama contributes to a more inclusive and affectively supportive classroom environment. It encourages learner agency, cultivates collaborative learning, and promotes social-emotional development. According to Stinson (2009), the creative and performative nature of drama enables learners to experiment with language in low-

stress settings, resulting in deeper cognitive involvement. Akyüz and Tanış (2020) also found that regular drama practice among Turkish university students not only improved speaking skills but also fostered more positive attitudes toward oral communication.

However, the success of drama-based instruction depends heavily on its implementation. As Lee et al. (2015) suggest, sustained engagement—typically over 12 weeks or more—is often necessary to observe meaningful improvements in fluency and public speaking. Stinson and Winston (2011) also caution that short-term interventions may fail to yield substantial gains, underscoring the importance of process-oriented design in drama pedagogy. Notably, most research has focused on young learners, with limited investigation into its potential in secondary and tertiary contexts (Ohta, 2024), suggesting the need for further exploration in more advanced EFL settings.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is firmly grounded in Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which collectively offer a robust and multidimensional framework for examining the effects of drama-based activities on EFL speaking skills. Sociocultural Theory, originally advanced by Vygotsky (1978, 1987), asserts that cognitive development, including language acquisition, is deeply embedded in social interaction and mediated through cultural tools and collaborative activity. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) delineates the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other. This scaffolded support, delivered through modeling, guided questioning, and cooperative learning, is essential in facilitating learners' progression toward greater competence (Mahan, 2022; Ohta, 2024). Drama-based activities exemplify such scaffolded learning by immersing learners in interactive, role-driven tasks that require collaboration, negotiation of meaning, and active social engagement. Augmenting this social perspective, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory underscores the cyclical process of learning through direct experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Drama offers concrete experiential opportunities where learners not only practice language in authentic contexts but also reflect critically on their performances. This iterative process not only enhances internalization of language skills but also promotes both fluency and learner confidence.

CLT was initially conceptualized by Canale and Swain (1980) and then elaborated by Richards and Rodgers (2014). The main concern of CLT is real-life communicative competence. Therefore, drama-based instruction is in line with CLT principles as it fosters meaningful interactions and negotiates meaning in socially relevant contexts. Nonetheless, using CLT in many EFL environments such as Turkey harbours some limitations because various factors such as limited resources, large class sizes, exam-oriented curricula, and teacher preparedness (Kırkgoz, 2007).

On the one hand, Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis underlines vital role of interaction and meaning negotiation in language acquisition. On the other hand, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis draws attention to the crucial impact of affective factors (e.g., motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence) on language learning. Drama-based learning environments reduce learners' emotional barriers by providing supportive and enjoyable atmospheres characterized by low anxiety levels. This psychological comfort enables students to be more willing to communicate and contributes to a deeper and more meaningful adoption of the target language (Luo et al., 2024). Although these theoretical perspectives are interconnected, they may explain how drama-based instruction can simultaneously enhance linguistic proficiency and affective engagement among middle school EFL learners. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among

these frameworks and highlights how they intersect within drama pedagogy to support communication skills and student engagement (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Theoretical Integration of SCT, CLT, and Complementary Frameworks in Drama-Based EFL Instruction



2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the effectiveness of drama-based instruction on middle school students' speaking skills. Two pre-existing classes were assigned as the control group and the experimental group. While the control group continued with the regular curriculum, the experimental group participated in additional drama-based speaking activities. A pre-test/post-test design was implemented in both groups to measure speaking performance. Additionally, focus group interviews were conducted with selected students from the experimental group to gather insights into their learning experiences.

2.2. Participants and Context

The participants were seventh-grade students from a public middle school in Muş, Turkey. The students were between the ages of 12 and 13. The classes were selected through convenience sampling, and parental consent was obtained for all participants. Although there were 57 students, the number dropped due to a lack of attendance; thus, the study was conducted with 48 participants (27 females and 21 males). The two groups demonstrated comparable levels of English proficiency, as determined by their previous semester grades and evaluations conducted by their instructor. The study took place at the same school where the researcher was completing a teaching practicum, allowing the students to be already acquainted with the researcher's presence in the classroom. This familiarity contributed to a more authentic and comfortable classroom environment. Both groups received instruction from the same English teacher to ensure consistency across the instructional setting. The lessons and research procedures were collaboratively developed by the researcher and the course instructor. All ethical standards were meticulously observed. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Muş Alparslan University, as well as from the appropriate school authorities. Informed consent

was obtained from all parents and students. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and students were assured that their participation would have no effect on their academic evaluations. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout all stages of the study.

2.3. Instruments and Data Collection

Both the researcher and the course instructor developed a rubric collaboratively to assess speaking skills. Each component of the rubric, which consists of five basic components (fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and content), included detailed descriptors on a 5-point Likert scale to ensure clarity and consistency in scoring. Two external experts in the field of language assessment were consulted for content validity. Based on their feedback, minor revisions were made. Then, the rubric was piloted to ensure clarity. Finally, to establish inter-rater reliability, rater training was conducted. Inter-rater reliability was calculated as .82. This level of agreement suggests the scoring procedure was consistent and reliable. Students' performances were scored independently by trained raters based on recordings of their presentations.

Students in both groups were asked to give a short oral presentation before and after the 6-week instructional period. These tasks were comparable in format, length, and topic range to ensure equivalency and valid comparisons. Presentations were video-recorded and scored using the rubric. To control for potential teacher effects, the same classroom teacher delivered instruction to both the experimental and control groups, following a shared syllabus developed collaboratively with the researcher. Furthermore, baseline equivalence between the two groups was assessed using students' previous semester English grades and classroom performance records, which confirmed that the groups were comparable in proficiency prior to the intervention. To explore learner perceptions and affective outcomes, focus group interviews were conducted with a subset of students from the experimental group. These were held after the post-test and included open-ended questions related to students' enjoyment, motivation, anxiety, confidence, and collaboration during drama activities. Students also provided written reflections after each session, which offered additional insight into their weekly experiences.

2.4. Procedure

The study spanned six weeks, with both the experimental and control groups receiving three English lessons per week. The experimental group engaged in one additional 40-minute session per week focused exclusively on drama-based speaking activities, while the control group continued following the national curriculum using a textbook-based approach. The drama sessions were carefully designed to support interaction, creativity, and spontaneous language use. The activities included improvisational games, role-plays, character-based dialogues, and dramatized retellings of familiar narratives.

Each activity was suitable for students' language level and closely tied to existing lesson objectives. Students worked in pairs or small groups. They were asked to script, rehearse, and perform collaboratively. On the other hand, speaking was performed through conventional drills, textbook exercises, and short dialogues in the control group.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data of pre- and post-test scores were analysed using SPSS version 21. The data were screened for normality, and assumptions for parametric testing were met. within-group changes in speaking scores (pre- vs. post-test) were examined via Paired samples t-tests, while independent samples t-test was conducted to compare post-test speaking performance between the experimental and control groups.

Regarding qualitative data, transcripts and reflections were analysed using thematic analysis. Data were coded inductively, allowing patterns to emerge without predetermined categories. Coding was performed manually. Triangulation between the reflections and interviews enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

3. Results

This section presents the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses according to the research questions. The data consist of pre- and post-test speaking scores (RQ1) and students' perceptions and affective experiences gathered through focus group interviews and reflections (RQ2 and RQ3).

3.1. Findings for RQ1

To assess the impact of drama-based activities on speaking performance, paired samples t-tests were conducted within each group (Table 1), and an independent samples t-test (Table 2) was used to compare post-test scores between the groups. The speaking rubric measured five components: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and content.

Table 1

Paired Samples t-Test Results (Within-Group Comparisons)

Group	Test	M	SD	t	df	p
Experimental	Pre-test	16.32	3.45			
	Post-test	22.18	3.88	10.92	23	.000**
Control	Pre-test	15.89	3.67			
	Post-test	17.01	3.52	2.14	23	.043*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .05$

The experimental group showed a statistically significant increase in speaking scores from pre- to post-test ($t(23) = 10.92$, $p < .05$), with a mean gain of nearly 6 points. The control group also improved slightly, but the gain was marginal and less robust ($p < .05$). This large t-value suggests a strong effect of the intervention on students' oral performance, particularly in terms of fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary development. The control group also showed a statistically significant improvement ($t(23) = 2.14$, $p < .05$), but the gain was modest and less substantial, with only about a 1-point increase. This smaller effect may reflect minimal improvement due to routine classroom exposure rather than any targeted pedagogical strategy.

Table 2

Independent Samples t-Test (Post-Test Comparison Between Groups)

Group	M	SD	t	df	p
Experimental	22.18	3.88	4.83	46	.000**
Control	17.01	3.52			

The independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in post-test scores between the experimental and control groups ($t(46) = 4.83$, $p < .05$). This result confirms that students exposed to drama-based speaking instruction performed significantly better than their peers who received traditional instruction. The large t-value and low p-value indicate a meaningful and practically relevant difference between the two groups. Taken together, these findings provide strong empirical support for the effectiveness of drama-based pedagogy in enhancing students' speaking abilities in an EFL context.

3.2. Findings for RQ2

Qualitative data from focus group interviews and student reflections revealed that students held generally positive views toward the use of drama-based activities. Thematic analysis identified three key themes related to perceptions of the instruction method (Table 3).

Table 3.

Themes and Codes

Theme	Codes	f
Enjoyment and engagement	fun	22
	not boring	21
	enjoyable	21
	different	15
Relevance and real-world learning	use of language in context	19
	memorable	18
	meaningful	13
Lower pressure and risk-taking	safe space	21
	less afraid	20
	willing to try	20
	freedom to speak	14

Enjoyment and Engagement

When the qualitative data were examined, it was observed that drama-based speaking lessons significantly increased fun and enjoyment, and student found these lessons more engaging. They also underlined the role of drama in adding a sense of novelty and playfulness to English lessons. One student referred to traditional instruction and noted, *“We were playing, not studying thanks to drama. It was not boring like grammar exercises.”* Another student remarked, *“We did something new and fun, which made me feel excited every.”* This shows the positive shift in the classroom environment, and this atmosphere contributed to greater participation and enthusiasm during speaking tasks. The learning process became more meaningful and less mechanical as students used gestures, facial expressions, or character voices while acting.

Relevance and Real-World Learning

One of the main issues that students frequently mentioned was the authenticity of the tasks. Drama-based activities mirrored real-life situations, as they were meaningful and useful. Students stated that they could learn how to use English in practical contexts thanks to the role plays and scenarios they acted out during the lessons. One student explained, *“I used many words and even sentences from the skits in real life. And they became more memorable.”* Another participant emphasized retention, saying, *“We didn’t just learn words, we used them in a story, and that helped me remember better.”* These findings show that students appreciate the contextual nature of drama-based teaching and perceive it as more than just academic education. In other words, they consider drama-based instruction as preparation for real communication. Furthermore, this connection with everyday language use has made their learning meaningful and memorable.

Lower Pressure and Risk-Taking

When the data were carefully examined, it was found that students often emphasized how drama creates a safe space where they could speak without fear of judgment or embarrassment. Several learners shared that they were not afraid of making mistakes thanks acting because they were *“playing a character.”* For example, one student commented, *“I chose a character and started to act my task. It was easier for me to speak. I was not afraid of making mistakes because*

I wasn't myself, I was the character." Similar excerpt was noted by another student, who said, *"Even if I made a mistake, I didn't feel embarrassed because we were acting."* This shows how drama instils confidence in students, reduces speaking anxiety, and increases their willingness to participate. Mistakes were not only tolerated but seen as part of the process, which encouraged more spontaneous language use and greater risk-taking in oral communication.

3.3. Findings for RQ3

Thematic analysis of the same qualitative data revealed three key themes associated with affective engagement and social interaction (Table 4).

Table 4.

Themes and Codes

Theme	Codes	f
Increased Motivation	excitement for class	20
	anticipation	18
	eager to participate	15
Growth in Confidence	speak more loudly	17
	less shy	16
	belief in ability	14
Peer Collaboration	teamwork	23
	helping others	20
	learning from classmates	16

Increased Motivation

Drama-based lessons noticeably enhanced students' motivation to attend and participate in English classes. Many described how the anticipation of being assigned a new role or engaging in a group performance gave them a sense of excitement and purpose. One student said, *"English became my favorite class. I was curious every week about the new activity."* Another echoed this sentiment by stating, *"I didn't want to miss class because I wanted to act."* This eagerness translated into greater classroom participation and attentiveness. Drama provided intrinsic rewards by making learning enjoyable, which in turn reinforced positive attitudes toward English learning.

Growth in Confidence

Students also reported feeling more confident when speaking English, largely due to repeated speaking opportunities in a supportive environment. The act of performing, receiving peer encouragement, and hearing themselves succeed helped them internalize a more positive self-image. One participant noted, *"Now I speak louder. I used to be very quiet."* Another stated, *"Drama helped me believe I can speak English well."* These reflections demonstrate how structured opportunities to perform publicly helped students overcome their hesitation and build their self-esteem as language users.

Peer Collaboration

Drama activities were inherently collaborative, requiring students to work in teams, help each other, and listen actively. This dynamic created a positive and inclusive classroom atmosphere. Students described how they practiced together, gave each other cues during performances, and even shared new vocabulary. One student said, *"We worked as a team. Everyone had their part and helped each other."* Another shared, *"When someone forgot a line, we supported them instead of laughing."* These comments indicate that drama-based tasks fostered not only linguistic development but also empathy, trust, and cooperation—key elements of a socially constructive learning environment.

4. Discussion

This study set out to examine the impact of drama-based activities on middle school students' speaking performance and affective engagement in the EFL classroom. Drawing on sociocultural theory and CLT principles, the findings reinforce the value of interactive, learner-centered instruction in fostering both linguistic and emotional development. The discussion below elaborates on the results through the lens of the three research questions and theoretical underpinnings. The originality of this study lies in the systematic and sustained integration of drama into the speaking curriculum, moving beyond one-off activities or short-term projects often reported in the literature. Furthermore, the study adds to the field by offering empirical evidence from a Turkish middle school context (a setting that remains underrepresented in global discussions of drama-based EFL instruction).

4.1. Discussion of RQ1

The experimental group's improvement in fluency, interaction, and pronunciation illustrates the effectiveness of drama in enhancing speaking performance. These gains align with findings from Effendi (2015), who observed that students receiving drama instruction outperformed their peers in expressing ideas orally. Similarly, Sirisrimangkorn (2018) and Tseng (2018) reported noticeable improvements in fluency and discourse management among students engaged in drama-based EFL classes. This progression can be attributed to drama's emphasis on authentic communication, where language is used purposefully in context—a central tenet of CLT. Through tasks such as improvisation and role-play, students experienced real-time meaning negotiation, which resonates with Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, emphasizing modified output as a source of language development.

From a Sociocultural perspective, these activities acted as scaffolds within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), allowing students to engage in higher-level communicative functions with peer support. Drama-making naturally encourages collaborative problem-solving, which promotes both linguistic complexity and functional use of language, echoing Moghadam and Ghafarsamar's (2018) findings that drama stimulates not only vocabulary and grammar use but also pragmatic competence.

The drama-based tasks also created embodied experiences, where learners enacted roles using gestures, intonation, and spatial awareness—engaging multiple modalities and reinforcing language through physical and emotional memory. Such multimodal enactments align with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which posits that learners internalize knowledge more effectively through concrete experience and reflection. Importantly, even students who initially demonstrated reluctance or low proficiency showed notable improvement, suggesting that drama may help close the performance gap by offering supportive, inclusive entry points into oral language use.

4.2. Discussion of RQ2

Student reflections revealed overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward drama, echoing studies by Angelianawati (2019) and Zhang et al. (2019), who found that learners viewed drama as enjoyable, engaging, and motivating. Participants' perceptions reflect humanistic language teaching approaches that emphasize learner emotions, self-expression, and motivation. Students appreciated the freedom to be creative and to perform, stating that drama activities made speaking English more natural and enjoyable. This suggests a reduction in the Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982), allowing students to take more linguistic risks and produce language without the fear of making mistakes. Peer support in drama tasks helped create a low-anxiety environment in the classroom, which contributed to a sense of psychological safety. This finding confirms Tseng (2018) who reported increased self-awareness and collaborative learning during drama

tasks. In this study, similar feedback indicated that students not only enjoyed the process but also became more aware of how and when to use English appropriately. This suggests that they engaged in deeper interaction with pragmatic competence.

Students generally described drama as an emotional and creative space of freedom where they could explore language in a fun way, bring characters to life, and express identities that might not emerge in traditional classroom tasks. There seems to be a shift in learner identity, from passive recipient to expressive participant, which is an essential outcome of performance-based instruction. It is inspiring that students feel more like ‘real speakers’ thanks to acting. Thus, it can be interpreted that drama supports the development of L2 learner self-concept, which is a critical affective factor in long-term language acquisition.

4.2. Discussion of RQ3

The most compelling impact of drama was seen in the affective domain. Students reported increased self-confidence, motivation, and peer connection—factors strongly emphasized in the Sociocultural framework, which posits that learning is a social and identity-forming process. Learners noted that performing in front of others, while initially intimidating, helped them “feel like real English speakers,” reflecting a shift in self-perception facilitated by role-taking and identity construction. This finding complements Gałazka and Trinder (2018), who highlighted the confidence-building aspects of drama through the enactment of meaningful roles. Likewise, Ananto and Rusmiati (2018a) found that student performers gained greater control over pronunciation and fluency alongside increased classroom participation—a pattern mirrored in the current study’s experimental group.

Peer interaction also deepened through drama tasks. Students often referenced how rehearsals fostered teamwork, active listening, and mutual encouragement. This aligns with CLT’s focus on communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) and supports Angelianawati’s (2019) conclusion that drama enhances not only speaking ability but also interpersonal relationships among learners. Furthermore, the drama activities acted as motivational anchors, especially for students who typically disengage from more passive instruction. Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory helps explain this outcome: learning through drama involves concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation—an ideal sequence for adolescent learners.

Emotional fluctuations among learners are particularly significant in middle school settings, where students are highly sensitive to peer perception and especially vulnerable to feelings of disconnection in foreign language classrooms. Findings indicate that drama can reconceptualize language learning—not as a performance to be judged, but as a socially meaningful and collaborative experience. The sense of shared responsibility cultivated during group performances fosters an environment of mutual encouragement, giving rise to a micro-culture built on trust, empathy, and collective accomplishment. This collaborative atmosphere is vital for students, especially in situations where learners may feel isolated or anxious and plays a crucial role in developing long-term motivation and perseverance. Similar affective and linguistic benefits have been observed in drama-based EFL instruction in East Asian contexts. Nguyen (2023) and Tseng (2018) reported that the use of role-play and improvisation in language education could reduce speaking anxiety and increase learner autonomy. These cross-contextual findings are crucial because they reinforce the transferability of drama pedagogy across culturally diverse EFL settings.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Investigating the effects of drama-based activities on the speaking performance and emotional engagement of middle school EFL students, this study argues that integrating drama into English instruction can produce substantial gains in both spoken proficiency and learner motivation. Findings indicate that drama-based instruction develops students' speaking competence including fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary use. Drama also fosters emotional engagement, boosted learner confidence, and encouraged risk-taking in a psychologically safe environment. The collaborative nature of the activities also nurtured a sense of classroom community, supporting both individual and collective growth.

This study is original because it pragmatically integrates drama into the core curriculum, not as a supplementary strategy or extracurricular activity, but as an accessible, structured pedagogical approach within the constraints of a typical public-school classroom. In other words, the current study argues that there is no need for expensive technology or external support to implement student-centered teaching methods; what is important is for teachers to plan, take initiative, and change their teaching approach. The findings define drama not only as a tool for language development, but also as an environment for identity construction, emotional expression, and empowerment of learners. These affective and social dimensions, although often overlooked in traditional English language teaching, are of fundamental importance for the development of communicative competence and the long-term retention of language learning.

This study has some limitations. First, the study was conducted with a relatively small sample size within a single public middle school. This limits the generalizability of the results. Second, although the six-week duration may be sufficient to observe meaningful improvements, it may not fully capture the long-term effects of drama-based instruction on language development and learner motivation. Third, the researcher's involvement in both instructional design and observation, although carefully managed, may have introduced bias in data collection or interpretation. Finally, the study did not focus on other language domains such as listening comprehension or grammatical accuracy. These limitations point to several directions for future research. Longitudinal studies could help evaluate the sustainable impact of drama on communication skills and learner identity. Replicating this approach in different educational settings (e.g., technology-supported learning environments) could provide clearer results regarding the scalability and contextual adaptability of the method. Furthermore, examining teachers' professional development processes in relation to drama pedagogy may reveal how their teaching beliefs and practices are transformed when they are equipped with creative teaching tools. Moreover, the dual role of the researcher as co-designer and classroom observer may have influenced student behaviour or responses during interviews. Finally, future studies might explore blended models that combine drama with digital tools, such as audio-visual storytelling or online collaborative performance, to expand the reach of embodied, socially grounded language learning in diverse instructional environments.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

No generative artificial intelligence tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, etc.) were utilized in the preparation of this scientific study. All content, including the text and analyses, was produced entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based generation tools.

Ethical Statement

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with pre-service teachers. Particular attention was given to ensuring participant confidentiality, written consent was obtained, and ethical guidelines were followed throughout the process. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Muş Alparslan University (Ethics Approval Number: 189853 / Date: 11.04.2025).

Author Contributions

All stages of this study were carried out by a single author.

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