

Exploring Emotional Engagement in Drama-Based Learning for ESL Student

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100026>

Received: 07 November 2025; Accepted: 14 November 2025; Published: 27 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Drama-based learning (DBL) plays a significant role in shaping the emotional aspects of learning English as a Second Language (ESL), offering Malaysian learners a more engaging alternative to traditional classroom instruction. While DBL is widely recognised for boosting motivation and reducing anxiety, this study specifically examines its effects on enjoyment, confidence and peer connection. A Google Form questionnaire was administered to 100 Malaysian ESL students with prior DBL experience. The findings reveal that learners reported higher emotional engagement in DBL, with notable mean scores in enjoyment (4.00), emotional intensity (4.00) and peer connection (4.17), compared to lower scores recorded in traditional lessons, which ranged from 3.00 to 3.60. Traditional methods were associated with reduced confidence and weaker interpersonal connections. Overall, the results suggest that DBL creates a more interactive and emotionally supportive environment where students feel comfortable and confident using English, offering valuable implications for educators, curriculum designers and policymakers.

Keywords: drama-based learning, ESL learners, emotional engagement, language learning

INTRODUCTION

"Drama should be at the heart of education. The curriculum should be evolved as you go along, with what the children bring to it"

-Dorothy Heathcote-

The emphasis placed on the holistic nature of education by Dorothy Heathcote, a prominent drama educator, underscores the potential of drama to significantly influence pedagogical approaches. In the perpetually evolving educational sphere, there is an increasing imperative for novel, innovative and engaging teaching methodologies that effectively address diverse student needs and are readily adaptable to contemporary educational contexts. Consequently, drama, when strategically integrated as a pedagogical tool, offers a distinctive approach for both student engagement and the refinement of English speaking proficiency.

Drama, defined as an artistic medium encompassing performance, narrative and characterization, serves as a powerful instrument for knowledge delivery. Its etymological roots trace back to a Greek word meaning "deed" or "act," traditionally associated with the performative arts such as ballet and mime. Crucially, Drama in Education (DiE) transcends conventional theater by deliberately integrating storytelling, performative action and role-play into the curriculum. This methodology is instrumental in fostering a range of crucial student competencies including teamwork, innovative thought, critical reasoning and empathy; by promoting a more compelling, character-based perspective. DBL activities, therefore, move beyond passive instruction by immersing students in real-life scenarios, encouraging the use of language in meaningful contexts and facilitating a deeper understanding of semantic content (Sim & Kim, 2021).

Drama-based approaches have long been recognised for their capacity to transform the learning experience by engaging learners cognitively, emotionally, and physically. Contemporary research on drama pedagogy emphasises its potential to create authentic, collaborative, and embodied learning environments that promote deeper language use and personal involvement (Alam, Karim, & Ahmad, 2020; Bessadet, 2022). Within modern ESL contexts where communicative demands, learner diversity and curriculum expectations continue to evolve, Drama-Based Learning (DBL) has become increasingly relevant as an alternative to traditional instructional models. DBL situates learners in imagined or dramatic scenarios through techniques such as role-play, improvisation, tableaux and process drama, enabling meaning to be actively constructed rather than passively absorbed (Islam, 2023). This learner-centred, experiential orientation is closely aligned with sociocultural and constructivist views of language learning that emphasises interaction, mediation and authentic communication as drivers of linguistic and affective development.

In contrast, traditional ESL instruction in many educational settings remains largely teachercentred, textbook-driven and focused on accuracy oriented practice. Lessons typically follow a tight sequencing in which the teacher introduces linguistic forms, students complete the controlled exercises and limited communicative tasks are provided at the end to finish the process of learning. Such pedagogy often reinforces the Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF) pattern, where teacher questioning dominates discourse and students respond with short, predetermined answers. Despite of this approach supports grammatical accuracy and exam preparation, it restricts opportunities for spontaneous language use, creative risk-taking and communicative negotiation. Studies have shown that when instruction is dominated by rigid structures and strong teacher authority, learners may exhibit reduced motivation, diminished engagement and limited willingness to communicate (Wang, Patterson, & Long, 2024). These concerns are particularly salient in Malaysian and Asian ESL contexts where highstakes assessment, syllabus coverage pressures and cultural expectations reinforce procedural plus teacher-led classroom routines.

Drama-Based Learning has emerged as a promising response to these limitations. Importantly, DBL is not confined to isolated performance tasks; it represents a structured pedagogical framework with established methods for language teaching. In ESL classrooms, DBL has been implemented through strategies such as teacher-in-role, improvisational scenes, hot-seating, process drama, and dramatization of stories or thematic units (Dawoud, 2024; Uştuk, 2022). A typical DBL lesson often begins with warm-up activities to build trust and lower anxiety, followed by a dramatic frame that introduces roles and context. Learners collaboratively negotiate meaning, construct dialogue, draw on target language resources, and interact in character. Teachers scaffold throughout the process by modelling language, guiding interaction, and facilitating reflection. Research has documented that such practices enhance speaking fluency, confidence, and communicative competence by providing meaningful, affectively rich opportunities for language use (Erşin, 2025; Islam, 2023). Furthermore, because drama encourages perspective-taking, emotional expression and interpersonal engagement, DBL often creates a supportive classroom climate that promotes deeper learner involvement (Kaisa & Keinänen, 2024).

Despite positive findings, existing studies tend to focus on specific emotional variables mainly focused on motivation or anxiety reduction when examining the impact of DBL. Indeed even these dimensions are important, they offer only a partial view of the broader emotional landscape that shapes language learning. Recent scholarship highlights emotional engagement as a critical predictor of learners’ participation, willingness to communicate and sustained effort (Wang & Ye, 2021; Ng & Ushida, 2024; Yanbo, 2023). However, limited research has explored how DBL influences this fuller spectrum of emotional engagement, particularly in comparison to traditional and teacher-centred ESL instruction. Additionally, few empirical studies have examined how the specific implementation of DBL like the scaffolding procedures, interaction patterns and dramatic conventions which most likely to shapes learners’ emotional engagement within real classroom environments. This gap is significant, as emotional engagement is shaped not only by pedagogical intentions but by the lived classroom experience of learners.

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates the emotional engagement of ESL learners participating in Drama-Based Learning compared with those receiving traditional, a teachercentred instruction. The study examines whether DBL fosters higher levels of emotional engagement and how these levels differ from those

observed in conventional classrooms. By employing a more comprehensive emotional framework, this research contributes to the current understanding of the affective dimensions of ESL learning and offers insights into how DBL may enrich learners' experiences beyond linguistic outcomes. Ultimately, the study aims to inform ESL educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to implement pedagogies that support not only communicative competence but also learners' emotional well-being and holistic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1.0 Drama-Based Learning (DBL)

In contemporary educational contexts, Drama-Based Pedagogy (DBP) is recognized as an umbrella term encompassing a diverse array of dramatic activities including applied theatre, improvisation, structured role-playing, writing in role, creative drama and process drama (Ranzau, 2017). This broad spectrum of activities distinguishes DBL from traditional theatrical performance, positioning it as an integrated pedagogical strategy. Beyond its established educational applications, the immersive and active nature of DBL holds substantial promise for fostering students' emotional engagement (Chakraborty & Deb, 2023). With its inherent focus on role-playing, interpersonal interaction and emotional expression, DBL provides a rich environment for investigating and cultivating students' affective responses to the learning process, a core focus of the current study.

However, the efficacy of DBL, despite its deep roots in human interaction and storytelling, is contingent upon its structured implementation. As DBL has consistently demonstrated effectiveness in boosting engagement, its success is often moderated by student disposition (Kim & Kim, 2021). Students may encounter difficulties with role-playing due to factors such as introversion or lack of confidence, yet others may significantly thrive and benefit from the activities, highlighting the need for differentiated and sensitive instructional design (Dilek et al., 2022).

2.0 Emotional Engagement

According to Connel and Wellborn (1991) and Skinner and Belmont (1993), emotional engagement refers to the students' affective reactions in the classroom which includes interest, boredom, happiness, sadness and anxiety. Emotional engagement plays a significant role in molding and shaping learners' motivations and participation in classroom learning activities, specifically when it comes to language acquisition. To add on, positive emotions such as enjoyment and enthusiasm have been found to enhance cognitive engagement which leads to better retention and comprehension according to Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004). On the other hand, negative emotions such as anxiety or frustration may hinder language learning by reducing students' eagerness and willingness to communicate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Emotional engagement is essential for language learning as it influences students' willingness to communicate with others. Emotional engagement is essential for language learning as it influences students' willingness to communicate. Indeed DBL can enhance positive emotions, but it may also increase anxiety for some students, which in particular might be uncomfortable with performance-based activities.

2.1 Emotional Engagement in Drama-Based Learning

In the context of DBL, emotional engagement is heightened as students actively immerse themselves in role-playing and storytelling, which fosters a deeper connection with the language (Stinson & Winston, 2011). The general performative nature of drama encourages learners to express themselves freely, which can boost their confidence and reduce their language anxiety (Kao & O'Neil, 1998). However, while drama-based learning can enhance positive emotional engagement, it can also introduce problems and challenges like performance anxiety or fear of making mistakes. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a supportive environment where students feel comfortable taking risks, chances and expressing themselves without the constant fear of judgement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). By incorporating collaborative and low-stakes activities, DBL can foster effective emotional engagement within their language. Nevertheless, even if DBL offers opportunities to increased emotional engagement, its effectiveness is dependent on the teacher's ability to create a supportive

environment. This is because without a proper scaffolding, some students may feel overwhelmed rather than motivated.

2.2 Emotional Engagement Factors

Emotional engagement in language learning is a critical dimension of overall student involvement, focusing on the feelings, attitudes and values students associate with the learning process (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). In the context of Drama-Based Language (DBL) teaching, this engagement is actively cultivated through immersive and expressive activities. Six key emotional engagement factors such as interest, enjoyment, emotional intensity, peer connection, content connection and sense of accomplishment are particularly influential in shaping students' affective experiences and their subsequent learning outcomes (Pekrun et al., 2002; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Hiver et al., 2021). These factors combine to create a dynamic, emotionally rich environment that moves beyond passive reception to active, embodied participation.

2.2.1 Interest

Interest is fundamentally a key driver of student engagement and is crucial for initiating and sustaining motivation in learning (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). It is a concept impacted by both situational factors such as the learning material's novelty, appeal, relevance and personal preferences (Ainley et al., 2002). In DBL, the use of role-playing, improvisation and storytelling immediately triggers situational interest, which captures learners' attention and makes language acquisition inherently more captivating (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). This initial capture is critical as recent research on task engagement suggests, learners' deliberate actions in service of completing a pedagogical task, which includes their focus and curiosity are key elements of productive involvement (Hiver & Wu, 2023). When learning activities are perceived as innovative and meaningful, learners are significantly more likely to maintain interest and dedicate higher cognitive effort (Ainley et al., 2002). Furthermore, as DBL is highly effective in sparking initial interest, a longitudinal study by Shirvan et al. (2021) on affective factors indicates that while positive emotional states (like those sparked by interest) can be stable, focused teaching practices can lead to significant improvements in engagement for students who initially show lower interest levels, highlighting the malleability of this factor in the classroom. However, the impact of DBL varies; while some students naturally gravitate toward drama, others may require explicit scaffolding to transform initial situational interest into sustained individual interest.

2.2.2 Enjoyment

Learning enjoyment is conceptualized as the positive emotion experienced during the learning process, which is linked to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and deeper cognitive processing (Pekrun et al., 2002). Joy, excitement and contentment are positive emotions that are known to broaden an individual's thought action repertoire, helping to create a calm and supportive learning environment (Fredrickson, 2001). This, in turn is essential for lowering language anxiety and promoting involvement, align with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. DBL is inherently enjoyable as it allows students to use the target language in expressive and collaborative activities such as character exploration and spontaneous improvisation in a relaxed environment. This high level of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) is widely recognized for its pivotal role in facilitating language learning (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2020). Research confirms that enjoyment is vital for bridging engagement, enhancing motivation and developing positive learning attitudes among ESL students (Al-Adwan et al., 2022). Enjoyment is often fostered by teacher-related factors, the learning environment and a sense of achievement (Ting et al., 2023). However, individual personality traits and prior experiences are significant predictors of FLE (Botes et al., 2024). Therefore, while DBL creates a generally positive climate, teachers must ensure diverse activities are available to cater to students who may prefer more structured or quieter activities over high-energy and expressive ones.

2.2.3 Emotional Intensity

Emotional intensity refers to the strength or magnitude of affective responses experienced during a learning event (Tyng et al., 2017). High-intensity emotional experiences are known to enhance memory retention and

cognitive engagement by strengthening affective associations with the material, a phenomenon known as the Emotional Enhancement of Memory (EEM). DBL leverages embodied learning and immersive storytelling to heighten emotional intensity, such as experiencing the excitement of a narrative climax or the anxiety of conflict resolution (Winston, 2013). This immersive engagement increases the impact of language acquisition by making the context unforgettable. However, the influence of intensity is complicated in Second Language (L2) acquisition. Studies show that emotional words and experiences typically elicit lower emotional reactivity and reduced memory effects in an L2 compared to the native language (L1), especially for later learners (Imbault et al., 2021). Therefore, to leverage intensity effectively in DBL, teachers must find a critical balance. High emotional intensity must be carefully managed to avoid triggering excessive performance anxiety (which hinders learning), while also ensuring the DBL task requires a high level of language proficiency to achieve native-like emotional responses, as high L2 proficiency can mitigate this emotional dampening effect (Ferré et al., 2010).

2.2.4 Peer Connection

Emotional engagement in learning is greatly influenced by social relationships (Wentzel, 1999). Peer connection increases motivation and creates a sense of belonging through cooperation and social support. Group activities and role-playing scenarios in DBL require cooperation and communication, fostering peer connections and a positive atmosphere (Mercer, Dörnyei, 2020). Good peer connections reduce the fear of making mistakes and promote taking chances when using language. Although DBL promotes collaboration, the effectiveness of peer interactions depends mostly on classroom dynamics. Some students may struggle with teamwork due to differing communication styles or social anxieties.

2.2.5 Content Connection

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), content connection is the extent to which students identify with and derive meaning from the learning material. Learners are more inclined to engage emotionally and cognitively when they believe that the material is personally relevant. By enabling students to take on roles and scenarios that resonate with their experiences and interest, DBL fosters content connection (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). More meaningful language acquisition is made possible by this meaningful interaction which also increases emotional engagement. DBL has the potential to strengthen content connection by making abstract concepts more understandable through role-play and storytelling. However, some students may engage with the theatrical parts rather than focusing on language acquisition.

2.2.6 Sense of Accomplishment

A robust sense of accomplishment is vital for sustaining motivation and engagement, as it directly reinforces self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). When learners perceive success, even in small yet manageable steps, it encourages continued effort in language learning. DBL is particularly effective in providing immediate and tangible opportunities for accomplishment, such as successfully completing an improvised scene, delivering a rehearsed dialogue or participating in a short performance (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). This public, often immediate, feedback reinforces self-efficacy and gives students process recognition. This enjoyment derived from successful performance, is described as a sense of accomplishment and reward that motivates greater success and increased self-confidence to communicate spontaneously in English (Zhao, 2023). Furthermore, a strong sense of self-confidence built through these accomplishments is integral to fostering intrinsic motivation, as it makes learners more willing to take risks and persevere through challenges (Ghafar, 2023). Teachers should leverage DBL by offering diverse opportunities for performance and constructive criticism but must also complement this creative freedom with clear learning benchmarks to help students track and internalize their long-term linguistic progress.

3.0 Implementation of DBL in Classroom Teaching and Its Implications

Recent developments in communicative and learner-centred ESL pedagogy have contributed to a growing interest in the integration of Drama-Based Learning (DBL) into classroom practice. Studies demonstrate that

DBL is typically implemented through structured drama techniques such as hot-seating, process drama, teacher-in-role, scripted performance and improvisation, all of which simulate authentic communicative situations and encourage learners to negotiate meaning collaboratively (Uştuk, 2022; Kaisa & Keinänen, 2024). These dramatic strategies provide rich linguistic environments in which students can practice spontaneous communication while engaging affectively and socially with the learning content. However, effective implementation of DBL requires deliberate scaffolding to support learners of varying proficiency and confidence levels. Research highlights the need for clear role descriptions, teacher modelling, language frames, reflective debriefing and sequenced task progression to facilitate productive participation (Alam et al., 2020; Islam, 2023). It is important to notice that some learners especially those with higher anxiety or limited speaking experience may become overwhelmed by the performative demands of DBL and consequently disengage (Kim & Kim, 2021; Dilek et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, recent empirical findings consistently report positive outcomes. DBL has been shown to improve speaking fluency and accuracy through interactive rehearsal and embodied practice (Erşin, 2025), while also enhancing learners' confidence and willingness to communicate by reducing fear of judgment in a collaborative and expressive environment (Islam, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Emotional engagement benefits are also widely noted, including heightened enjoyment, curiosity and interpersonal connection, all of which contribute to sustained motivation in ESL settings (Ng & Ushida, 2024). Nevertheless, effective DBL implementation is frequently hindered by systemic and pedagogical constraints. Many teachers lack adequate training in drama pedagogy, which leads to superficial or inconsistent application of DBL principles (Kaisa & Keinänen, 2024). Structural limitations such as large class sizes, rigid assessment demands, and exam-oriented curricula further restrict opportunities for extended dramatic sequences and reflective dialogue (Yanbo, 2023). Moreover, DBL depends heavily on classroom trust and psychological safety; in contexts where students fear embarrassment or negative evaluation, drama activities may inadvertently heighten anxiety rather than foster engagement (Botes et al., 2024).

Overall, the implementation of DBL in ESL classrooms presents both promising opportunities and important challenges. Especially when it is facilitated thoughtfully with appropriate scaffolding, teacher preparation and institutional support. DBL can humanize language instruction by integrating creativity, emotional expression and authentic communication. However, its success ultimately relies on teachers' pedagogical readiness, supportive school structures and sensitive facilitation that addresses learners' emotional and linguistic needs.

Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the assumption that instructional methodology plays a critical role in shaping the affective experience of language learners. Drama-Based Learning (DBL) can be characterized by role-play, improvisation, perspective-taking and collaborative story construction that is posited to generate higher levels of emotional engagement. DBL is assumed to do so by eliciting positive emotions such as enjoyment, curiosity and emotional resonance while simultaneously reducing negative affect, particularly anxiety. Traditional ESL instruction in contrast, is typically teacher-centred and emphasizes controlled practice, accuracy and repetition. Such approaches offer fewer opportunities for emotional involvement, creative expression or meaningful interaction; therefore, they are expected to yield lower emotional engagement. In this study, emotional engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising enjoyment, interest, emotional intensity, motivation, social connection and anxiety regulation. The conceptual model proposes that the type of instructional approach, in this case; DBL versus traditional instruction that directly influences learners' emotional engagement. This relationship forms the basis of the comparative analysis conducted in the study.

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives stated as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Constructivist Learning Theory, and Sociocultural Theory which aim to explain how Drama-Based Learning (DBL) can enhance emotional engagement in the ESL classroom. CLT positions language use as a tool for authentic communication. As described by Richards and Rodgers (1992) and Littlewood (1981), CLT prioritizes interaction, fluency and meaning-making over mechanical accuracy. DBL aligns with these principles by immersing learners in communicative scenarios (e.g., role-plays and improvisations) that require

emotional expression, negotiation of meaning and interpersonal connection which works as key contributors to emotional engagement.

In Constructivist perspectives (Tomei, 2009; Ekins et al., 2011) view learning as an active, experiential process in which individuals construct understanding through participation and reflection. DBL embodies constructivist principles by enabling learners to experience and interpret language situations rather than merely study them. This experiential dimension supports both cognitive involvement and emotional resonance. However, drawing on Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Sociocultural Theory emphasizes learning through social interaction, dialogue and collaborative meaning-making. DBL operationalizes these principles by creating shared, culturally mediated spaces where learners coconstruct knowledge through performance, discussion and collective imagination.

Taken together, these theories offer a coherent foundation for understanding how DBL engages learners cognitively, socially and affectively. CLT explains its communicative authenticity; constructivism explains its experiential depth; and sociocultural theory explains its collaborative, emotionally rich interactions. Their convergence supports the study's assumption that DBL can foster higher emotional engagement than traditional ESL instruction.

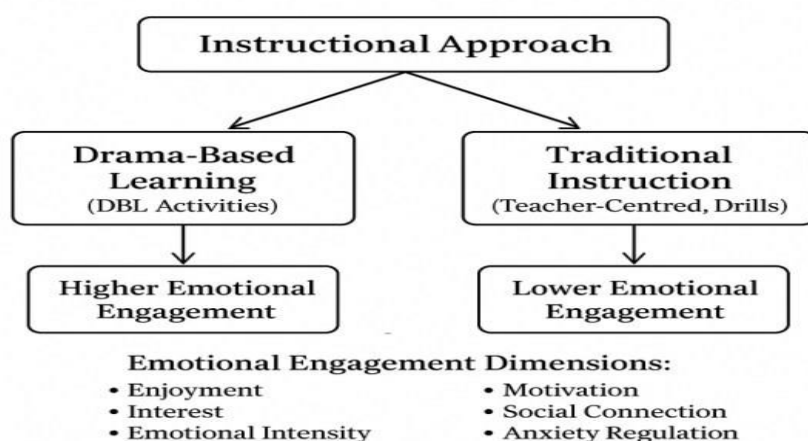


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework on the Instructional Approach of Classroom

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate Malaysian ESL learners' perceptions of Drama-Based Learning (DBL) and its influence on emotional engagement. Six dimensions of engagement are examined: interest, enjoyment, emotional intensity, peer connection, content connection and sense of accomplishment. Data will be collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from previously validated instruments developed by Ni'mah et al. (2024), Zahara (2018) and Ismail (2024). The survey contains 15 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all to 5 = Extremely), allowing respondents to express differing levels of emotional engagement. All items were constructed to enable meaningful comparison between DBL and traditional ESL instruction, supporting the instrument's reliability and content validity. The questionnaire will be administered online using Google Forms, which enables wide reach, reduces researcher interference, and ensures both convenience and confidentiality over a two-week response window.

A purposive sampling approach will be used to recruit 100 Malaysian ESL learners aged 18 and above. Participants must have prior exposure to DBL through coursework (e.g., Theatre in TESL) or through classroom-based performance activities. This sampling strategy is suitable because the study requires individuals who have experienced both DBL and conventional instruction in order to provide informed and relevant responses. To strengthen representativeness despite the sample size, the distribution of the Google Form will be planned across several demographic categories, including race (Malay, Chinese, Indian and others), age groups (18–21, 22–24), and education levels (foundation, diploma and undergraduate). This approach ensures that the sample reflects a range of backgrounds, which enhances the dependability of the findings.

Although data collection is conducted online, the recruitment process is targeted rather than open-ended. The survey link is distributed only to academic groups and programme known to incorporate DBL-related learning activities, ensuring that respondents fall within the defined inclusion criteria. Using an online platform also reduces logistical limitations, allowing data to be gathered efficiently across institutions while maintaining ethical safeguards.

The collected quantitative data will be analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores for each emotional engagement factor. The mean will be calculated using the formula $\text{Mean} = (\sum X) / N$, where X denotes individual responses and N represents the total number of participants. Mean scores from the DBL and traditional learning conditions will be compared to identify differences in emotional engagement. Graphical representations such as bar charts will be used to support interpretation. This analytic procedure provides clear, objective and replicable insights into how DBL influences emotional engagement among Malaysian ESL learners.

FINDINGS

Emotional Intensity

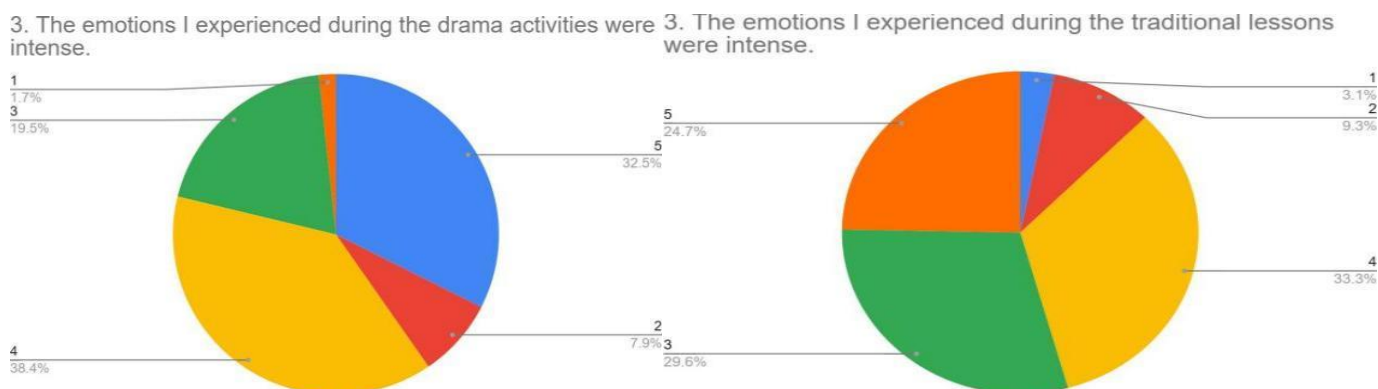


Fig. 2 Emotional Intensity

“This learning method makes me feel emotionally involved in the learning process.”

Emotional intensity showed the biggest contrast with DBL scoring 4.00 compared to 3.00 in traditional learning. The pie chart highlights that in DBL 32.5% strongly agreed and 38.4% agreed that they felt emotionally engaged, whereas 19.5% were neutral, 7.9% disagreed and 1.7% ESL learners strongly disagreed with the notion. In comparison, for traditional learning, 24.7% strongly agreed, and 33.3% agreed that they were emotionally engaged during traditional learning but 29.6% were neutral, 9.3% disagreed and 3.1% strongly disagreed that learners were emotionally engaged during traditional learning.

Peer Connection

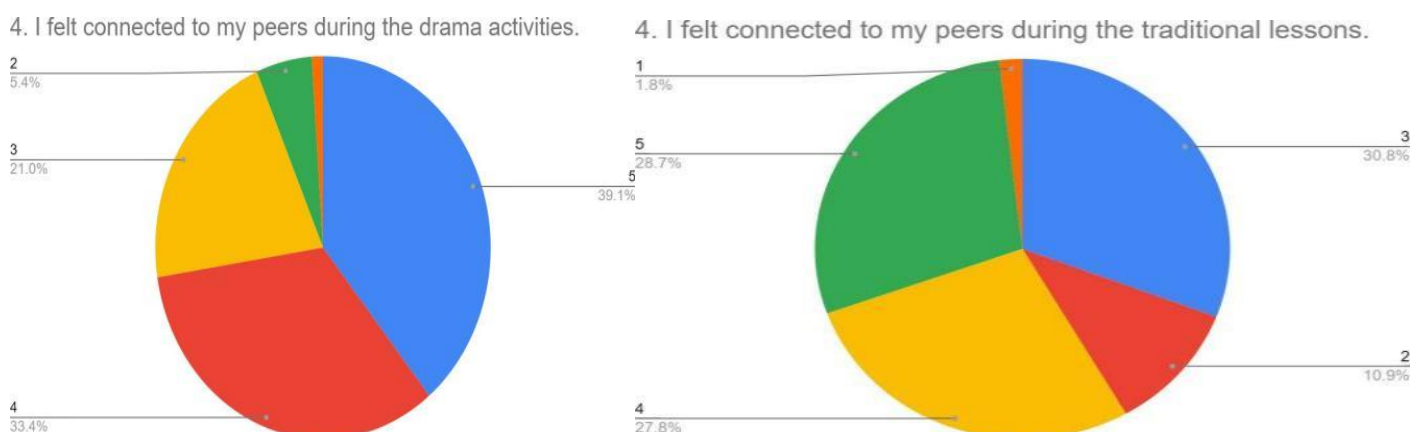


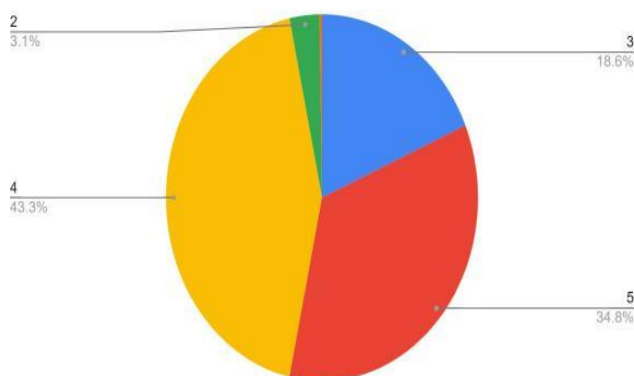
Fig. 3 Peer Connection

"I feel connected with my classmates when learning through this method."

DBL significantly enhanced peer connections with a mean score of 4.17 vs 3.50 in traditional learning. The pie chart shows that in DBL, 39.1% strongly agreed and 33.4% agreed that they felt more connected to their peers while 21% were neutral and 5.4% disagreed with the statement. However, in traditional learning, 28.7% strongly agreed and 27.6% agreed that they felt more connected to their peers while 30.8% were more neutral, 10.9% disagreed and 1.8% strongly disagreed with the notion.

Content Connection

5. I felt connected to the content/topics explored in the drama activities.



5. I felt connected to the content/topics explored in the traditional lessons.

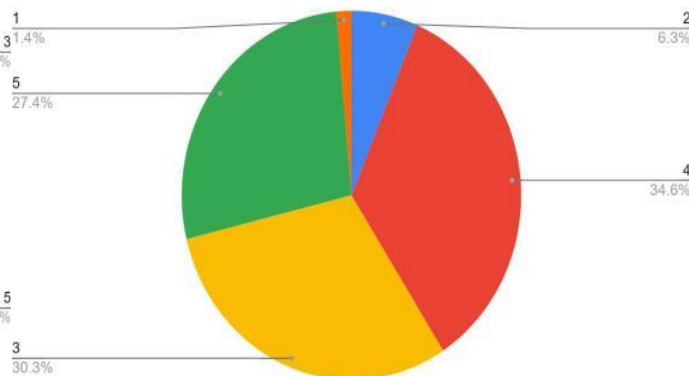


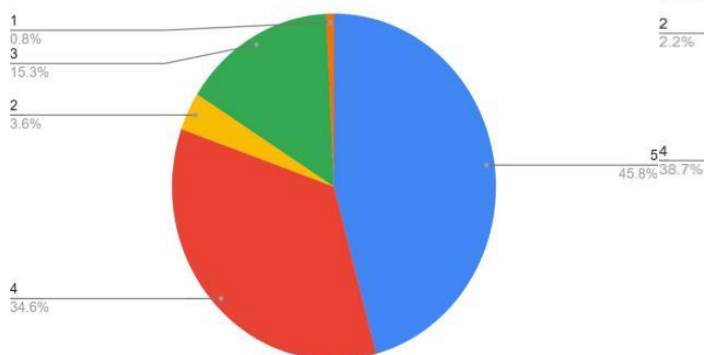
Fig. 4 Content Connection

"This learning method helps me better understand and relate to the learning content."

While DBL performed better in content connection (3.83 vs. 3.67), the gap was smaller than in other categories. The pie chart shows that in DBL, 34.8% ESL learners strongly agreed and 43.3% agreed that they felt connected to the content whereas 18.6% felt neutral and 3.1% disagreed that they felt connected to the content. On the other hand, for traditional learning, 6.3% strongly agreed and 34.6% agreed that they felt connected to the content while 30.3% were neutral, 6.3% disagreed and 1.4% strongly disagreed with the very statement.

Sense of Accomplishment

6. I felt a sense of accomplishment after completing the drama activities.



6. I felt a sense of accomplishment after completing the tasks in the traditional lessons.

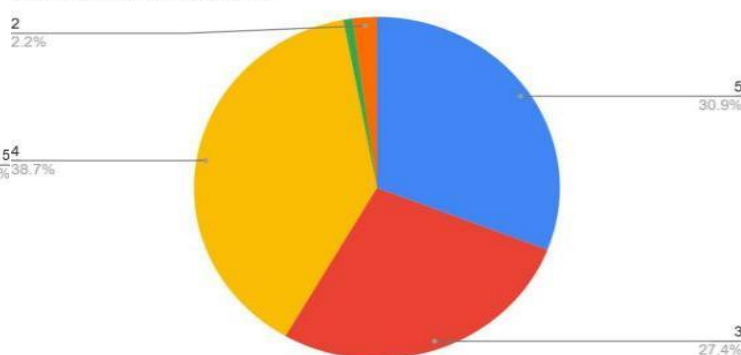


Fig. 5 Sense of Accomplishment

"I feel a sense of achievement when learning through this method."

The smallest gap was in sense of accomplishment with DBL scoring 4.17 vs. 4.00 in traditional learning. The pie chart shows that in DBL 45.8% strongly agreed and 34.6% agreed that they felt a sense of accomplishment. However, 15.3% were neutral, 3.6% disagreed and 0.8% strongly disagreed regarding the statement. Whereas for traditional learning, 30.9%

strongly agreed and 38.7% agreed that they felt a sense of accomplishment meanwhile 27.4% were neutral and only 2.2% disagreed that they felt a sense of accomplishment in traditional learning.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the questionnaires responses reveals that DBL consistently scores high in emotional engagement compared to the traditional way.

Emotional Engagement Factor	Drama-Based Learning (DBL) Mean Score	Traditional Learning Mean Score
Interest	4.17	3.33
Enjoyment	4.00	3.50
Emotional Intensity	4.00	3.00
Peer Connection	4.17	3.60
Content Connection	3.83	3.67
Sense of Accomplishment	4.17	4.00

Higher Emotional Engagement in DBL

The findings shows that DBL creates a significantly more engaging and interactive learning environment for ESL students. The higher scores in interest (4.17 vs 3.33) and enjoyment (4.00 vs. 3.50) suggest that students find DBL activities more stimulating and immersive compared to traditional learning. Additionally, DBL encourages students to actively participate in scenarios, role-play, and storytelling, which makes lessons feel more dynamic and relatable for the learners which aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) which emphasises the role of social interaction and active engagement in cognitive development. Unlike traditional learning, they often rely on rote learning and structured exercises. Evidently it shows that DBL allows for spontaneity and creativity which can make students feel more invested in the learning process.

Emotional Intensity and Connection with Peers

Emotional intensity showed the biggest contrast where DBL scored 4.00 compared to 3.00 in traditional learning. This suggests that learners experience much stronger emotional responses when participating in DBL. According to Damasio's Somatic Marker Hypothesis (1994), emotions play a significant role in decision-making and learning which means that emotionally engaging learning experiences such as drama can enhance memory retention and comprehension. The immersive nature of DBL allows the learners to connect deeply with emotions of the characters they portray and the stories they read, enhancing empathy and emotional expression within each learner. In contrast, traditional learning methods may lack the same level of emotional stimulation, as they often involve passive learning through reading, writing and listening exercises.

Plus, peer connection is notably higher in DBL (4.17 vs 3.50), supporting the idea that group interactions and role-playing creates a stronger sense of community between learners. This finding aligns with Johnson & Johnson's (1989) Cooperative Learning Theory which shows that cooperative learning structures such as drama activities can promote higher levels of social interaction, communication and teamwork. Working together in DBL drama-based activities requires students to communicate, collaborate and support one another, fostering teamwork and also social skills. Whereas, in traditional lessons, interaction may be more limited and often restricted to structured group discussions or presentations, which may not create the same depth of peer connection.

Additionally, peer connection is notably higher in DBL (4.17 vs 3.50), supporting the idea that group interactions and role-playing creates a stronger sense of community between learners. This finding aligns with Johnson & Johnson's (1989) Cooperative Learning Theory which shows that cooperative learning structures such as drama activities can promote higher levels of social interaction, communication and teamwork. Working together in DBL drama-based activities requires students to communicate, collaborate and support one another, fostering teamwork and also social skills. Whereas in traditional lessons, interaction may be more limited and often restricted to structured group discussions or presentations, which may not create the same depth of peer connection.

Content Connection and Sense of Accomplishment

While DBL shows advantages in more areas, the gap between DBL and traditional learning is narrower in terms of content connection (3.83 vs 3.67) and sense of accomplishment (4.17 vs 4.00). This suggests that while DBL enhances engagement, traditional learning still provides a structured sense of achievement for students. A possible explanation for this is that traditional lessons often follow clear objectives, assessment criteria and step-by-step progressions that allows students to measure their own success in a more straightforward manner. According to Locke & Latham's GoalSetting Theory, setting clear and structured goals can enhance motivation and performance which becomes a strength of traditional learning.

On the other hand, content connection is slightly higher in DBL possibly because some of the learners may struggle in fully grasping the academic material when it is integrated into dramatic scenarios. If the drama-based approach is not structured well, there may be a risk of students being more focused on the performance aspects rather than content comprehension. Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988) suggests that excessive cognitive load can hinder learning which may explain why some students find it challenging to connect with academic contents when engaged in drama-based activities.

The Practical Implications

The findings also indicated that DBL has several positive effects on language learners. It fosters increased motivation and confidence, as the emotionally stimulating environment of DBL helps learners feel more at ease which reduces their language speaking anxiety and encourages them to express themselves in English. Furthermore, DBL promotes stronger peer relationships as role-playing and group activities facilitate communication and teamwork which creates a positive classroom atmosphere. The engaging nature of DBL also aids in better retention of language skills, including vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. However, it is important for teachers to ensure that DBL activities are well-structured, striking a balance between creative expression and language acquisition so that learners benefit from both the enjoyment of acting and the development of their language. However, it is important for teachers to ensure that DBL activities are well-structured, creating a balance between creative expression and language acquisition. This prevents learners from focusing solely on acting and ensures that they are also developing their language skills.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant impact of Drama-Based Learning (DBL) on ESL students' engagement and learning experience. To specify, the findings indicate that DBL fosters higher emotional engagement with students displaying a greater interest, enjoyment, and emotional intensity compared to the traditional learning methods. This aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) that emphasises active learning through social interaction. The immersive and participatory nature of DBL also encourages spontaneous communication, role-playing and storytelling which makes lessons feel more relatable and dynamic within the learning process. Additionally, Johnson & Johnson's (1989) Cooperative Learning Theory supports the idea that DBL strengthens peer relationships by promoting collaboration, teamwork, and mutual support. Unlike traditional learning which often relies on structured exercises and passive participation, DBL allows for deeper emotional connections, enhancing students' motivation and willingness to engage in language learning.

Nevertheless, while DBL does enhance engagement, its impact on content connection and sense of accomplishment is only slightly higher than traditional learning. This suggests that while DBL makes lessons

more memorable, structured learning from traditional learning still provides a clear sense of achievement. Locke & Latham's Goal-Setting Theory (1990) explains this by emphasising how defined objectives and progress tracking enhances motivation. To add on, some students may struggle with fully grasping academic content within drama-based scenarios if the activities are not well-structured. Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988) suggests that an excessive cognitive burden such as balancing performance and content learning can hinder comprehension which indicates the need for a well balanced approach where DBL remains engaging yet structured enough to ensure meaningful learning.

The study's limitations primarily stem from the relatively small number of items included in the questionnaire. To prevent participant fatigue, the survey was intentionally kept concise while still addressing key dimensions of emotional engagement. Porter et al. (2004) caution that overly lengthy surveys may compromise response accuracy, increase dropout rates and contribute to disengagement. Accordingly, this study prioritized brevity without compromising the measurement of emotional engagement when comparing DBL with traditional learning approaches. Future research could extend this work by incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or open-ended responses to provide richer insights into students' emotional engagement in drama-based contexts.

Overall, these findings reaffirm that the integration of DBL when applied within a structured pedagogical framework, can create a more stimulating and emotionally supportive learning environment. Such an approach not only enhances students' confidence and reduces language anxiety but also strengthens peer relationships and fosters sustained emotional engagement. Moreover, the interactive nature of DBL contributes to improvements in vocabulary retention, pronunciation and fluency. Nonetheless, meticulous planning remains essential to ensure that students concentrate not only on performance but also on the development of linguistic competence. Future studies may further explore strategies to optimize DBL for enhancing both engagement and academic comprehension, as well as to evaluate its long-term impact on language proficiency across diverse learner populations.

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