

Drama-Based Learning and Self-Confidence: Insights from Malaysian Higher Education

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.924ILEIID0023>

Received: 23 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 29 October 2025

ABSTRACT

English language anxiety remains a significant barrier for undergraduates in Malaysia, often impeding their willingness to communicate effectively in academic and professional settings. Drama-based learning is recognised as an innovative and experiential method that not only enhances language skills but also boosts selfconfidence. This study examines how drama activities incorporated into a drama-based English communication course at a Malaysian public university increase students' confidence in speaking English. A qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews was conducted with three lecturers who taught the course. The constant comparison method was employed to identify recurring themes during data analysis. Findings suggest that activities such as monologues, improvisation, drama production, poetry recitation, and language games helped students overcome anxiety, develop social interaction skills, and build confidence to communicate spontaneously in English. The results underscore the effectiveness of drama as a teaching tool in higher education, fostering an environment that encourages students to take intellectual risks and express themselves freely. This research provides valuable insights into ongoing discussions about learner-centred methods in English language teaching, emphasising the potential of drama to alleviate language anxiety and promote communicative competence. The study ultimately recommends greater integration of drama into university curricula as a strategic approach to enhancing language learning outcomes.

Keywords: drama-based learning, self-confidence, English communication, higher education, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Current formal English language learning in Malaysia takes place in traditional classrooms as well as a more modern approach by incorporating online distance learning where the focus of learning is on the grammatical and vocabulary mastery. They are used to passive learning such as listening to lectures, completing assignments and answering tests. However, nowadays there is a growing desire among students, especially in the tertiary education to learn English in an interesting environment. According to Nganga (2019), the pedagogy in the 21st century must focus on 4Cs-collaboration, critical thinking, creativity and communication. In 1974, the Malaysian Curriculum Development Centre proposed communicative language teaching or CLT for the English syllabus which refers to the effort of operationalizing communication competence (Ukat & Ismail, 2022). In the university level, CLT is adopted for the English language by aiming students to interact and engage in real-life communication.

According to Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), Malaysian students are not exposed to real-life situations that encourage them to use the second language and the benefits of being linguistically competent in English. This is because mainly the focus of English classes is following the syllabus heavily and getting high marks for English tests or assessments. As a result, university students are not competitive in the market and they face anxiety in

using the second language in daily conversations and professional settings. According to Masud et al. (2024), language anxiety is defined as a complex state of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning process. Therefore, language anxiety inhibits the learning process of the language as the students are fearful of making mistakes in the classrooms. Negative attitudes of language students will result in demotivation, stress, frustration and apprehension (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Shraiber and Yaroslavova (2016) stated that drama creates a conducive environment for learning to take place and it helps overcome two barriers of spontaneous speech: the fear of making mistakes as well as the fear of using the foreign language in public.

Drama on the other hand, is an activity where learners are instructed to portray themselves or someone else when given an imaginary situation and the character of another person. Drama has a unique value as a pedagogical technique as it allows students to express their own feelings. However, drama in the context of teaching carries a different meaning which is the experience regardless of any function communication to the audience. Therefore, drama is best called an experiential, active learning instrument.

Past researches had proven that drama is a strategy to increase students' engagement in classrooms and develop speaking skills in the target language (Bessadet, 2022). Past studies also suggested that drama increases students' willingness to participate in class activities, leading to the progress of speaking skills, fluency and accuracy of language, as well as comprehensibility (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Besides, drama also gives individuals the opportunity for self-actualization, group work and sharing of responsibilities (Wiyanti et al., 2018). Apart from that, drama emphasizes more on student-centered approach rather than teacher-centered approach. This means that the students are actively learning by responding to the lecturers' instructions and asking questions when they encounter confusion. Past researches had proven the effectiveness of drama in English classrooms and confirmed that drama is suitable for university levels (Sirisrimangkorn, 2018).

Drama also enables students to gain confidence and self-esteem needed to use English through the experience and enjoyment of performing drama in English. Most students often enjoy the learning process if they are allowed to show their talents and skills to the public. This enjoyment which is also a sense of accomplishment and reward can lead to increased motivation and greater success in language proficiency (Zhao, 2023). Drama also should be recognized as a teaching tool that can help strengthen language learning and cultivate creative development. This is because it allows students to be expressive by using different vocabulary and at the same using imagination to create an interesting and innovative performance. Ahmed's (2019) study stated that drama provides the feeling of amusement and psychological support which help to reduce students' level of anxiety. Hu and Shu (2025) also highlighted that drama increases students' communication skills and shyness through group discussions in drama class. There are many drama activities that can be included in the class to vary the learning process and keep students motivated and interested such as language games, mime, improvisation, storytelling and role play.

In UiTM, The Communication through Drama course (EPE530) is designed to enable students to communicate effectively in English with confidence, creativity, critical thinking, and an appreciation of aesthetic values. However, many Malaysian students continue to experience low confidence when using English, as it is their second language. They often resort to their mother tongue to avoid miscommunication or errors, leading to language anxiety and reluctance to speak spontaneously. This lack of confidence is compounded by the limited vocabulary and fear of inaccuracy, both of which restrict students' ability to communicate naturally in English.

Traditional English lessons in Malaysia have largely emphasised lectures, grammar drills, and rote memorisation, which contribute to boredom and disengagement among students. Learners increasingly prefer interactive, expressive, and supportive environments where they can share opinions, practise creativity, and build communication skills in enjoyable ways. While existing research has examined the use of drama in language learning, few studies have specifically investigated how English drama enhances self-confidence among Malaysian undergraduates. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining the role of drama in boosting students' confidence in using English, thereby demonstrating the pedagogical significance of drama in higher education contexts. In order to do so, this study will be answering the two research questions below:

1. What are the drama activities used in classrooms to facilitate the teaching-learning process?

2. How do drama activities enhance students' self-confidence?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Use of Drama and Drama Activities

Drama has been described in multiple ways within the field of language education. It is often regarded as a creative activity in which learners take on roles, either portraying themselves or others in imagined situations, and use this process as a platform for communication (Zhao, 2023). Beyond role adoption, drama encompasses a wide variety of oral activities that engage creativity, making it highly suitable for learners across different age groups. It integrates the four essential language skills which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing, thereby offering a holistic learning experience (Al-Jiboury, 2024). Furthermore, the dynamic nature of drama requires teachers to diversify instructional techniques and design innovative classroom practices to maintain student motivation and interest (Al-Jiboury, 2024).

Drama activities can take many forms, including role plays, folk tales, poetry, plays, and reader's theatre (Koushki, 2019). Role play, for instance, enables students to embody characters or objects through verbal and non-verbal expression, while folk tales with simple plots and familiar characters can support understanding (Muktadir et al., 2024). Poetry fosters emotional connection with language, whereas plays encourage the use of costumes, props, and stagecraft to enhance communication and audience engagement (Xiao, 2024). Reader's theatre, by contrast, requires minimal resources and allows learners to focus on expressive reading. Other activities such as mime highlight the significance of non-verbal communication, while improvisation provides opportunities for spontaneous expression through gestures, facial expressions, and creative dialogue (Elaldi & Yerliyurt, 2017). When carefully structured and aligned with clear objectives, these activities make drama a powerful tool for fostering reasoning, creativity, and interpersonal skills (Celume et al., 2019). Thus, drama's wide range of practices reinforces its value as a learner-centred and engaging pedagogical approach.

Students' Motivation Level in Drama

Motivation plays an essential role in language acquisition, and it is strongly shaped by an individual's level of self-confidence (Ghafar, 2023). Motivation can be divided into two main types: intrinsic, which arises from internal factors such as personal interest and enjoyment, and extrinsic, which is driven by external rewards including recognition, grades, or career advancement (Ghafar, 2023). In addition, Fiddiyasari and Pustika (2021) distinguished between integrative and instrumental motivation. Learners with integrative motivation study a language to engage more fully with a culture, whereas those with instrumental motivation are primarily concerned with practical benefits such as employment, salary, or academic qualifications. These perspectives highlight that motivation is multi-faceted and central to students' engagement and progress in learning a second language.

Drama has been identified as a particularly effective approach for enhancing learners' motivation in language classrooms. Elaldi and Yerliyurt (2017) emphasise that drama creates a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment, reducing anxiety and encouraging active participation. Stevens (2015) observed that students who were disengaged during storytelling became enthusiastic and interactive when drama activities such as frozen scenes and role-play were introduced. Similarly, Hulse and Owens (2019) found that drama not only captures learners' attention but also stimulates creativity, enabling students to engage with language beyond traditional textbooks. Participation in group drama plays further fosters a sense of belonging and performance motivation among students (Deng, 2024). Collectively, these studies suggest that drama effectively enhances motivation by combining creativity, interaction, and enjoyment, thereby reinforcing its pedagogical value in second language learning.

The Effects of Drama on Students' Self-Confidence and Socialisation

Self-confidence has been described as an individual's awareness of their abilities, appreciation of themselves, and recognition of their emotions (Ghafar, 2023). In language learning, teachers can apply various strategies to stimulate interest and encourage learners to take an active role in the classroom. When students are consistently

engaged in speaking activities, they not only improve their participation within lessons but also gain the courage to use English beyond the classroom setting. Drama is one effective approach in this regard, as it familiarises students with English in performance-based contexts, reducing barriers to communication in daily life. Research has shown that drama offers focus and support for learners to use language independently, which in turn nurtures their self-confidence (Islam, 2023). Similarly, Hu and Shu (2025) highlighted that drama allows students to collaborate, express themselves, and support each other, while Deng (2024) adds that this process enables learners to reflect on themselves, others, and their environment, leading to greater self-awareness and stronger self-esteem.

Beyond building individual confidence, drama also plays a significant role in enhancing social skills and peer interaction. The collaborative nature of drama requires students to engage with one another, overcome communication barriers, and reduce anxiety related to making mistakes (Astiandani & Mustafa, 2021). Through these shared experiences, learners develop resilience and a willingness to take risks in communication, which further strengthens their confidence. Studies have also demonstrated that active participation in both individual and group drama activities promotes the development of friendships and positive classroom relationships (Elaldi & Yerliyurt, 2017). Taken together, these findings suggest that drama not only improves learners' self-confidence but also fosters supportive social environments that contribute to their overall language learning experience.

Theoretical Framework – Constructivism Theory (Aljohani, 2017)

Constructivism, a psychological theory of learning, explains how individuals develop knowledge through experience and reflection (Allen, 2025). In education, this theory highlights a top-down approach where learners grasp central ideas before exploring details (Aljohani, 2017). The emphasis is on active learning, where students reflect on their understanding and engage in dialogue about how their knowledge evolves. In this model, teachers function as facilitators who guide rather than dictate the learning process, creating opportunities for both the transmission of knowledge and active student participation (Fernando & Marikar, 2017). Thinkers such as Piaget and Vygotsky extended the theory with different emphases: Piaget underscored independent active learning, whereas Vygotsky pointed to the role of collaboration and apprenticeship in knowledge construction (Aljohani, 2017). Together, these perspectives illustrate how constructivism places learners at the centre of the educational experience and links their growth to both individual reflection and social interaction.

Within the context of foreign language learning, constructivism offers four guiding principles: action-oriented and cooperative learning, learner-centred approaches, process-related awareness, and holistic language experiences (Aljohani, 2017). Action-oriented tasks encourage collaboration, creativity, and self-expression, which strengthen both confidence and social skills. Learner-centred practices give students greater autonomy in tailoring learning to their preferred styles, while process-related awareness stresses the importance of reflection in consolidating new knowledge (Allen, 2025). Holistic language experiences, meanwhile, situate learning in authentic and meaningful contexts that allow students to connect with real-life situations. In a constructivist classroom, teachers design interactive environments that prioritise questioning, exploration, and negotiation with learners, thereby fostering deeper engagement and ownership of learning (Allen, 2025). When applied to drama, constructivism is particularly effective, as it enables learners to actively construct knowledge through physical, cognitive, and emotional involvement. By shifting responsibility from teacher to student, drama activities not only enhance cognitive abilities but also develop learners' self-confidence (Hu & Shu, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the impact of drama-based teaching on students' self-confidence in English communication. Using a case study was suitable because it offers a detailed understanding of a specific context, namely a drama-based English communication course at a Malaysian public university, within its real-world educational setting. The research was guided by constructivist learning theory, which emphasises that knowledge and confidence grow through active participation, collaboration, and reflection.

Three lecturers from the university's language department participated in this study. They were chosen for their direct experience teaching the drama-based English communication course. Their insights proved valuable as

they reflected on students' progress, challenges, and overall growth in confidence throughout the semester. To preserve confidentiality, neither the name of the institution nor the course code is included in this paper.

The revised approach updated the English curriculum by incorporating various drama-based activities, including monologues, improvisation, theatrical performances, poetry recitation, simulations, and games. These elements were selected to immerse students in realistic communication scenarios, allowing them to take language risks within a supportive environment. Collaboration among peers was also encouraged, as students worked together on creative tasks. Instead of focusing solely on grammar, the course emphasised experiential learning, with performance and creativity at the heart of developing students' confidence and communication skills.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three lecturers. This method was chosen for its flexibility and adaptability. It enabled them to explore key points raised by participants while maintaining a consistent structure across all interviews. Five guiding questions, adapted from Elaldi and Yerliyurt (2017), were used to examine the drama activities employed, their impact on students' confidence, and the challenges faced during drama teaching implementation. Each interview lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes, was audiorecorded with the participant's consent, and transcribed verbatim. To support the findings and ensure reliable analysis, relevant course documents, such as assessment outlines and activity details, were also reviewed.

In analysing the data, the constant comparative method was employed, as outlined by Olson et al. (2016). The initial coding stage involved identifying key phrases, such as "language anxiety," "confidence through performance," and "peer collaboration." These preliminary codes were then systematically compared across transcripts to identify recurring themes and develop broader categories, such as "confidence through risk-taking" and "socialisation through drama." To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was used, drawing on both interview transcripts and course documents, as well as peer debriefing with colleagues. These steps aimed to reinforce the credibility of the analysis and ensure that the results genuinely reflected participants' experiences.

From the analysis of the lecturers' interviews, three main findings emerged. First, drama-based activities fostered genuine communication among participants rather than rehearsed or superficial exchanges. Second, engaging in drama appeared to reduce anxiety and increase self-confidence. Lastly, drama activities improved social interaction and supported more effective collaborative learning within the group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the lecturers' interviews, three main findings emerged. First, drama-based activities fostered genuine communication among participants rather than rehearsed or superficial exchanges. Second, engaging in drama appeared to reduce anxiety and increase self-confidence. Lastly, drama activities improved social interaction and supported more effective collaborative learning within the group.

Drama Activities as Tools for Authentic Communication

Lecturers repeatedly emphasised the importance of activities such as monologues, improvisation, and drama production. Improvisation, in particular, requires students to react spontaneously, which enhances their ability to think quickly and respond effectively during conversations. At the same time, drama production involves teamwork, extensive practice, and live performances, providing students with opportunities to develop both their language skills and non-verbal communication. These insights are consistent with Nguyen (2023), who found that improvisation-based exercises significantly improved students' fluency and their ability to organise discussions effectively in EFL classrooms. The table below illustrates how various activities relate to different confidence outcomes, emphasising drama's versatility as a teaching aid.

Table 1 Drama Activities and their Perceived Impact

Drama Activity	Observation Outcome	Related Confidence Skills
Monologue	Practicing delivery, voice and stage presence	Public speaking confidence

Improvisation	Responding spontaneously in real time	Spontaneity and risk-taking
Drama production	Collaboration, creativity and longform performance	Teamwork and sustained confidence
Poetry recitation	Rhythm, pronunciation and articulation	Vocal clarity and expressiveness
Games and simulations	Fun, and low-stakes practice	Reduced anxiety and willingness to try

Moreover, these activities were selected by lecturers according to their teaching preferences, ensuring that students were exposed to multiple ways of practising English. The additional or “lighter” activities, particularly those not directly assessed, created a relaxed classroom atmosphere where students could focus on using the language meaningfully without the burden of academic pressure. This emphasis on authentic practice supports the idea that drama is an experiential learning tool that allows students to construct knowledge through active engagement rather than through passive memorisation.

The results also highlighted that drama learning is not solely about content but rather about providing students with opportunities to explore language through practice and creativity. Activities such as role-playing and reading aloud not only encouraged spontaneous speaking but also catered to different learning styles, particularly kinaesthetic learners who benefit from hands-on experiences. These varied tasks demonstrated that drama offers learners a safe yet dynamic space to apply their linguistic knowledge, while simultaneously promoting creativity and critical thinking. In this way, drama activities function as authentic communicative tools that prepare students to use English effectively in real-world contexts.

Reducing Anxiety and Building Confidence

Observing the students over time revealed a noticeable change in their behaviour. Initially, many hesitated and seemed concerned about making mistakes and being judged. However, as drama activities became a regular part of the classroom, the environment grew more supportive and even playful. Students started to take risks and express themselves more freely, no longer held back by fear of ridicule. These observations align with Dewi and Hayati (2025), who found that drama-based activities significantly increased students' willingness to communicate in English. Similarly, Wijaya et al. (2025) discovered that drama not only improved students' pronunciation but also made learning more enjoyable, both of which are vital for building lasting confidence.

The evidence also showed that drama plays a transformative role in shaping students' attitudes toward language learning. While many learners from Asian cultural contexts are hesitant to speak English due to fear of errors or cultural norms that discourage outspoken behaviour (Aljohani, 2017; Allen, 2025), drama created a stress-free environment that allowed them to practise without judgment (Ghafar, 2023). The use of improvisation, role play, and performance lowered affective filters, increased motivation, and encouraged learners to apply language creatively. Over time, students not only became more confident but also more motivated to communicate in English across different contexts. Thus, drama proved to be an effective means of reducing anxiety while simultaneously cultivating long-term self-confidence.

Socialisation and Collaborative Learning

Another important outcome of the drama-based classroom was the development of socialisation and collaborative skills. Students were consistently required to work together in activities such as role plays, group productions, and frozen scenes, which enhanced their ability to communicate, empathise, and collaborate. These group dynamics allowed students to establish positive relationships, develop interpersonal skills, and foster a sense of belonging (Elaldi & Yerliyurt, 2017; Deng, 2024). In this sense, drama not only facilitated language practice but also encouraged learners to see themselves as part of a collective, making the classroom experience more interactive and supportive. Teachers, acting as facilitators, were able to observe these interactions, provide guidance, and ensure that students took ownership of their learning (Onn et al., 2024).

Research supports these observations; for example, Ulbricht and Kruger (2023) emphasised the role of drama in promoting intercultural understanding and personal development. Similarly, Hu and Shu (2025) contended that drama education enhances teamwork and critical thinking. Therefore, drama serves not only as an artistic expression but also as an effective platform for developing social adaptability and cognitive flexibility. Implications for Language Education

Participating in drama can help reduce anxiety and boost self-esteem, laying a foundation for stronger communication skills. These skills are vital not only in the classroom, where students and educators can openly share their opinions and thoughts, but also in discussions about the content of their debates in academic and professional environments. Therefore, Malaysian universities should reconsider how they teach English. Instead of the traditional emphasis on grammar, incorporating more drama-based modules would provide students with authentic, real-life language experiences and inspire them to use the language in engaging, practical ways. This form of active participation often leads to more effective learning and helps students develop better command of skills compared to standard, theoretical activities.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined drama-based activities, including improvisation, monologues, and productions, as well as language anxiety and self-confidence among Malaysian undergraduate students learning English as a second language. The evidence indicates that drama is more than just a complementary element of language education; it specifically promotes meaningful communication, collaboration, and risk-taking. Additionally, it fosters transferable skills such as empathy, teamwork, and socialisation, which can manifest both during university studies and in future employment.

The significance of this study is demonstrating that drama can be more than a fun classroom activity, while positioning drama as a teaching approach that can enhance the process of language learning. Importantly, drama offers students the opportunity to practise English in context, which enables them to do so with greater confidence and as real examples of communication.

Future research should explore students' perspectives, how meaningful or lasting change occurs regarding communication skills, and compare the effects of drama on language anxiety and self-confidence across a broader range of higher education contexts. If these studies expand to provide clearer evidence for Yvonne Linsey's call for more experimental and constructive approaches in teaching English, then they can significantly enhance the English language curriculum.

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