

THE PERCEPTIONS OF THEATRE-BASED ACTIVITIES IN TESL AMONG TESL STUDENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This study investigates ESL students' perceptions of theatre-based activities for enhancing English-speaking skills. It examines how participation in theatre affects students with confidence, fluency, and ability to overcome speaking problems. Many students struggle with speaking English because they have little experience with it and are anxious or afraid of making mistakes. Drama classes include activities such as improvisation, role play, and scripted performances provide students with an engaging and pressure-free environment to practice speaking. The study focuses on TESL students at the University of Selangor (UNISEL) who took Theatre in TESL as an elective subject in their B.Ed TESL programme. A total of 107 students participated in the survey and reported their experiences with theatre-based learning. The study adopted a quantitative approach using a structured questionnaire for data collection. Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity and reliability of participant selection. The results show that students perceive role-playing and theatre activities as beneficial for building confidence and promoting spontaneous English communication. The study highlights the positive role of theatre in TESL and underlines its potential to improve speaking skills. Further research is recommended to investigate teaching strategies, learner attitudes, and the wider pedagogical impact of theatre-based learning.

Keywords: *TESL Students, Theatre-based Activities, English-speaking Skills, Self-confidence, Fluency, Speaking Challenges, Improvisation, Role-playing*

INTRODUCTION

English language competency has become indispensable in a world that is becoming more interconnected by the day. The language is pivotal in social, professional, and academic settings and is the universal language of communication. Hence, for non-native speakers whose first language is not English, mastering the language opens up options throughout the world. Therefore, the programme, Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), plays a notable role in non-native speakers' lives because it assists them in improving their language skills and helps them thrive in many contexts, including academic, professional careers, and real-life conversations. As Holman (2022) points out, ESL involves more than the mere transmission of grammar rules and vocabulary because it addresses the holistic development of the learner's language proficiency across all language skills, which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Among all the language skills, speaking is one of the fundamental skills for ESL students. All ESL students should hone their speaking abilities for efficient communication. In addition, speaking proficiently contributes to academic success as well as improved performance in other settings, including professional career development and everyday life. However, in the current time, it has been a great challenge for ESL students to speak fluently and confidently, particularly in real-life situations, especially for their personal and professional lives. As Ishak and Aziz (2022, p.888) said that the main reasons for this challenge are "Fear of being ridiculed, nervousness, lack of practice, and non-interactive classroom activities". Also, research by Borres, Kyamko, and Hernando (2023) highlights that students often avoid speaking due to anxiety and fear of negative criticism and that might affect their willingness to be engaged in discussions. Besides, students also struggle in perceiving the English language due to limited vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties. (Borres et al., 2023) On top of that, the huge influence of native language also results in hindering TESL students' speaking skills. Traditional language teaching in a formal classroom often focuses more on structured learning skills, which follow a curriculum with the objectives given and also grammar-focused approaches. This teaching method might not fully aid students in staying engaged in the lesson, and it does not provide enough opportunities for them to practice communication in real-life situations (Bessadet, 2022). As a result, these challenges encountered by TESL students make it complicated for them to develop effective communication skills, impacting their academic performance and social interactions.

The use of theater-based activities being integrated into lessons is one potential solution for these issues (Holman, 2022). Theatre-based activities have gained recognition for their capability to enhance speaking skills in language learners by providing an immersive and pressure-free learning environment. Bessadet (2022) claims that theater-based activities provide students with a safe environment where they can practice speaking without being anxious about making mistakes, which aids in their confidence and fluency development. In contrast with traditional classroom instruction that commonly prioritizes accuracy over fluency.

On the other hand, theatre promotes interactions and spontaneous speech. Theatre-based activities such as role-playing, improvisation, script reading and character-building are acknowledged as innovative and engaging educational tools for learners to enhance their language skills, mainly speaking abilities. (Man et al, 2021) Furthermore, theatre integrates verbal and non-verbal communication, including speaking, vocabulary, pronunciation, body language, gestures, and facial expressions. These skills are essential for learners to communicate effectively in real life because language is not just words but also how they are delivered. Through role-playing and body language, TESL students practice English for real-life situations, such as job interviews, formal presentations, and casual conversations. The

theatre-based activities also expose students to cultural nuances, like how emotions or politeness are expressed in English-speaking cultures, which might not be taught in traditional classrooms. Catherine and Suganthan (2023) highlighted that theatre-based activities create a safe and immersive environment for the learners to practice speaking and improve their fluency in the language, as well as encourage them to participate actively to foster creativity and teamwork. Traditional ESL classrooms focus more on formal lessons, such as grammar and writing, which might not reflect real-world language use.

Therefore, this study explores the perceptions of theatre-based activities in enhancing TESL students' speaking skills in English. This research focuses on ESL students who took Theatre as an elective course in their B.Ed TESL programme and have experience in theatre-based activities. This research investigates (a) the challenges students face when participating in theatre-based activities, (b) the aspects of these activities that effectively improve their speaking abilities, and (c) determine ESL students' perceived change in confidence in their English speaking ability following engagement in theatre-based activities.

Even though this research provides valuable insights into the integration of theatre-based activities within TESL programs, the findings are based on a specific student population and may not be directly applicable to other educational settings. However, the results can offer a valuable contribution to the broader conversation on innovative teaching methods in TESL, particularly in theatre-based activities to foster more engaging and dynamic language learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking Challenges Among Tesl Students

Developing English-speaking skills remains a significant challenge for ESL students. Many struggles with fluency, pronunciation, and confidence due to limited exposure to real-life speaking situations (Ishak & Aziz, 2022). Language anxiety is a widespread issue, with students fearing to make mistakes and being judged by peers and instructors. This anxiety of TESL students often leads to hesitation, reducing their willingness to practice speaking and engage in conversations (Zakaria et al., 2019).

Traditional teaching methods, which emphasize grammar and writing over interactive speaking activities, contribute to these challenges as well (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Even though classroom-based instruction provides theoretical knowledge for the students, it often lacks practical components that allow students to use language spontaneously (Holman, 2022). As a result, students may struggle with real-world conversations despite having a foundational understanding of English.

Moreover, limited practice in real-life conversation is another serious issue. Classroom learning, in its conventional format, traditionally emphasizes grammar and written exercises at the cost of interactive speech practices (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Therefore, students may perform exceptionally well in written tests but fail miserably when asked to carry out spontaneous conversation. For instance, Tuan and Mai (2015) found that Vietnamese EFL students lacked speaking confidence due to insufficient speaking opportunities, leading to poor performance in real-life communicative situations. Furthermore, pronunciation and intonation difficulties remain major challenges for ESL students (Gilakjani, 2016). It is common for ESL

students to have trouble pronouncing English words correctly, which makes them confused or unable to communicate with native English speakers. The stress patterns, rhythm, and intonation are also making the speech of such students difficult and unnatural or vague. Without deliberate pronunciation practice, the students can easily develop these habits that emphasize the above problems and become a contributory factor affecting their speaking confidence.

Poor expression capability is another common issue faced by many ESL learners (Boonkit, 2010). Some people don't communicate because they don't understand grammar, instead, they just don't have the language to completely express their thoughts. They are unable to participate in full conversations because of the limitations, which causes conversations to become tentative and complex. Last but not least, lack of confidence and speech ability prevent TESL students from speaking fluently. Speaking in front of a class or in casual settings might frighten students so much that they predict their words or avoid speaking out of anxiety. This self-consciousness tendency is sure to translate into pauses, hesitation, filler words, or avoidance of chances to talk and reduce progress.

Theatre-Based Activities

Theatre-based activities have been widely recognized as an effective approach in TESL education and a way to enhance language proficiency. These activities promote active engagement, improvisation, and communicative competence, making them suitable for improving speaking skills in particular. . These strategies go beyond the conventional approaches of teaching by engaging students in active and experiential learning that emphasizes communication, teamwork and creativity. Theatre-based activities in TESL also offer students an interactive and engaging way to develop their language skills (Man et al., 2021). These activities include role-playing, improvisation, script reading, and group-based activities, all of which encourage students to use English in real-life contexts (Bessadet, 2022).

Various studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of theatre-based activities in developing speaking skills in TESL. According to the findings, theatre-based activities help students overcome some of the most frequent obstacles in speaking, like confidence issues, language anxiety, and a lack of practice opportunities. Besides practicing speaking in real-life situations, students are improving their pronunciation, intonation and fluency through role-playing activities, group performances and role-playing dialogues. Benaired, & Reguieg (2024) explores the integration of drama within language instruction and its profound impact on students' speaking proficiency.

One of the key benefits of theatre-based activities in language learning is that it encourages active participation and meaningful communication. Through scripted and unscripted performances, students engage in dialogue, express emotions, and develop their ability to articulate thoughts clearly (Catherine & Suganthan, 2023). These activities help students to practice pronunciation, intonation, and fluency, which are essential components of effective spoken communication (Borres et al., 2023).

Moreover, theatre-based activities create a safe space for students to practice speaking without the fear of making mistakes. Many students struggle with language anxiety and self-consciousness when speaking in English, but drama exercises encourage them to step out of their comfort zones (Sirisrimangkorn, 2018). By repeatedly engaging in performance-based tasks, they build confidence and become more comfortable expressing themselves in English (Bessadet, 2022).

Hence, theatre-based activities provide a suitable instrument for language development. The research papers also introduce practical uses of theatre, indicating how it can give students real, communicative situations to practice speaking, which contributes to the object of your investigation. Man et al., (2021) revealed that participants were motivated and possessed self-confidence in the language learning process. Furthermore, the reviewed studies show how theatre-based activities assist ESL students to build up their confidence, improve their fluency and feel more comfortable speaking a second language, a common barrier to effective communication. In a nutshell, this chapter justifies the inclusion of theatre-based activities in ESL classrooms and hence supports your investigation into their effectiveness in improving speaking skills.

Theatre-Based Activities For Speaking Skills

Theatre-based activities specifically target the development of speaking skills by providing students with opportunities to practice real-life communication in a structured yet dynamic setting (Borres et al., 2023). To a majority of ESL students, the achievement of good speaking skills remains an unbeatable challenge depending on factors such as language apprehension, fear of making mistakes, limited exposure to speak during real-life scenarios, pronunciation difficulty, and loss of confidence. However, theatre-based activities such as role-playing, improvisation, script performances, and group activities allow ESL students to enhance their fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence in speaking English (Hidayat, 2023).

One of the most effective theatre-based activities in TESL for improving speaking skills is role-playing. In role-playing exercises, students take on different characters and engage in dialogues that mimic real-life situations such as job interviews, debates, or social interactions (Ishak & Aziz, 2022). This enables them to practice speech spontaneously and adapt their language use to different contexts.

Improvisation is another valuable theatre-based activity that enhances speaking skills. Unlike scripted performances, improvisation encourages students to think quickly and respond spontaneously, fostering natural and fluid speech (Sirisrimangkorn, 2018). This kind of activity helps students overcome hesitation and develop the ability to construct sentences more rapidly, which is crucial for effective communication.

Additionally, theatre-based activities contribute to confidence-building, which is a crucial factor in speaking proficiency. Many TESL students struggle with stage fright and anxiety when speaking English, however regular participation in theatre-based activities helps them overcome these fears (Man et al., 2021). Performing in front of an audience, receiving constructive feedback, and engaging in group rehearsals gradually build self-assurance that allow students to speak with greater ease and expressiveness (Holman, 2022).

FRAMEWORK

Theory	Key Principles	Application in TESL	Relevance to Theatre-Based Learning
Constructivist Learning Theory	Learners actively construct knowledge through experiences	Encourages active participation in language learning	Theatre-based activities engage students in experiential learning, enhancing language acquisition
Social Constructivism	Learning occurs through social interaction and collaboration	Promotes peer learning and communication	Group performances and role-playing emphasize teamwork and interaction

Table 1: Comparison of Theoretical Frameworks in Theatre-Based Learning

Constructivist learning theory provides a foundation for understanding how people learn by actively interacting with their environment to construct their own knowledge. According to constructivist learning theory people gain knowledge through their experiences and their ability to create meaning from those experiences. Constructivist learning theory states that knowledge development occurs through direct experiences and reflection.

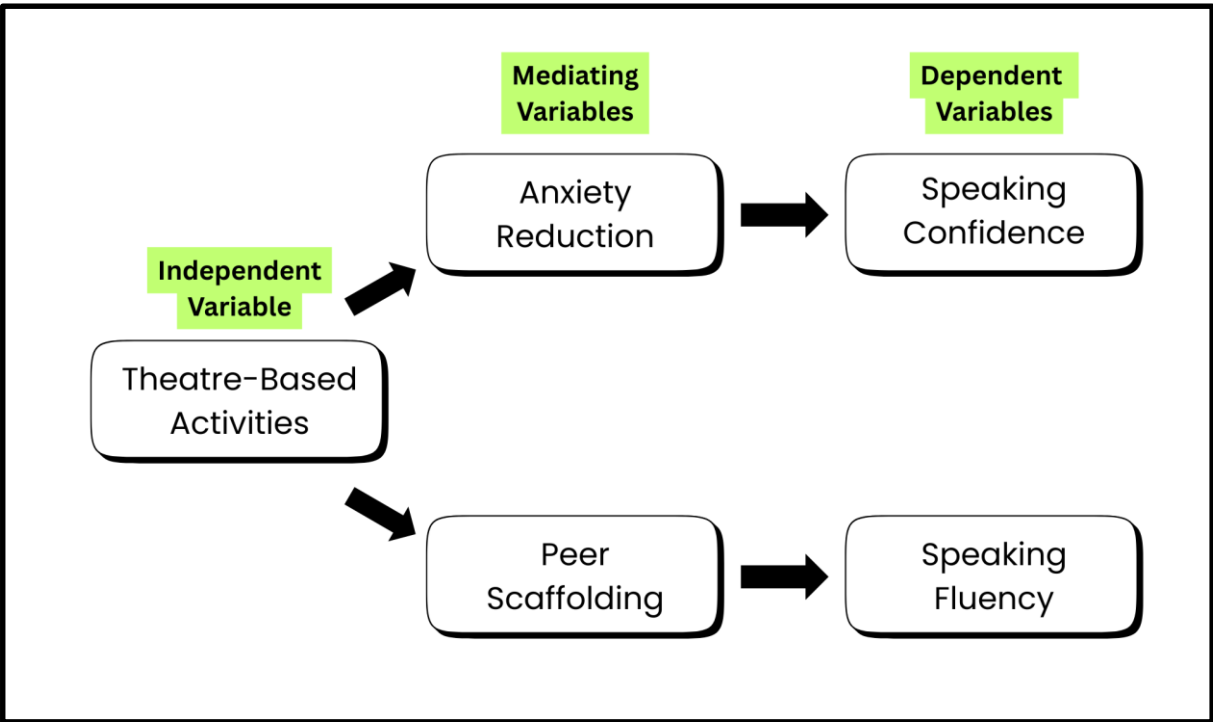


Diagram 1: Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework illustrates how theatre-based activities help ESL students to improve their English speaking skills. Activities such as role-play and improvisation are very useful in learning to be more engaging and interactive. These activities are expected to reduce the anxiety of students and encourage peer support. When students are less nervous and feel supported by their peers, they are more likely to speak with confidence and fluency. Therefore, theatre activities create a positive environment that helps students become more comfortable and effective in using English.

Theory One: Constructivist Learning Theory

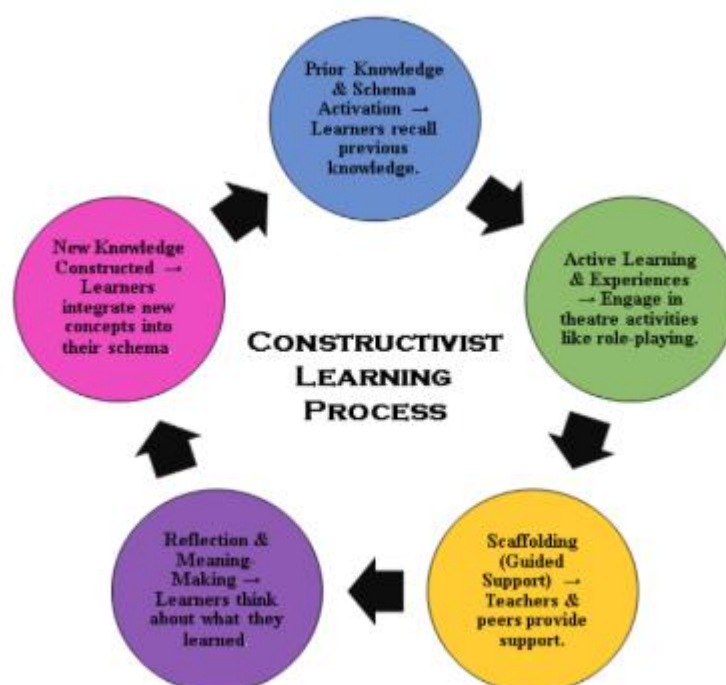


Diagram 2: Constructivist Learning Process

Constructivist Learning Theory suggests that learning is an active process that occurs through experience, reflection, and interaction with the world. In this study, theatre activities are being used as the independent variable, and the purpose is to offer experiential and reflective learning environments. In role-playing and improvisation exercises, for instance, students construct knowledge of language in an active learning process of learning and scaffolding (Bruner). That directly guided the development of survey questions that question the students' perceptions on participating in those activities and whether they enhance language acquisition.

Theory Two: Social Constructivism Theory

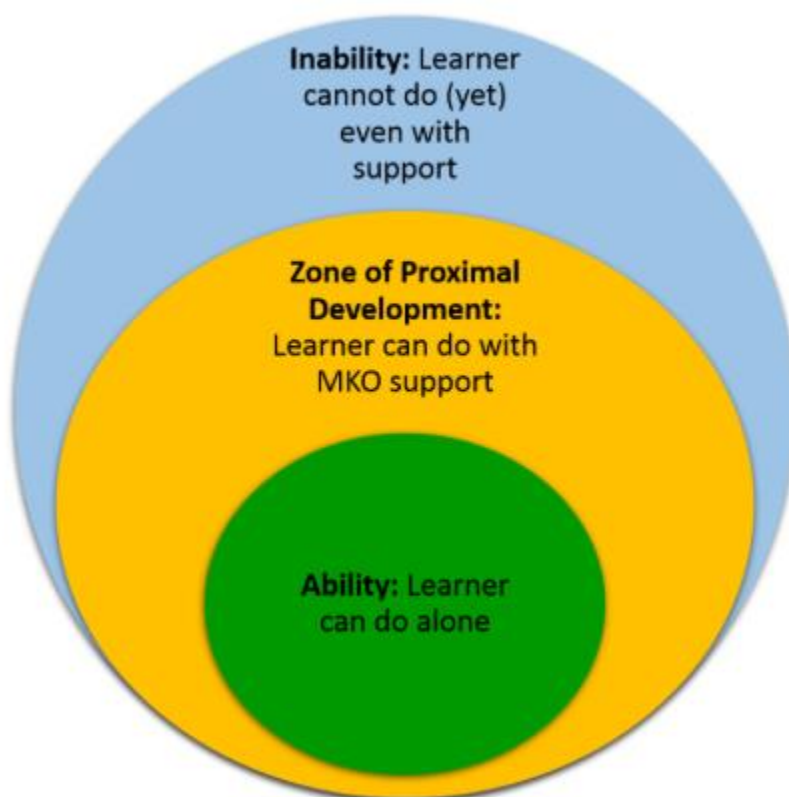


Diagram 3: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory focuses on the importance of learning as a social process, especially in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—the space between what an individual can accomplish alone and with the guidance of a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). Scaffolding, collaboration, and language as both a communicative and learning device are highlighted in this theory. In this study, theater-based activities such as role-plays and group presentations are social learning environments where students support one another, reduce anxiety, and gain fluency through contact. These ideas guided research questions and survey design, which embrace dimensions of peer collaboration, communication confidence, and language anxiety. Scaffolding occurs spontaneously in drama activities, where teachers and peers give students feedback on lexis and pronunciation, which the students acquire in their ZPD. Despite the limitation of differing levels of proficiency being observed by the theory, practices such as mixed-ability groupings and role allocation allow for equal contribution and inclusive learning. Generally, Social Constructivism upholds the study's focus on the importance of interactive, peer-supported settings in building speaking proficiency in TESL.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a quantitative method as a research design to investigate the perception of TESL students regarding the role of theatre-based activities in improving their English-speaking skills. This method provides clarity to the study and conveys the result in an articulated manner to the larger audience of intended educators, policymakers and researchers, so that it is relevant and applicable in bringing about an improvement in English speaking with innovative teaching methods like theatre-based activities.

Participants that were involved in this study were UNISEL TESL students who took Theatre in TESL as an elective subject in their Bachelor of Teaching English as a Second Language (B.Ed TESL) programme. Since they have firsthand knowledge of theatre-based activities and can offer insightful opinions on how the activities had effect on their speaking abilities, all of the participants who were chosen finished their Theatre in TESL course, which increased the accuracy and dependability of the findings. 107 participants were sieved through purposive sampling strategy as the study highly required participants who had relevant experience to the study.

The key material for data collection was a self-administered survey created using Google Forms. Since the medium of research was digital, through Google Forms, convenience and access were achieved, hence increasing the rate of response and subsequently, the reliability of the results. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire, which consisted of four sections. The first section was to gather the participants' demographic information, such as age, academic year, and proficiency level, to provide valuable insights into the findings. The second section of the survey investigated the challenges faced by TESL students in theatre-based activities, including linguistic, technical, and collaborative barriers. Moreover, the third section of the survey assessed the effectiveness of specific theatre aspects, such as role-playing, improvisation, script-reading, and collaboration. The final section of the questionnaire explored the impact of theatre activities on TESL students' confidence in speaking English in academic and social circumstances. Each section consisted of 8–16 items which are measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to quantify student perceptions objectively. All of the questions in the survey utilized multiple-choice questions, which consisted of statements that allowed participants to rate their agreement.

Descriptive statistical techniques were used to manually analyze the survey data to understand how the participants perceived theater-based activities and how it affected their ability to speak English. Based on the main sections of the survey, the responses gathered from the Google Forms questionnaire were examined, arranged, and classified. The frequency and percentage of answers to each question were calculated to find patterns and trends in the data.

For the purposes of presenting the findings in a clear visual representation, the results were then displayed in tables and charts. To investigate the variations in answers according to demographic variables like academic year, proficiency level, and prior theater experience in TESL, a comparative analysis was also carried out. To ensure accuracy and reliability, the data was carefully cross-checked to avoid errors in interpretation. The findings from the analysis were then discussed in relation to the research objectives, providing insights into how theatre-based activities contribute to improving TESL students' spoken English proficiency.

RESULT

Result

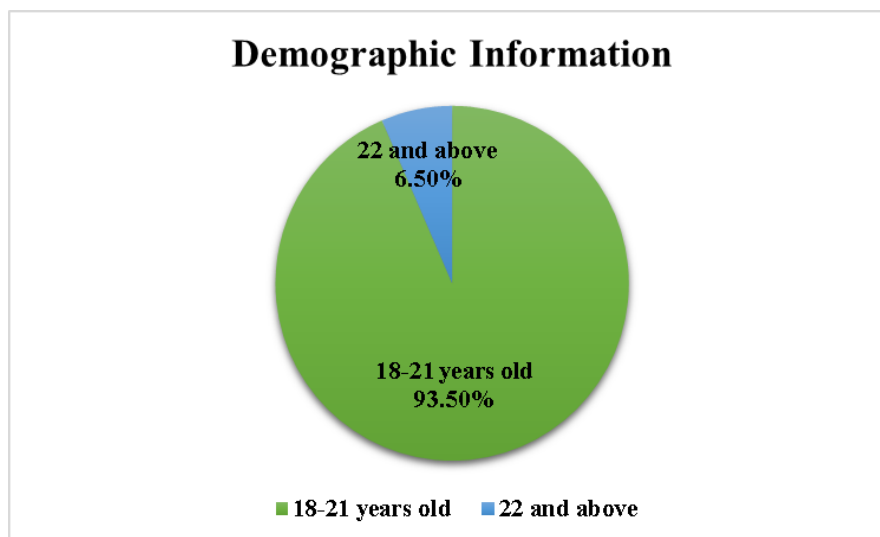


Chart 1: Demographic Information of Age Group

This research presents the findings of 107 UNISEL TESL students who responded to a questionnaire on theatre-based activities in TESL and English-speaking skills. The analysis consists of four categories which are demographic information, difficulty, effectiveness, and confidence-building. The study investigates the application of theatre in language learning according to Social Constructivism and Constructivist Learning Theory. Theatre facilitates effective communication and active participation that are in line with these theories. This identifies the benefits and challenges of learning by theatre, examines potential improvements, and gives suggestions on enhancing students' oral proficiency.

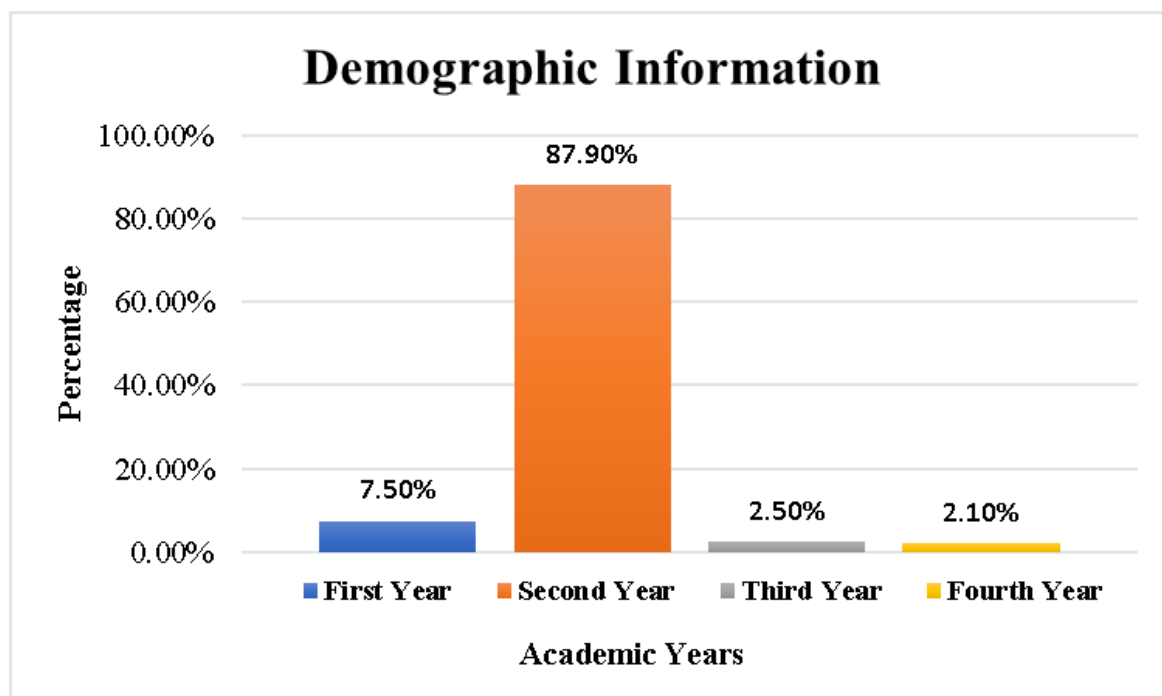


Chart 2: Demographic Information of Academic Years

The study surveyed 107 UNISEL TESL students, where the majority (93.5%) were between 18-21 years, showing that they are fresh in their studies. Only a limited number (6.5%) were 22 and above, who may have varied academic backgrounds. The majority (87.9%) were second-years, presumably those already familiar with performance-based learning, though the third- and fourth-year answers were more reflective. A higher proportion of respondents (86%) were classified as intermediate level English speakers and 12.1% were advanced, providing a continuum of levels of ability. This indicates that, majority of ESL students are young, second-year students with intermediate English ability, and hence are the best candidates for theatre-based learning. This level of learners is at an age when developing fluency and confidence is most important, and the data justifies testing the effect of theatre on their oral skills.

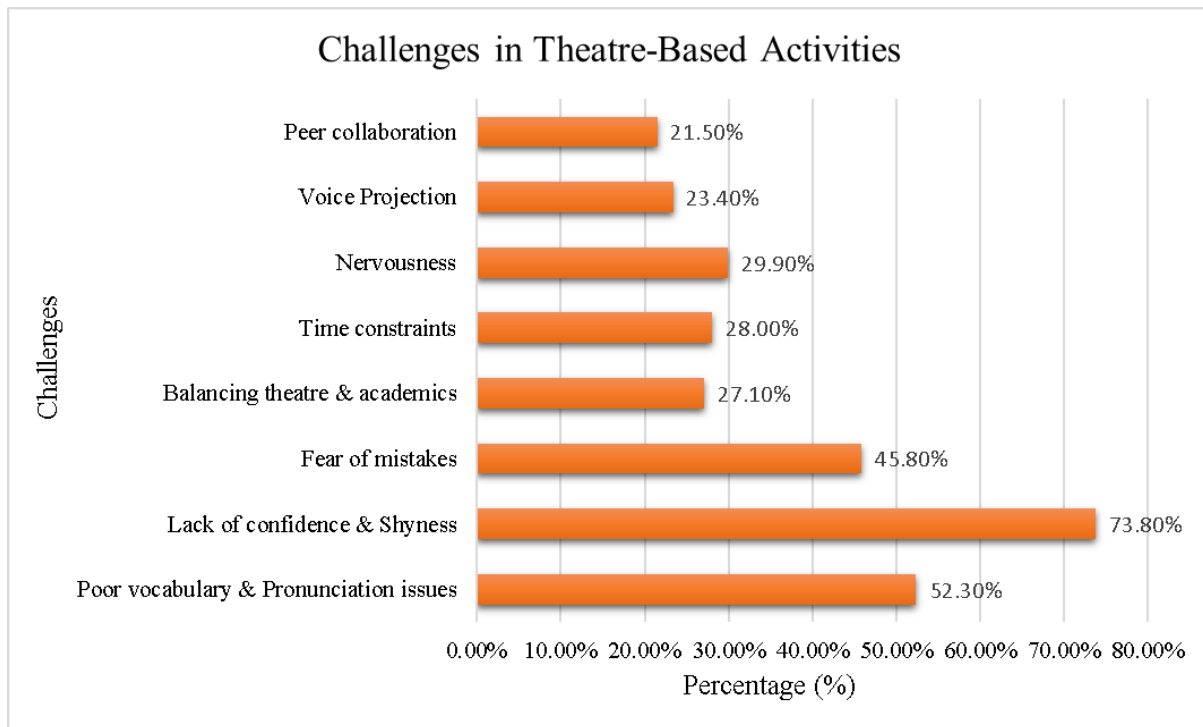


Chart 3: Challenges in Theatre Activities (Bar Chart)

The study reveals that, while Theatre-based activities offer a dynamic and engaging means of enhancing the learning of English language, yet many ESL students face overwhelming barriers that inhibit active engagement. Analytical results indicate that the most prevalent single barrier is shyness and confidence, dominating 73.8% of the population, which leads to hesitation in acting and stilted delivery. Pronunciation issues and limited vocabulary also afflict 52.3% of the students, diminishing clarity and emotional expression. To this end, 45.8% fear making mistakes, 29.9% experience anxiety, 28% cite time constraints, and 27.1% struggle with balancing school and theatre. All these contribute to students' unreadiness and diminished interest in theatre. Other barriers include poor projection (23.4%) and difficulties in peer working (21.5%), which impact performance quality and group work. These findings emphasize the need for properly structured support mechanisms in the form of confidence-building exercises, pronunciation training, coordinated rehearsal timetables, and collaborative skills acquisition to utilize theatre as effectively as possible in language learning.

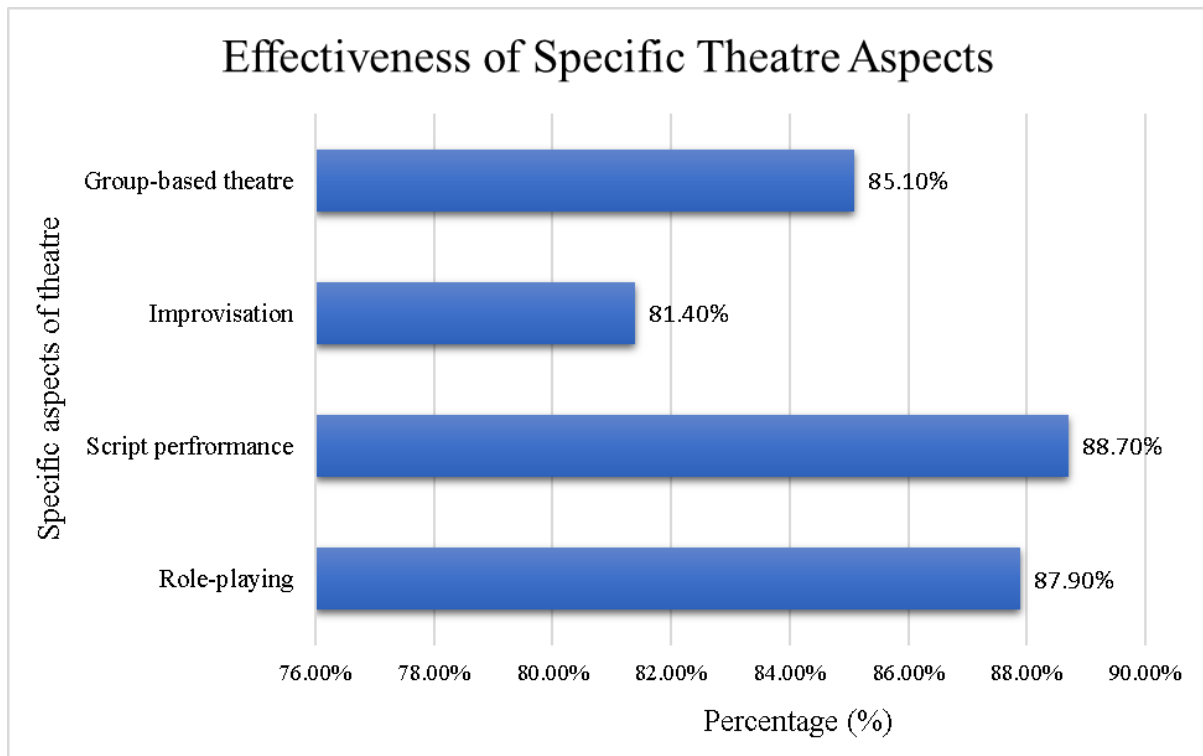


Chart 4: Effectiveness of Specific Theatre Aspects (Bar Chart)

This research confirms the effectiveness of theatre-based activities in enhancing ESL students' English-speaking skill, with resounding student approval of various methods. Script performance, endorsed by 88.7% of the students, helps to refine pronunciation and fluency through repetition and rehearsal. Role-playing, endorsed by 87.9%, promotes spontaneous speaking and reduces nervousness by simulating real-life conversation. Collaborative learning, endorsed by 85.1%, promotes peer interaction, active listening, and interpersonal communication. In addition, improvisation, liked by 81.4%, encourages spontaneous speech and builds learner confidence. The analytical inference drawn from these findings is that theatre-based methods not only help in linguistic development but also in the acquisition of essential soft skills such as confidence, teamwork, and adaptability, making them an effective and enjoyable pedagogical vehicle for speaking skill.

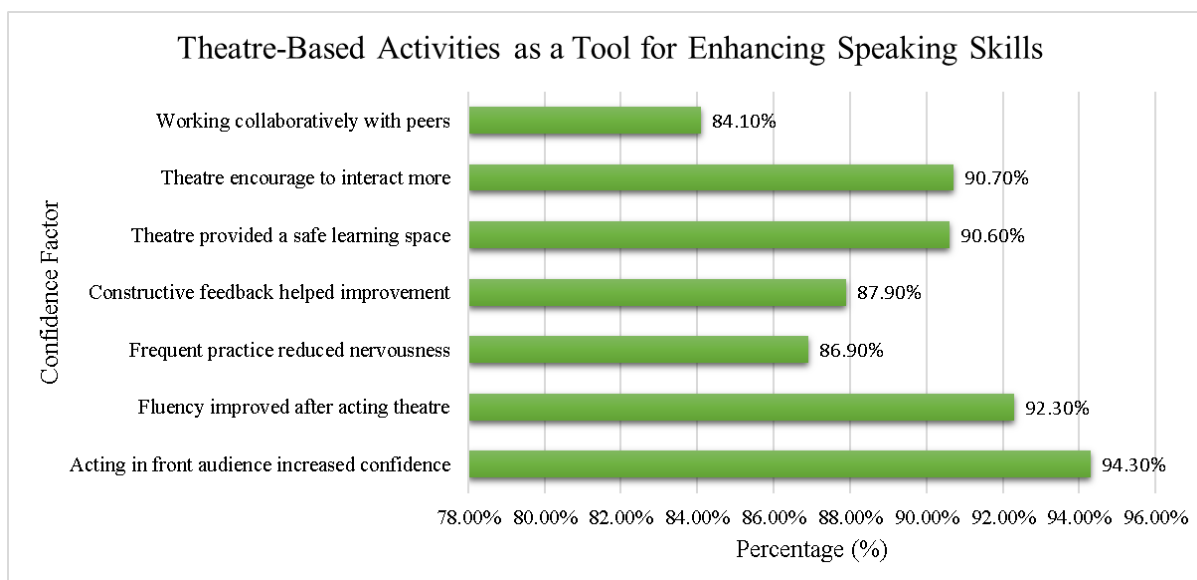


Chart 5: Theatre-Based Activities as a Tool for Enhancing Speaking Skills (Bar Chart)

The study demonstrates the powerful impact of theatre activities to build the English fluency and confidence of TESL students on the basis of an inspiring, low-anxiety, and supportive environment. Analytical observations show that 94.3% of students became more confident after performing stages, demonstrating that repeated exposure to speaking environments builds hardness, toughens pronunciation, and enables expression of feeling. Development in fluency was confirmed by 92.3%, owing to spontaneous speech, gain in sentence construction, and vocabulary growth. The study further discovered 90.7% with smoother peer dialogue, 90.6% who benefited from the safe space theatre provided for imagination expression, 87.9% who valued positive criticism which improved pronunciation and tone, and 86.9% who observed a reduction in anxiety levels through frequent practice. Lastly, 84.1% indicated that cooperative exercise in theatre enhanced confidence via communication and cooperation. Overall, these results demonstrate analytically that theatre-based teaching is an extremely effective pedagogy for learning English-speaking competence and communicative confidence among TESL students.

Discussion

The results of this study underscore the significant role of theatre activity in enhancing TESL students' English speaking proficiency. Such findings are significant in that they show how drama activities such as improvisation, role-playing, and group performances help students overcome fear and acquire the confidence to speak English more spontaneously. The fact that students improved their fluency, pronunciation, and intonation through active involvement confirms the findings of earlier research by Kao and O'Neill (1998), whose study also pointed out the positive impact of drama on language learning performance. In contrast to mere memorization, the students learned to utilize language naturally within communicative, everyday situations highlighting the experiential learning potential.

This is vindicated by constructivist theory of learning, where students build knowledge not by passive reception but by proactive action. Students build meaning in drama by working from scripts, playing characters, and reacting to peers in authentic speaking situations. The learning

is made personal, memorable, and relevant. Furthermore, results depict the principles of social constructivism, that is, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners develop language abilities through assisted interaction with fellow learners and more experienced others. The groupings of peers and the group performances discussed by the participants show the co-construction and social negotiation of language development.

The cooperative environment of theater also fosters interpersonal skills like cooperation, adaptability, and problem-solving above and beyond dividends for academic language learning. These social elements further support the worth of group and community in the TESL classroom. The addition of theater-based exercises in the TESL curriculum is therefore a useful theory-driven pedagogical intervention. It supports both language learning and confidence of students by cultivating an encouraging, engaging, and sociably charged learning environment.

CONCLUSION

This study validates that theatre-based learning significantly benefits TESL students by enhancing their speaking skills, confidence, and fluency. Students perceive theatre-based activities as a valuable and effective way to reduce language anxiety and develop natural communication skills. Specific theatre aspects such as role-playing, improvisation, and script performances were particularly beneficial in fostering an engaging and supportive learning environment for the students. The study contributes to TESL by demonstrating that theatre-based approaches align with established language learning theories and provide an effective pedagogical tool for speaking skills development. By incorporating theatre-based activities into language instruction, educators can create dynamic learning experiences that enhance students' communicative competence.

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