

Scaffolding English Communication through Drama-Based Pedagogy: Insights from ESL Lecturers in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Despite extensive formal English instruction, many Malaysian higher education graduates continue to show limited confidence and persistent anxiety when communicating in English, indicating ongoing challenges in developing communicative competence in tertiary ESL contexts. Although drama-based pedagogy is widely advocated as an effective way to address these challenges, limited empirical research has examined how experienced lecturers intentionally scaffold English communication through drama within undergraduate curricula. This study explores the pedagogical principles underpinning lecturers' implementation of drama-based learning in an undergraduate English communication course at a Malaysian public university. Specifically, it investigates how lecturers design, sequence, facilitate, and adapt drama-based learning experiences to support students' communicative development. Employing a qualitative research design, the study drew on in-depth semi-structured interviews with three experienced ESL lecturers teaching the Communication Through Drama course. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated pedagogical principles emerged from the analysis: (1) a structured progression of learning activities from low-risk individual monologues to higher-risk ensemble productions; (2) the deliberate creation of psychologically safe communicative environments that reduce learners' affective barriers to participation; (3) the design of authentic communicative situations through drama in which learners negotiate meaning and respond to realistic scenarios; and (4) a facilitative teaching orientation in which lecturers act as guides, observers, and co-learners. Collectively, these principles supported learners' gradual development of communicative independence throughout the semester rather than through isolated classroom activities or assessments. The findings complement the predominantly outcome-oriented literature on drama-based pedagogy by providing a process-oriented explanation of how communicative competence is cultivated through purposeful instructional design. Furthermore, the study extends scaffolding theory in second-language education by demonstrating that effective scaffolding in drama-based pedagogy integrates cognitive, emotional, interactive, and instructional dimensions. The study offers a coherent pedagogical framework for lecturers, curriculum designers, and professional development providers seeking to embed drama-based pedagogy as a structured, supportive, and sustainable approach to developing communicative competence in higher education ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Drama-Based Pedagogy; Communicative Competence; English Communication; Psychological Safety; Scaffolding

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in English has become an increasingly important graduate attribute as universities prepare students for globalised academic, professional, and multicultural environments (Chan & Tse, 2025). Consequently, higher education institutions are placing greater emphasis on learner-centred pedagogies that foster communicative competence alongside disciplinary knowledge and enhance graduates' employability (Tuearah et al., 2025). Recent research consistently identifies communication and language proficiency as essential competencies for meeting evolving workplace expectations. Nevertheless, many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners still struggle to communicate spontaneously, participate confidently in classroom interactions, and transfer their language knowledge to authentic communicative contexts (Mani & Wan Salmuni Wan Mustaffa, 2024). These challenges have been linked to communication apprehension, limited opportunities for meaningful interaction, and instructional practices that offer insufficient support for authentic language use (Kuluşaklı & Genç, 2024). Accordingly, communicative competence is increasingly understood not merely as linguistic knowledge but as the ability to participate confidently and meaningfully in authentic social interaction.

Drama-based pedagogy has emerged as a promising learner-centred approach, positioning learners as active participants in meaning-making through communication, collaboration, and experiential learning. Through activities such as role-play, improvisation, simulation, storytelling, and theatrical performance, learners negotiate meaning, solve problems collaboratively, and communicate purposefully in realistic social contexts. Recent systematic reviews consistently show that drama-based pedagogy enhances speaking proficiency, communicative competence, classroom engagement, creativity, collaboration, and learners' willingness to communicate across diverse ESL and EFL settings (Dawoud et al., 2024; Friatin et al., 2026; Kirkpatrick et al., 2024; Kumara Rao & Zakaria, 2025; Luo et al., 2024; Shelton & Guyotte, 2025). In Malaysian higher education, qualitative studies likewise support the pedagogical value of drama-based learning. Mohd Nor et al. (2024) reported that drama-based classrooms foster learner interaction through social constructivist principles and visible thinking routines, thereby creating more student-centred learning environments that promote communication. More recently, Othman et al. (2025) found that activities such as monologues, improvisation, and drama production reduced learners' language anxiety while increasing their confidence and willingness to communicate in English. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that drama-based pedagogy contributes not only to improved communicative outcomes but also to richer learner participation in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

Despite this growing body of evidence, existing research remains largely outcome-focused, emphasising what learners achieve rather than how those outcomes are realised pedagogically (Dawoud et al., 2024; Kumara Rao & Zakaria, 2025; Luo et al., 2024; Shelton & Guyotte, 2025). The effectiveness of drama-based pedagogy should not be assumed to follow automatically from dramatic activities. Rather, it depends on lecturers' deliberate instructional decisions, including how they design, sequence, facilitate, and adapt learning experiences to learners' evolving needs. Purposeful teacher mediation, structured learner support, and ongoing opportunities for reflection are therefore central to successful implementation of drama-based learning.

The present study draws on constructivist, social constructivist, scaffolding, and experiential learning perspectives, which together provide a coherent theoretical foundation for understanding how lecturers design, facilitate, and adapt drama-based learning experiences (Bruner, 1986; Kolb, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976; Saidjonovna, 2026). Constructivist perspectives view learning as an active process in which learners construct knowledge through meaningful participation, authentic experience, and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Gormley & Nestel, 2025). Scaffolding theory further explains how temporary, adaptive instructional support enables learners to accomplish increasingly complex communicative tasks before responsibility is gradually transferred to them (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). Complementing these perspectives, Experiential Learning Theory proposes that meaningful learning develops through a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Saidjonovna, 2026). Together, these perspectives provide an integrated

framework for examining how lecturers intentionally scaffold English communication through drama-based pedagogy.

Against this background, the present study addresses an important gap in the literature by examining the pedagogical processes through which experienced ESL lecturers scaffold English communication in undergraduate drama-based classrooms. Rather than focusing solely on learner outcomes, the study focuses on the instructional practices that underpin those outcomes and support learners' progressive development of communicative competence.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What pedagogical strategies do ESL lecturers employ when implementing drama-based learning in undergraduate English communication classrooms?
2. How do lecturers scaffold students' participation and English-language communication through drama-based activities?
3. What pedagogical principles emerge from lecturers' use of drama-based learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Communication as a Graduate Competency

English communication is increasingly recognised as a core graduate competency in higher education, reflecting employers' growing expectations that graduates possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also the ability to communicate effectively, collaborate, solve problems, and adapt to diverse professional environments (Arsenis et al., 2022; Bhatti et al., 2023). A comprehensive twenty-year narrative review characterises employability as a dynamic, lifelong capability in which communication, adaptability, and higher-order thinking are central attributes rather than supplementary skills (Choi-Lundberg et al., 2024). Consistent with this perspective, studies in the Malaysian context identify communication, interpersonal competence, leadership, digital literacy, and professional dispositions as among the most valued graduate attributes employers seek (Mahmud & Wong, 2022).

Contemporary understandings of communicative competence extend well beyond grammatical proficiency. Rather than being viewed solely as linguistic accuracy, communicative competence is now recognised as a multidimensional construct encompassing linguistic, discourse, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and interactional competencies that enable individuals to communicate appropriately across diverse contexts. Recent systematic reviews further demonstrate that communicative competence develops through the interaction of learner characteristics, instructional approaches, curriculum design, classroom activities, and opportunities for authentic language use (Mootoosamy & Aryadoust, 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024).

Despite these developments, the transition from classroom language learning to effective academic and professional communication remains challenging for many ESL and EFL undergraduates. Although learners may possess adequate linguistic knowledge, they often remain reluctant to communicate because of anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, limited confidence, or perceived inadequacy. A systematic review by Faitaki et al. (2026) found that multiple interacting factors shape willingness to communicate, including perceived competence, motivation, classroom relationships, instructional practices, and opportunities for meaningful interaction. Wang et al. (2025) report similar findings, while Ma and Wang (2023) show that supportive classroom environments remain among the strongest predictors of learners' decisions to initiate communication. Likewise, Guo et al. (2024) and Rahmanu and Molnár (2024) conclude that collaborative learning, interactive pedagogies, and personalised feedback significantly strengthen learners' willingness to communicate.

Collectively, these studies suggest that communication development is both a linguistic and a participatory process. Consequently, pedagogical approaches that create authentic opportunities for purposeful language use are increasingly regarded as essential to developing communicative competence. In this context, drama-based pedagogy is particularly relevant because it situates language learning within meaningful social interaction (Schwandt, 1994; Shelton & Guyotte, 2025).

Learner-Centred Pedagogy as a Foundation

The growing emphasis on communicative competence has accelerated the shift from teacher-centred instruction towards learner-centred pedagogies that position students as active participants in learning. Recent systematic reviews consistently report that learner-centred approaches enhance learner engagement, classroom interaction, communicative competence, motivation, and higher-order thinking by encouraging learners to use language purposefully rather than passively receiving knowledge (Guo et al., 2024; Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024).

A systematic review by Bremner et al. (2022) further identifies consistent positive associations among learner-centred teaching, learner motivation and confidence, and the quality of teacher–student relationships. These findings suggest that meaningful participation is more likely when learners perceive the classroom as supportive, collaborative, and psychologically safe.

Within this pedagogical paradigm, the lecturer's role extends beyond transmitting knowledge to include designing meaningful learning experiences, facilitating interaction, providing formative feedback, monitoring learners' progress, and continuously adapting instructional support to learners' emerging needs. Drama-based pedagogy exemplifies this learner-centred orientation by situating language learning within purposeful social interaction and collaborative meaning-making (Friatin et al., 2026). Evidence from Malaysian higher education further reinforces this perspective. Mohd Nor et al. (2024) found that drama classrooms promoted collaborative interaction, visible thinking, and active learner participation, demonstrating that communicative learning is strengthened when learners construct knowledge socially through authentic engagement.

Scaffolding English Communication through Drama

Drama-based pedagogy positions learners as active participants who construct meaning through purposeful communication rather than merely practising predetermined linguistic forms (Friatin et al., 2026). Through activities such as process drama, role-play, improvisation, simulation, teacher-in-role, hot-seating, and collaborative storytelling, learners negotiate meaning, express emotions, solve problems, and respond spontaneously in authentic communicative contexts (Schwandt, 1994). Rather than prioritising linguistic perfection, these approaches emphasise meaningful communication, creativity, and interaction. Malaysian evidence similarly shows that monologues, improvisation, simulations, and drama productions provide authentic opportunities for students to develop confidence and communicative competence through sustained language use (Othman et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of drama-based pedagogy cannot be attributed solely to the dramatic activities themselves. Rather, successful implementation depends on the pedagogical decisions lecturers make before, during, and after these activities (Dawoud et al., 2024; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Kumara Rao & Zakaria, 2025; Luo et al., 2024). Drama creates the communicative context, but lecturers determine how learning experiences are structured, how interaction is facilitated, how feedback is provided, and how learners are progressively supported towards greater communicative independence.

Scaffolding offers a suitable theoretical lens for understanding these instructional processes. Rooted in sociocultural learning theory, scaffolding denotes the temporary, adaptive support a more knowledgeable individual provides to help learners accomplish tasks that initially exceed their independent capabilities (Abdullah et al., 2026; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises scaffolding as a dynamic, responsive pedagogical process that involves deliberate task

sequencing, modelling, questioning, collaborative dialogue, feedback, and the gradual transfer of responsibility to learners (Arora et al., 2024; Wijnia et al., 2024).

Drama-based pedagogy offers particularly favourable conditions for scaffolding, as communicative demands can be systematically adjusted to learners' developing abilities. Lecturers may initially provide structured scenarios, vocabulary support, guided questioning, or carefully designed role-play, then progressively encourage learners to improvise, negotiate meaning independently, and manage increasingly complex communicative situations. Peers likewise contribute to scaffolding through collaborative dialogue, constructive feedback, shared problem-solving, and the co-construction of meaning (Dawoud et al., 2024; Kumara Rao & Zakaria, 2025). Although substantial evidence confirms the positive effects of drama-based pedagogy on speaking proficiency, communicative confidence, learner engagement, and language achievement, comparatively little research has examined the pedagogical processes by which lecturers intentionally scaffold these developmental outcomes.

Conceptual Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature shows that communicative competence has become an essential graduate capability, requiring pedagogical approaches that go beyond the transmission of linguistic knowledge. Learner-centred pedagogy provides an educational framework in which students actively construct knowledge through meaningful communication, collaboration, and authentic engagement. Within this framework, drama-based pedagogy offers rich opportunities for experiential language learning by situating communication in realistic social contexts that foster participation, creativity, and reflection.

The literature also suggests that the success of drama-based pedagogy depends less on the dramatic activities themselves than on the pedagogical decisions that shape learners' experiences. These instructional practices closely reflect the principles of scaffolding, in which lecturers provide responsive, temporary support and progressively transfer responsibility to learners as their communicative competence develops. Previous Malaysian studies have examined learner interaction in online drama classrooms (Mohd Nor et al., 2024) and the influence of drama-based learning on students' confidence and willingness to communicate (Othman et al., 2025). However, considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding how lecturers intentionally scaffold English communication through the sequencing of drama activities, facilitative instructional practices, and adaptive learner support.

Consequently, an important gap remains in the literature. While most previous research has evaluated the outcomes of drama-based interventions, relatively few studies have examined the pedagogical processes through which those outcomes are achieved. This gap is particularly evident in Malaysian higher education, where institutional contexts, curriculum expectations, learner characteristics and cultural considerations shape lecturers' instructional decisions. To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how experienced ESL lecturers intentionally scaffold English communication through drama-based pedagogy in Malaysian higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design to explore how ESL lecturers scaffold English communication through drama-based pedagogy in undergraduate classrooms. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought an in-depth understanding of lecturers' pedagogical practices, experiences, and perspectives rather than measuring predetermined variables or testing causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection, allowing participants to provide rich accounts of their instructional practices and enabling researchers to probe emerging issues in greater depth.

Research Context

The study was conducted at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia. As one of Malaysia's largest public universities, UiTM places considerable emphasis on developing students' English proficiency and communication skills to enhance academic success and graduate employability. The Communication Through Drama course provided an appropriate research setting because it explicitly incorporates learner-centred instructional approaches that encourage students to develop their English communication skills through experiential, collaborative, and performance-based learning activities.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants whose professional experience closely aligned with the study's objectives (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Patton, 2015). Three ESL lecturers currently teaching the Communication Through Drama course took part in the study. Each lecturer had more than five years' experience teaching English and extensive experience integrating drama-based pedagogy into classroom practice. The small, information-rich sample was appropriate for the study's focused exploratory purpose, which was to examine lecturers' pedagogical reasoning in depth within a single course context rather than to represent the wider population of Malaysian ESL lecturers. However, the sample size ($N = 3$) and single-institution setting necessarily limit the breadth and transferability of the findings. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality throughout the research process.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol developed from the research questions and relevant literature. Semi-structured interviewing enabled participants to describe their pedagogical practices openly while allowing researchers to explore issues that emerged during the conversations. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes and took place in a quiet, comfortable setting to support open discussion. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Because the study used interviews as its sole data source, the analysis captures lecturers' retrospective accounts at a single point in time; it does not independently verify reported practices through classroom observation, student testimony, lesson plans, or recordings of classroom activity.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase analytical framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data and identify meaningful patterns relevant to the research questions. This was followed by systematic coding, initial theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and the production of the final analytical report.

Consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, an inductive coding approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge through iterative engagement with participants' accounts rather than from predetermined theoretical categories (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researchers first assigned descriptive codes to significant statements and recurring ideas, then progressively refined these codes into broader conceptual categories and overarching themes (Ahmed et al., 2025; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Throughout the analytical process, the researchers engaged reflexively with the data to keep interpretations grounded in participants' perspectives while acknowledging their interpretative role in knowledge construction.

Trustworthiness

The criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were applied to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Credibility was supported by semi-structured interviews that enabled participants to provide detailed accounts and by grounding the analysis in verbatim excerpts. Dependability was supported

by maintaining an audit trail documenting data collection, coding and theme development. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive engagement with the data and attention to the researchers' interpretative role. Transferability was addressed by describing the research context, participant characteristics and procedures in sufficient detail for readers to judge relevance to comparable settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). These procedures improve transparency but do not replace triangulation across multiple data sources.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Before data collection, all participants were informed of the study's purpose and their rights as research participants, and written informed consent was obtained before the interview. Pseudonyms were used throughout, and audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The reflexive thematic analysis yielded four interrelated pedagogical principles that together explain how ESL lecturers scaffold English communication through drama-based pedagogy. These principles comprised (1) a structured progression of learning activities, (2) the deliberate creation of psychologically safe communicative spaces, (3) the design of authentic communicative experiences through drama, and (4) a facilitative teaching orientation in which lecturers guided learners towards increasing independence. Rather than functioning as isolated instructional strategies, these principles served as mutually reinforcing components of a coherent pedagogical approach. Across all four themes, communicative independence emerged as the cumulative outcome of sustained participation throughout the semester, rather than as the product of any single activity or assessment.

Structured Progression as Pedagogical Scaffolding

All three lecturers described drama-based learning as a carefully sequenced developmental process in which communicative demands increased progressively throughout the semester. Rather than exposing learners immediately to complex performances, lecturers scaffolded participation by moving students from low-risk individual tasks to increasingly collaborative and authentic communicative activities. This gradual progression reflected the principles of instructional scaffolding, enabling learners to develop confidence, competence, and autonomy through successive stages of supported participation (Arora et al., 2024; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976).

Participant A described a clear progression from individual monologues to paired improvisation and on to a full-group drama production:

"We got three main activities which are the monologue, the improvisation and the drama production... You can see the movement from individual, to pair work, and group work. That is how we do it."

Beyond the formal assessments, Participant A exposed students to preparatory activities—viewing professional performances, analysing previous student productions, and engaging in impromptu speaking exercises—which reduced anxiety and improved communicative readiness.

Participant B structured each lesson into three pedagogical stages: warm-up activities, lesson implementation and post-lesson practice. Warm-up activities included stretching, "Simon Says," charades, reading aloud and spontaneous speaking tasks.

Participant C described a progression of increasingly challenging drama techniques—simulations, role-play, monologues, poetry recitation, improvisation and miming—before moving students towards more authentic communicative situations. Collectively, the three participants described scaffolding as extending beyond linguistic support to encompass emotional preparation, collaborative participation, and progressively increasing communicative responsibility. Learning activities were deliberately sequenced to provide learners

with repeated experiences of manageable success before introducing more demanding communicative tasks. Rather than functioning as isolated classroom exercises, these activities formed a coherent developmental pathway through which communicative responsibility was gradually transferred from lecturer to learner (Arora et al., 2024; Wood et al., 1976).

Creating Safe Communicative Spaces

A second pedagogical principle concerned the deliberate creation of psychologically safe learning environments where learners were encouraged to experiment with English without fear of embarrassment or excessive correction. Across all three interviews, lecturers consistently prioritised meaningful communication and active participation over linguistic perfection, thereby reducing learners' affective barriers to communication and fostering favourable conditions for language development (Friatin et al., 2026; Shelton & Guyotte, 2025).

Participant A emphasised expression rather than grammatical accuracy.

"The focus is primarily to get them to speak. Not so much focus on the fluency or accuracy. But we would like them to express themselves, use the language to express."

Participant B described creating a classroom atmosphere in which students could practise English without fear of judgement, with drama lessons providing a safe environment for rehearsing real-life communicative situations:

"Drama class gave the students the opportunity to practice situations they would normally encounter in the real world... A safe environment for them. No judgement."

Participant C argued that language fluency should take precedence over grammatical accuracy in drama activities and that communication extends beyond spoken language:

"It is more fluency rather than accuracy... It is more on expressing yourself... not just verbal but also non-verbal."

Lecturers' acceptance of mistakes reduced affective barriers; none of the participants reported correcting every language error during performance, consistent with communicative language teaching (Shelton & Guyotte, 2025). Participants also emphasised the role of enjoyment: Participant A described activities as flexible and student-driven, while Participant B encouraged students to "be goofy" in pair and group activities.

Authentic Communication through Drama-Based Learning

The third pedagogical principle focused on creating authentic communicative experiences through drama. Rather than treating English as an abstract linguistic system, lecturers designed activities that required learners to negotiate meaning, solve problems, respond spontaneously, and interact in realistic social situations. In doing so, drama became a medium through which communication was experienced as purposeful social action rather than as classroom language practice (Dawoud et al., 2024; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Yeşilçınar, 2025).

Participant A described how students gradually progressed from structured monologue performances to more authentic communicative tasks:

"For the improvisation... the students are provided with the simulation... they have to improvise... extend the very simple situation given by the lecturer. These actually require them to use their creativity besides the right language."

Participant B viewed drama as preparation for everyday communicative situations, deliberately incorporating scenarios that mirrored everyday social interactions:

"Drama class gave the students an opportunity to practice situations they would normally encounter in the real world... they have a safe environment to practice these situations. These situations are everyday situations. It's just that it is in English."

Participant C emphasised spontaneous communication through improvisation:

"Improvisation is when a student is given a situation... and they have to spontaneously react."

Across the interviews, authenticity was consistently linked to spontaneity, contextual relevance, creativity, and meaningful interaction. Drama therefore served as a bridge between classroom learning and real-world communication, enabling learners to experience English as a functional medium for social interaction rather than merely as an academic subject (Dawoud et al., 2024).

The Lecturer as Facilitator of Communicative Learning

The fourth pedagogical principle concerned lecturers' facilitative orientation towards learning. Rather than positioning themselves as primary sources of knowledge, participants consistently described their role as designing learning experiences, guiding interaction, encouraging experimentation, and gradually transferring communicative responsibility to students. In this way, lecturers functioned less as instructors delivering content and more as facilitators of communicative learning. Participant A explained that the activities were designed to help students discover their own communicative abilities:

"Some students probably have hidden talent but they didn't have the right room or the right platform to unleash their potential."

Learning was not entirely lecturer-led:

"It is quite flexible... it just comes up from students themselves. Not only from me. I actually learn a lot from them as well."

Participant B adopted a facilitative role by deliberately rotating partners in classroom activities:

"They usually don't stick with the same pairs. I would ask them to move around and work with different pairs."

The lecturer also integrated values education into drama activities:

"This is a very good opportunity to teach the students good values... you can dramatise it in class, but this is not how you should behave in real life."

Participant C emphasised facilitation through repeated opportunities for guided practice:

"Early in the semester it would be something difficult for them to do. But towards the end of the semester they will enjoy all these improvisation activities because they find that it is fun and they can express themselves however they like."

Collectively, these accounts illustrate facilitation as an adaptive, relational pedagogical practice through which lecturers continually adjusted instructional support and encouraged learners to become increasingly independent communicators.

Communicative Independence through Repeated Practice

Across all interviews, communicative independence emerged not as a distinct pedagogical strategy but as the

cumulative outcome of the four preceding principles. Participants consistently observed that repeated engagement in progressively challenging drama-based activities enabled learners to become increasingly confident, spontaneous, and autonomous in their use of English.

Participant A noted:

"Especially for those quite reserved students... in the beginning they have to work very hard for the monologue... As they move on to the next pair work, then the group work and the last one, the drama production, we can see that they will put in the effort to present their best."

Participant B linked communicative development to repeated exposure to realistic situations:

"If you were to practice it in class... then you would've known, 'this is one way of solving this, or another way of solving it.' Looking at your friends acting it out... I would say yes."

Participant C observed this developmental transformation directly:

"At first you think that one student looks shy and quiet... but at the end of the semester... she is quite outgoing and she is able to respond to different situations... she realises that, 'Oh, I can do this.'"

Taken together, the findings indicate that communicative independence was achieved through sustained participation in a carefully scaffolded learning environment, rather than through isolated speaking activities or summative assessments. Learners' growing willingness to communicate reflected the cumulative effect of structured progression, psychological safety, authentic communication, and facilitative teaching, all of which operated throughout the semester.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how experienced ESL lecturers scaffold English communication through drama-based pedagogy in Malaysian higher education. The findings indicate that communicative development does not arise from individual drama activities alone but emerges from the interplay of four interrelated pedagogical principles: structured progression, psychological safety, authentic communication, and facilitative teaching. Rather than operating in isolation, these principles form an integrated pedagogical framework that gradually supports learners' development towards communicative independence. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to the existing literature and considers their theoretical and pedagogical significance.

Structured Progression as the Cognitive Backbone

The findings suggest that structured progression underpins the cognitive foundation of effective drama-based pedagogy. Rather than exposing learners to increasingly complex communicative tasks without guidance, lecturers intentionally sequenced learning experiences to align with learners' developing confidence and communicative competence. This finding extends Kao and O'Neill's (1998) process-drama perspective by showing that communicative growth occurs through successive stages of supported participation, not performance alone. Structured progression therefore represents more than effective lesson planning; it functions as a pedagogical mechanism for operationalising scaffolding over an extended learning period.

Psychological Safety as the Affective Backbone

Creating psychologically safe communicative spaces lowered affective barriers and enabled learners to take communicative risks (Gormley & Nestel, 2025). The findings demonstrate that drama-based pedagogy operationalises integrated scaffolding through sequenced, repeated, and authentic communicative activities rather than isolated language exercises (Arora et al., 2024; Wood et al., 1976). This finding aligns with Othman et al. (2025), who likewise reported that drama-based activities reduced language anxiety and increased learners' confidence to communicate spontaneously in English. The present study extends those

findings by showing how lecturers deliberately established psychologically safe learning environments through facilitative classroom practices that encouraged communicative risk-taking. Collectively, these findings suggest that psychological safety should be understood not merely as a desirable classroom climate but as a fundamental pedagogical condition that enables learners to engage in communicative risk-taking and progressively develop confidence in authentic English communication.

Authentic Communication as the Contextual Backbone

The findings reinforce the importance of authenticity as a defining feature of drama-based language learning. Rather than practising isolated linguistic forms, learners engaged in meaningful communicative situations that required them to negotiate meaning, respond spontaneously, and interact purposefully in realistic social contexts. These findings support previous research emphasising authenticity in drama-based pedagogy (Dawoud et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2024) and extend the work of Galante and Thomson (2017) by showing that authentic communication is achieved through carefully scaffolded instructional progression rather than dramatic performance alone.

Facilitation as the Relational–Instructional Backbone

The facilitative orientation adopted by participants highlights an important shift in the role of the language lecturer within learner-centred pedagogy. Rather than functioning primarily as knowledge transmitters, lecturers designed learning environments that encouraged experimentation, collaboration, reflection, and increasingly independent communication (Bremner et al., 2022). This finding aligns with learner-centred pedagogical research, which shows that facilitative teaching enhances learner motivation, confidence, and meaningful classroom interaction (Bremner et al., 2022). The present study extends this literature by illustrating how facilitation serves as the instructional mechanism through which scaffolding is enacted throughout an entire semester of drama-based learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976).

Communicative Independence as the Cumulative Outcome

One of the study's most significant findings is that communicative independence emerged as the cumulative outcome of interactions among all four pedagogical principles. Rather than arising from any single activity, assessment, or instructional technique, it developed progressively through repeated participation in increasingly demanding yet carefully scaffolded communicative experiences.

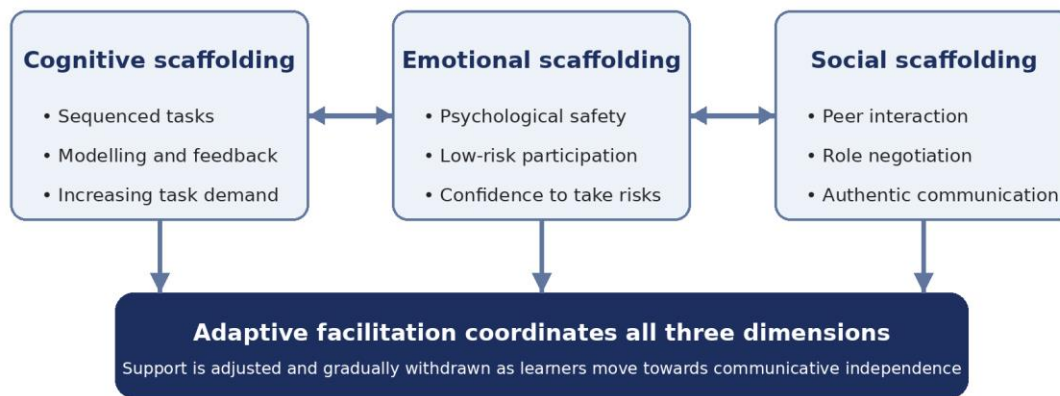
This finding reinforces sociocultural perspectives on language learning, suggesting that independence is achieved through the gradual withdrawal of pedagogical support rather than through immediate learner autonomy (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976).

Integrated Framework

Taken together, the findings support a dynamic, multidimensional conceptualisation of scaffolding in drama-based pedagogy. Cognitive scaffolding is provided through task sequencing, modelling, prompts and feedback; emotional scaffolding is created through psychological safety and manageable opportunities for communicative risk-taking; and social scaffolding develops through peer interaction, role negotiation and authentic collaborative communication. These dimensions are mutually dependent rather than sequential or discrete. Emotional safety enables learners to engage with cognitively demanding tasks, and social interaction creates opportunities to apply and extend that support. Lecturers adapt all three dimensions in response to learners' participation. Facilitative teaching therefore serves as the coordinating mechanism through which support is increased, modified or gradually withdrawn. As learners encounter more demanding communicative situations, the cycle repeats, progressively shifting responsibility toward communicative independence (Galante & Thomson, 2017; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976).

Figure 1 summarises these reciprocal relationships.

Dynamic Scaffolding in Drama-Based Pedagogy



The cycle is repeated as learners encounter progressively more demanding communicative tasks.

Figure 1. Dynamic interaction among cognitive, emotional and social scaffolding dimensions

Pedagogical Implications

Implementation Challenges and Boundary Conditions

The integrated framework should not be assumed to be equally easy to implement in every classroom. Mixed proficiency levels can enable peer support, but they can also lead to unequal participation when more confident speakers dominate improvisation or group decision-making. Lecturers therefore need to calibrate roles, prompts, language support and grouping arrangements so that lower-proficiency learners are challenged without being overwhelmed and more proficient learners remain meaningfully engaged. Psychological safety also requires active monitoring, as an enjoyable activity for confident students may still create exposure or embarrassment for reluctant participants.

Institutional conditions may impose further constraints. Drama activities require time for preparation, rehearsal, performance and reflection, which can compete with prescribed syllabus coverage and assessment schedules. Space limitations, large classes, performance-oriented assessment and uneven lecturers' experience with drama can also reduce opportunities for responsive facilitation. The framework therefore depends on curricular flexibility, manageable activity design and lecturers' capacity to balance fluency-focused participation with appropriate attention to language development.

These considerations also qualify the interpretation of communicative independence in the present study. Because the evidence comprises lecturers' cross-sectional reflections, the reported movement towards independence should be understood as a perceived developmental pattern rather than a directly observed longitudinal outcome. Future observational and student-centred research is needed to establish how consistently these processes occur across different learner groups and institutional settings.

This study's findings have significant implications for English language teaching, curriculum design, and professional development in higher education. Rather than treating drama-based pedagogy as an enrichment activity confined to theatre or performing arts programmes, the findings show that its pedagogical value lies in the intentional integration of structured progression, psychological safety, authentic communication, and facilitative teaching to support learners' communicative development (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976).

For ESL lecturers, the findings underscore the need to design learning experiences that progressively increase communicative demands while providing appropriate instructional and emotional support. Professional development programmes should therefore move beyond introducing isolated drama techniques and instead emphasise how lecturers can intentionally scaffold learners' participation through responsive

facilitation, purposeful task sequencing, and the creation of psychologically safe learning environments (Bremner et al., 2022; Shelton & Guyotte, 2025).

At the curriculum level, the proposed pedagogical framework offers practical guidance on embedding drama-based learning within existing English communication courses. The four interrelated pedagogical principles identified in this study can be integrated into curriculum planning to promote oral communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and interpersonal competence throughout an academic semester, rather than as isolated classroom activities (Galante & Thomson, 2017; Luo et al., 2024).

More broadly, the findings suggest that effective drama-based pedagogy depends less on theatrical performance than on lecturers' pedagogical expertise in designing supportive learning environments that help learners become increasingly confident and independent users of English (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Consequently, the integrated framework developed in this study provides a practical foundation for enhancing communicative competence across a range of higher-education ESL contexts.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only three experienced ESL lecturers from a single Malaysian public university. The sample provides in-depth, context-specific insight into one course but cannot represent the range of lecturers' experience, institutional resources or curricular expectations across Malaysian higher education. The findings should therefore be treated as analytically transferable possibilities rather than statistically or empirically generalisable conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Second, the study focused exclusively on lecturers' self-reported perspectives. It did not include students' accounts, classroom observations or teaching artefacts to corroborate how the reported scaffolding practices were enacted or experienced. The findings may consequently reflect selective recall, professional self-presentation or discrepancies between intended and actual practice.

Third, the cross-sectional interview design captured retrospective accounts at a single point in time. Although participants described students' gradual movement towards communicative independence, the study did not directly observe or measure change over the semester. Therefore, claims about developmental progression must be interpreted as lecturers' perceptions rather than as longitudinal evidence of student growth.

Future research should employ methodological triangulation by combining lecturer interviews with direct classroom observations, student interviews or focus groups, reflective journals, lesson plans, assessment materials and video recordings. Longitudinal designs could follow learners across a semester or successive semesters to examine changes in participation and communicative competence. Mixed-methods or quasi-experimental studies could complement qualitative insights with evidence of learning outcomes, while comparative studies across institutions, proficiency groups and cultural contexts could test how the framework operates under different curricular and organisational conditions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how experienced ESL lecturers scaffold English communication through drama-based pedagogy in Malaysian higher education. Drawing on reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, the study identified four interrelated pedagogical principles that collectively support learners' communicative development: structured progression, psychological safety, authentic communication, and facilitative teaching. Rather than functioning as independent instructional practices, these principles operate synergistically to guide learners towards greater communicative confidence and independence throughout a semester of drama-based learning.

The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on drama-based pedagogy by shifting attention from learner outcomes to the pedagogical processes through which communicative competence is

developed. In doing so, the study demonstrates that effective drama-based pedagogy depends not only on the use of dramatic activities but also on lecturers' deliberate instructional decisions about the sequencing of learning experiences, the provision of adaptive support, the creation of psychologically safe learning environments, and the facilitation of authentic communication.

The study also extends scaffolding theory in second-language education by demonstrating that effective scaffolding is multidimensional, integrating cognitive, emotional, interactive, and instructional dimensions into a coherent pedagogical framework. By conceptualising these dimensions as interdependent rather than discrete, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how communicative independence develops through sustained participation in drama-based learning.

Collectively, these findings complement recent Malaysian research on learner interaction (Mohd Nor et al., 2024) and learner confidence (Othman et al., 2025) by offering a pedagogical explanation of how experienced lecturers intentionally scaffold English communication through drama-based pedagogy. It is anticipated that the integrated pedagogical framework proposed in this study will provide useful guidance for lecturers, curriculum developers, and researchers seeking to design more effective learner-centred approaches to English communication in higher education.

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