

# Drama Techniques in Literature Teaching: A Conceptual Exploration in ESL/EFL Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

The integration of literature in English language teaching has long been recognized as an effective way to promote linguistic, cultural, and affective development. In recent years, drama techniques have emerged as powerful pedagogical tools that transform the literature classroom into an interactive and embodied space for learning. This conceptual paper explores how drama can enhance the teaching of literature in ESL and EFL contexts. Drawing on existing frameworks of literature pedagogy (Collie & Slater, 1987; Carter & Long, 1991) and drama pedagogy (Maley & Duff, 2005; Kao & O'Neill, 1998), it proposes a conceptual model in which drama serves as a mediating process between literary texts, language engagement, and learner development. The paper argues that drama techniques not only foster language acquisition and cultural understanding but also cultivate empathy, critical interpretation, and willingness to communicate. The proposed framework emphasizes drama's role in bridging linguistic competence and literary appreciation, offering insights for educators and researchers seeking innovative approaches to literature-based language teaching.

**Keywords:** Literature, English as Second Language, drama techniques

## INTRODUCTION

Literature has long held a significant place in language education, offering authentic linguistic input and opportunities for personal and cultural exploration. According to Collie and Slater (1987), literary texts provide genuine and undistorted language exposure that enables learners to experience the language as it is naturally used. Beyond linguistic enrichment, literature serves as a medium for understanding human experiences, values, and cultural identities. In the ESL and EFL classroom, where exposure to authentic language and culture may be limited, literature becomes an essential pedagogical resource that integrates language, culture, and affective learning.

Carter and Long (1991) conceptualized three complementary models for using literature in language teaching: the Cultural Model, which views literature as a window to cultural understanding; the Language Model, which focuses on developing language skills through authentic texts; and the Personal Growth Model, which encourages learners to engage emotionally and intellectually with the text. Together, these models highlight literature's potential to balance linguistic, cultural, and personal development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Role of Literature in ESL Language Teaching

Collie and Slater (1987) emphasized that literary texts serve as authentic materials that expose learners to rich, genuine language input. They argued that literature provides opportunities for cultural enrichment as learners encounter different ways of living and thinking expressed in the target language. Additionally, literature enhances language enrichment by familiarizing learners with varying registers, stylistic forms, grammatical structures, and lexical patterns in context while supporting oral language production and personal responses to text.

Similarly, Carter and Long (1991) viewed literature as a valuable pedagogical resource that supports cultural understanding, language skills development, and personal growth. Their framework outlines three key goals for students:

**The Cultural Model** — viewing literature as a window into different cultures;

**The Language Model** — using literature as authentic material for language skills development;

**The Personal Growth Model** — engaging readers emotionally, developing critical thinking and fostering enjoyment (as cited in Aebersold & Field, 1997).

Contemporary research continues to identify several compelling reasons for integrating literary texts in language classrooms: they provide authentic and varied language input, expose learners to multiple text types and registers, foster cultural awareness, and offer high-interest materials that can enhance motivation and engagement (Erdem, 2016; Okyar, 2017; Wuntu, 2024). Recent reviews further emphasise literature's potential to support integrated skills development and higher-order thinking — for example, reading for inference and critical interpretation — while also pointing to motivational and affective benefits for learners (Hossain, 2024; Mardiningrum, 2024).

At the same time, the instrumental orientation that treats literary texts primarily as resources for language learning—rather than as ends in themselves—remains influential in applied linguistics and ELT pedagogy (Maley & Duff, 2005; Carter & Long, 1991), although contemporary scholarship stresses that resource-oriented approaches should be complemented by activities that attend to cultural, aesthetic, and identity dimensions of texts (Calafato, 2024; Hagelquist, 2025).

Recent Malaysian research affirms that literary texts offer multiple pedagogical benefits: they present authentic and rich language input, expose learners to varied text types and registers, heighten interest and motivation, and provide a window into cultural and local relevance (Mohaideen, Ismail, & Rashid, 2020; Awang & Aziz, 2024). Studies also indicate that when local or relatable literary texts are used, students feel more engaged and show improved attitudes toward reading in English (Mohaideen et al., 2020). At the same time, the orientation that treats literary texts primarily as **language teaching resources rather than as objects of pure literary study** remains prominent in Malaysian ESL/EFL contexts (Subramaniam, 2003; Aziz & Nasharudin, 2010). However, recent investigations call for a broader pedagogical stance that not only addresses language skills but also identity, culture and affective engagement with texts (Jais & Ismail, 2023; Abdul Rahim & Aziz, 2024). In this way, a balanced approach is needed: one that respects the language-enrichment function of literature while also facilitating meaningful literary engagement.

Taken together, the recent literature supports a balanced, pedagogically principled use of literature: select texts that are pedagogically appropriate, scaffold linguistic and cultural access, and design tasks that promote both language development and meaningful engagement with literary meanings.

## Challenges in ESL Literature Teaching

Despite these pedagogical benefits, the implementation of literature teaching in ESL contexts is not without challenges. A recurring concern in Malaysian classrooms is teachers' limited training and confidence in using literature as a communicative and interactive language tool (Sidhu et al., 2010; Subramaniam, 2007; Jais & Ismail, 2023). Many teachers tend to rely on traditional teacher-centered methods, focusing heavily on comprehension questions and textual analysis rather than communicative engagement or aesthetic appreciation (Ganapathy & Hashim, 2021). Additionally, the linguistic and cultural distance between prescribed texts and students' lived experiences often makes comprehension difficult, especially when canonical British works are prioritized over contemporary or locally relevant materials (Talif, n.d.; Mohaideen et al., 2020). These factors can reduce learner motivation and hinder active participation, leading to a perception that literature is remote from real-life language use (Awang & Aziz, 2024).

In response to these persistent challenges, scholars have increasingly advocated for innovative and experiential

methodologies—particularly **drama-based pedagogy**—to bridge the gap between literary texts and learner experience (Maley & Duff, 2005; Stinson & Winston, 2011; Ng, 2022). Drama techniques such as role play, improvisation, and reader's theatre transform the classroom into a dynamic learning space that encourages empathy, embodiment, and emotional engagement (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Wessels, 1987). In the Malaysian ESL context, drama has been shown to promote communicative competence, confidence, and collaborative meaning-making while maintaining the literary integrity of the text (Jalaluddin et al., 2015; Rahim & Aziz, 2024). Consequently, drama-based literature instruction offers a promising pedagogical model that integrates language learning with affective, cultural, and aesthetic growth—aligning with both communicative and humanistic principles in contemporary ELT.

### Drama Techniques to Teach Literature

Susan Holden (1981) defines drama as any activity that requires participants to portray themselves or others in an imagined situation. In essence, drama situates learners in the “world of pretense,” where imagination becomes a tool for language exploration and interpersonal communication. Within this pedagogical frame, drama techniques refer to structured activities that engage learners in interaction and meaning-making within simulated or improvised contexts (Gaudart, 1990; Maley & Duff, 2005). These techniques emphasize **process over product**—that is, the learning and language use that occur during dramatic engagement rather than the polished performance itself.

As Gaudart (1990) notes, drama techniques are fundamentally about doing rather than presenting. They place learners in roles and situations that encourage spontaneous communication and creative problem-solving, allowing authentic and contextualized practice of the target language. This experiential focus aligns with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, which view language as a social tool for negotiation of meaning rather than a set of forms to be memorized (Stinson & Winston, 2011; Kao & O'Neill, 1998). Through improvisation, role play, simulation, and process drama, learners are not merely repeating lines but interpreting and expressing meaning within a social context.

The use of literature in language teaching has evolved from traditional text-based analysis to more experiential and communicative methodologies. Lazar (1993) and Duff and Maley (1990) argued that literature provides opportunities for authentic communication, creative response, and intercultural awareness. Within this context, drama techniques—such as role-play, improvisation, reader's theatre, and simulation—enable students to perform the text rather than merely interpret it, transforming passive reading into active engagement (Wessels, 1987; Miccoli, 2003).

Drama promotes language learning through meaningful interaction, negotiation of meaning, and embodied expression (Stinson & Winston, 2011). Kao and O'Neill (1998) describe drama as a process-oriented pedagogy that allows learners to explore literary themes through dialogue and action. By adopting fictional roles, learners internalize linguistic structures and vocabulary in context, promoting fluency and communicative confidence. Moreover, Schewe (2013) emphasized that drama in language education opens a space for aesthetic learning, allowing learners to integrate cognition, emotion, and physicality in language use.

From a sociocultural perspective, drama aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) notion of learning as a mediated social process. In drama activities, learners co-construct meaning within a shared imaginary world, supported by peer and teacher scaffolding. This collaborative engagement nurtures empathy, intercultural competence, and willingness to communicate (Piazzoli, 2018). Therefore, integrating drama into literature teaching offers a holistic pathway for developing linguistic competence, cultural sensitivity, and affective engagement.

Recent studies have confirmed that such embodied and participatory techniques enhance linguistic fluency, pragmatic awareness, and confidence among ESL/EFL learners (Ng, 2022; Jalaluddin et al., 2015). In the Malaysian context, Gaudart (1990) was among the first to demonstrate how drama could transform passive classrooms into interactive spaces that foster risk-taking and learner autonomy. Subsequent research has built on this foundation, showing that drama allows learners to integrate cognitive, affective, and kinaesthetic dimensions of learning, thereby deepening both comprehension and retention (Rahim & Aziz, 2024; Stinson, 2016). Moreover, the cooperative nature of drama encourages collaboration, empathy, and reflection—skills

essential for communicative competence and intercultural understanding.

Thus, drama techniques represent a **pedagogical bridge** between language learning and personal expression. By engaging students in imaginative yet purposeful discourse, they cultivate not only linguistic accuracy but also emotional intelligence, creativity, and critical awareness—all crucial components of holistic language education in contemporary ESL/EFL classrooms.

Drama techniques—including role-play, improvisation, tableau, readers' theatre and script writing—enable learners to inhabit characters and interpret texts physically, socially, and emotionally. Drama transforms reading from a passive to an active experience, increasing engagement and language output (Angelianawati, 2019).

Başaran (2024) classified drama strategies into key functional domains such as language skills development, motivation building, confidence enhancement, and awareness-raising, providing a practical guide for instructional design. Drama also lowers learners' affective filters, enhances motivation, and supports collaborative meaning-making (Bessadet, 2022; Zhao & Zhang, 2024).

Within Malaysian ESL settings, drama has been incorporated into communicative language teaching due to its potential to improve fluency, interaction and confidence (Wan Yee Sam, 1990). Research further shows drama improves learner creativity and helps overcome inhibition (Angelianawati, 2019; Bessadet, 2022), making it an ideal method for literature teaching where interpretation and affective engagement are important.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

To maximise drama-based literature instruction, teachers should:

- Select texts that enable enactment of scenes, dialogue, or conflict
- Provide language scaffolding and contextual background for comprehension
- Align drama tasks with language learning outcomes
- Use reflection activities (journals, discussions) to connect performance with critical reading
- Receive training in drama techniques for effective facilitation
- Support learners to perform confidently with clear roles and collaborative norms

By doing so, drama can enhance language enrichment, deepen cultural understanding, and promote personal growth—directly aligning with Carter and Long's (1991) three literature-teaching models.

### **Proposed Conceptual Framework**

Building upon previous literature, this paper proposes a Drama-Based Literature Instruction Framework (see Figure 1). The model conceptualizes drama as a mediating process linking literary texts, drama activities, and learner engagement, leading to multidimensional learning outcomes.

Key components:

- Input: Literary texts as authentic cultural and linguistic material.
- Pedagogical Mediation: Drama activities (role-play, improvisation, readers' theatre) facilitating embodiment and interaction.
- Mediating Variables: Learner engagement encompassing language, cultural, and personal dimensions.
- Outcomes: Language development, literary appreciation, cultural understanding, and motivation for further learning.

- Feedback Loop: Learners' enhanced engagement feeds back into sustained interest and deeper interpretive ability.

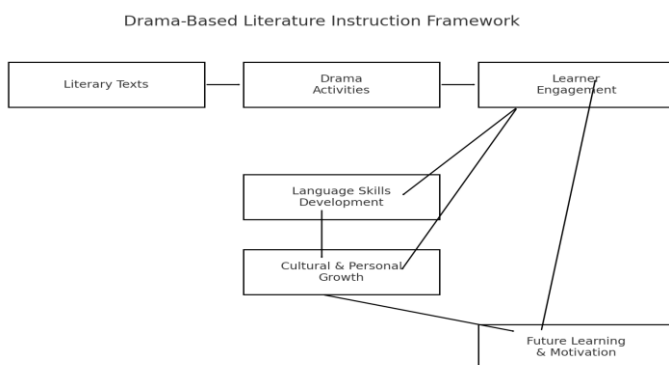


Figure 1 Drama-Based Literature Instruction Framework

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To implement the use of drama techniques in teaching literature in ESL classrooms, teachers are recommended to use techniques such as improvisation, role play, simulation, readers' theatre and process drama. Below are the lessons plan in which the techniques of improvisation, role play and simulation are provided as examples.

### Lesson Plan: Using Role Play to Teach “The Open Window” by H.H. Munro (Saki)

Level: Upper secondary (17–18 years old)

Duration: 80 minutes

Literary Text: ‘The Open Window’ by H.H. Munro (Saki)

Language Focus: Speaking, listening, and interpretation

Skill Focus: Literary understanding, communicative competence, creativity, empathy

### Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

1. Describe the main plot, characters, and themes of “The Open Window.”
2. Demonstrate understanding of character motivation and tone through role play.
3. Use appropriate language and intonation to convey mood and irony.
4. Collaborate effectively to plan and perform short dramatizations based on the story.

### Materials

Copies of ‘The Open Window’

Whiteboard / smartboard

Role cards (for characters: Vera, Framton Nuttel, Mrs. Sappleton, and others)

Props (optional: a chair, a window frame drawn on cardboard, letters, hats, etc.)

## Lesson Stages

### 1. Lead-in / Warm-up (10 minutes)

Begin with a short discussion: “Have you ever played a trick or been tricked by someone?”

Elicit short anecdotes from students to activate schema about deception, storytelling, and imagination.

Introduce the short story title “The Open Window” and briefly ask: “What do you think it might be about?”

### 2. Pre-reading Activity (10 minutes)

Show a picture of an open window (or draw one). Ask: “What could this symbolizes in a story?”

Pre-teach key vocabulary (e.g., rectory, infirmity, confident, self-possessed, delusion).

Give a short background about Saki’s style — irony, wit, and surprise endings.

### 3. While-reading / Guided Reading (15 minutes)

Students read “The Open Window” silently or listen to an audio version.

Ask guiding questions:

Who are the main characters?

What story does Vera tell Framton?

How does the story end?

What is ironic about the ending?

### 4. Role Play Preparation (20 minutes)

Divide class into small groups (4–5 students).

Assign each group a scene or perspective to dramatize. Examples:

1. Scene 1: Framton’s arrival and conversation with Vera.

2. Scene 2: Mrs. Sappleton’s entrance and talk about the open window.

3. Scene 3: The men’s “return” and Framton’s reaction.

4. Alternative ending: Vera’s explanation and her next story.

Give students role cards with short prompts (e.g., “You are Vera — clever and mischievous,” “You are Framton -nervous, polite, gullible”).

Instruct groups to:

Rehearse dialogues or improvise around the original text.

Decide how to express tone, facial expression, and body language.

Include at least one creative twist (e.g., modern setting, different ending, or inner thoughts narrated aloud).

### 5. Role Play Performance (15 minutes)



Each group performs their scene for the class.

Encourage classmates to observe and note:

How effectively the performance shows Vera's deception.

How language and tone create humor or tension.

6. Post-performance Reflection (10 minutes)

### **Discuss with students:**

What made Vera's story believable?

How does role play help you understand the characters' emotions and the theme of deception?

What language or expressions helped you convey irony or fear?

### **Assessment**

Formative: Teacher observation during role play for pronunciation, expression, and interaction.

Summative: Brief self-assessment or peer feedback using criteria (clarity, creativity, character understanding).

Extension / Homework:

Students write their own "twist-ending" short dialogue inspired by 'The Open Window.'

Alternatively, students can record a short video dramatization.

### **Lesson Plan: Using Improvisation to Teach "The Lotus Eater" by W. Somerset Maugham**

Level: Upper secondary (17–18 years old)

Duration: 80 minutes

Text: 'The Lotus Eater' by W. Somerset Maugham

Technique Focus: Improvisation (spontaneous acting based on a scenario)

Language Focus: Speaking, listening, critical thinking, moral reflection

### **Learning Objectives**

By the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate understanding of the story's themes, characters, and moral implications.
2. Use improvisation to explore alternative viewpoints and emotional responses.
3. Employ appropriate language, tone, and body language in spontaneous performance.
4. Reflect on the story's message about happiness, freedom, and consequence.

### **Materials**

Copies or summary of 'The Lotus Eater'

Whiteboard / projector

Cue cards with improvisation scenarios

Optional props (deck chair, book, hat, sunglasses — to suggest Capri life)

### **Lesson Stages**

#### **1. Lead-in / Warm-up (10 minutes)**

Ask students: “What would you do if you could live your dream life for 25 years, but had to give it all up afterward?”

Let a few students share their thoughts — introduce the idea of pleasure versus consequence.

Briefly introduce Somerset Maugham and “The Lotus Eater”: a story about a man who chooses to live for pleasure and pay the price later.

#### **2. Pre-reading (10 minutes)**

Show an image of Capri, Italy. Ask: “What kind of life might someone live there?”

Pre-teach key vocabulary (e.g., pension, annuity, hedonism, contentment, folly).

Set a prediction task: “What might happen to a man who decides to live only for pleasure?”

#### **3. While-reading (15 minutes)**

Students read key excerpts (or teacher summarizes) focusing on:

The narrator’s meeting with Wilson

Wilson’s decision to cash in his pension for 25 years of freedom

The tragic ending

Ask comprehension questions:

Why does Wilson choose to live this way?

How does the narrator judge him?

What happens when the money runs out?

#### **4. Improvisation Preparation (20 minutes)**

Divide students into small groups (4–5).

Explain Improvisation: performing without a script, using imagination to continue, change, or explore situations.

Give each group a scenario card (examples below).

#### **Improvisation Scenarios**

##### **1. Before the Decision:**

Wilson consults a friend (or the narrator) about giving up his job and living in Capri. The friend tries to persuade him not to do it.



## 2. During His Happy Years:

Wilson and other expatriates in Capri discuss whether happiness is sustainable without work or purpose.

## 3. The Return Visit (Alternate Ending):

Years later, the narrator meets an older Wilson who did not attempt suicide — how might life have changed?

## 4. Modern Adaptation:

A modern-day version where someone decides to “retire early” to live as an influencer or digital nomad — what advice would others give?

Guidance for Students:

Plan for 5–10 minutes.

Improvise dialogue — don’t memorize lines.

Focus on expressing the characters’ emotions, values, and conflicts.

Include at least one moment of tension or moral disagreement.

## 5. Improvisation Performance (15 minutes)

Groups perform for the class (3–5 minutes each).

Encourage spontaneous reactions — there is no need for perfection.

Audience observes and notes:

How characters reveal their beliefs about happiness and freedom.

What emotions or conflicts were portrayed effectively.

## 6. Reflection & Debrief (10 minutes)

Discuss:

What did you learn about Wilson’s choices through improvisation?

Did your view of him change after acting?

Is he foolish or courageous?

Optional written reflection: “If you were Wilson, would you make the same decision? Why or why not?”

## Assessment

Formative: Observation of participation, creativity, and understanding during improvisation.

Summative: Short reflective paragraph or peer evaluation after performance.

## Extension / Homework

Students write a short monologue from Wilson’s perspective at the end of his life.

Alternatively, create a “missing scene” between Wilson and the narrator exploring regret or satisfaction.

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## Lesson Plan: Using Simulation to Teach “The Last Leaf” by O. Henry

Level: Upper secondary (17–18 years old)

Duration: 80 minutes

Literary Text: “The Last Leaf” by O. Henry

**Language Focus:** Skills Focus: Speaking, Listening, Reading Comprehension, Creative Expression

**Skill Focus:** Literary understanding, communicative competence, creativity, empathy

### Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

1. Comprehend the plot, characters, and themes
2. Use language appropriately for storytelling and emotional expression.
3. Participate in a dramatic simulation of a real-life situation from the story.
4. Collaborate in groups to plan and perform a drama
5. Express emotions such as hope, fear, courage, and compassion through drama.
6. Use target vocabulary and sentence structures

### Materials

Copies of ‘The Last Leaf’

Character cards: Johnsy, Sue, Behrman, narrator (optional).

Basic props: easel, paintbrush, chair, window frame, leaves (paper cutouts).

Whiteboard/markers.

Vocabulary handout (e.g., “pneumonia,” “determined,” “sacrifice,” “hope,” “artistic”).

### Lesson Stages

1. Warm-up & Prediction (10 mins)

Activate background knowledge & interest

-Ask: “Have you ever felt very sick or helpless? How did hope help you?”

- Show an image of leaves falling from a tree in autumn.

- Ask: “What might happen if someone thinks a leaf falling is very important.

2. Pre-reading Activity (10 minutes)

Prepare students with key words

- Teach 5–6 key words using pictures, definitions, and sentences.

- Students match words to definitions in pairs.

### 3. Reading / Listening (15 mins)

Understand main events-read story aloud or play audio.

- Check comprehension:

Who are the main characters?

What illness does Johnsy have?

### 4. Simulation Preparation (15 mins)

Plan and rehearse a simulation

- Explain Simulation: students act as if they are in the story's situation, using own words.

- Divide class into groups (3–5 students).

- Assign roles: Johnsy, Sue, Behrman, narrator.

- Suggested scenes:

① Johnsy watching the leaves fall.

② Johnsy's reaction when she sees the last leaf.

- Groups plan dialogue, actions, and expressions.

Group work

Character cards, props

### 5. Simulation Performance (20 mins)

Demonstrate understanding through performance

- Groups perform their simulation (3–5 mins each).

- Encourage expressive voice, gestures, and emotions.

- Teacher and peers observe and note effective language or creativity.

### 6. Feedback & Language Focus (5 mins)

Reflect and reinforce language

- Highlight interesting expressions: hope, encouragement, admiration, worry.

- Provide positive feedback on fluency, emotion, and interaction.

### 7. Reflection / Wrap-Up (5 mins)

Consolidate learning

- Discuss: "How did the last leaf give hope?

What would you do in Behrman's place?"

- Optional mini writing:

“Write a diary entry as Johnsy or Behrman about that day.”

### Assessment

-Formative Assessment:

Participation in simulation and group planning

Expressing emotions and interaction in role

Use of target vocabulary and descriptive language

- Optional Summative Assessment:

Short paragraph or diary entry from character perspective

### Extension / Homework

Writing: Write a short story or diary entry imagining Behrman’s life before painting the leaf.

Speaking: In pairs, create a short conversation as if you are Sue explaining hope to someone else.

Creative: Draw or paint your own “last leaf” scene and describe it in English.

## CONCLUSION

Drama techniques provide a dynamic and learner-centered approach to literature teaching in ESL/EFL contexts. By engaging learners cognitively, emotionally, and physically, drama transforms the reading of literature into an experiential act of communication. The proposed framework situates drama as a bridge between linguistic proficiency and literary appreciation, supporting the development of communicative competence, cultural literacy, and personal growth. Future research could empirically examine the effectiveness of this framework across diverse contexts and learner populations, further validating drama as a core methodology in literature-based language teaching.

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