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Enhancing Participation and Writing Motivation through Role-Playing and Dubbing: An Action Research Study

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Abstract: This study addresses the persistent challenges of low classroom participation and weak writing motivation among first-year associate-degree students (Junior College to Bachelor's Degree Program) in a large University English class. Conducted as an action research project, the study implemented a one-week pedagogical intervention involving role-playing and dubbing activities. Seventy students from Chinese Language and Preschool Education majors were grouped to select, prepare, and perform dubbed versions of video clips, often translating Chinese comedic works into English. The results demonstrated a remarkable positive shift: typically, passive students actively engaged, and the classroom atmosphere transformed through collaborative creativity and performances enhanced by physical comedy. The findings are discussed through the theoretical lenses of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and collaborative learning, arguing that the activity successfully lowered learning anxiety and built communicative confidence. The study concludes that such scenario-based, student-centered tasks are an effective strategy for engaging passive learners in large classes. Furthermore, it suggests that the confidence and linguistic fluency gained from successful oral communication can serve as a crucial foundation for fostering motivation in more complex tasks like writing. This research offers practical implications for EFL teachers seeking innovative methods to enhance student engagement in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: Classroom Participation; Role-Playing; Dubbing; Affective Filter; Collaborative Learning; University English Teaching; Action Research.

1. Introduction

The English proficiency is increasingly crucial for students in Chinese higher education, serving as a key to academic advancement and future career opportunities. However, teaching English effectively, particularly in the context of associate degree programs (Junior College to Bachelor's Degree Program), presents unique challenges. Students in these programs often come with diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of English foundation, which can lead to decreased confidence and motivation in the classroom. This issue is further exacerbated in large-class settings, where individual students may find it easier to remain passive and avoid participation.

The author of this paper has observed two prominent and interrelated problems in a first-year University English class for associate degree students majoring in fields like Chinese Language and Preschool Education. First, there is a persistent issue of low classroom participation, often manifesting as a "silent classroom" where students are reluctant to speak or answer questions in English. Second, students' written work often lacks fluency and complexity, potentially stemming from a lack of engagement and limited expressive confidence. These challenges may be attributed to a combination of factors, including students' prior learning experiences, foreign language anxiety, and the inherent difficulties of fostering interaction in a large class of up to 70 students.

While communicative language teaching approaches are widely endorsed, finding practical and engaging methods to implement them in such specific contexts remains a task for frontline educators. This study therefore aims to explore the effectiveness of an innovative classroom intervention—role-playing and dubbing activities—in addressing these issues. It is hypothesized that by leveraging students' interests in popular media and creating a low-anxiety, collaborative environment, this method can enhance students' willingness to communicate and indirectly foster a more positive attitude towards English output, including writing.

This paper will begin by reviewing relevant literature on collaborative learning and drama-in-education techniques. It will then outline the methodology of the action research, describe the observed results, and discuss the implications of using such motivational activities for improving classroom dynamics and supporting English language acquisition in similar educational settings.

2. Literature Review

The challenges of low participation and output anxiety in foreign language classrooms are well-documented. To address these issues, contemporary language pedagogy increasingly emphasizes the importance of creating a low-anxiety environment that motivates students to communicate. This literature review will focus on two theoretical pillars that underpin the proposed teaching intervention: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and the concept of Collaborative Learning, followed by insights into the specific use of drama-based techniques.

First and foremost, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a fundamental rationale for this study. Krashen posits that a learner's emotional state can act as an invisible "filter" that impedes language acquisition. When anxiety is high, self-consciousness is strong, or motivation is low, this "affective filter" is raised, preventing comprehensible input from reaching the parts of the brain

responsible for language learning. Conversely, when the learning environment is enjoyable, supportive, and perceived as low-risk, the filter is lowered, allowing for more effective language acquisition. The large, mixed-ability class described in this study is a typical setting where a high affective filter can silence students. The role-playing and dubbing intervention is designed precisely to lower this filter by transforming the classroom from a place of performance anxiety into a space for playful experimentation. As Wang (2020) noted in a study on Chinese EFL learners, activities that reduce speaking anxiety are crucial for encouraging spontaneous language use.

Secondly, the intervention is grounded in the principles of Collaborative Learning. Johnson & Johnson (1999) have long argued that cooperative structures promote greater interpersonal and academic outcomes than competitive or individualistic efforts. In the context of language learning, collaborative tasks, such as group dubbing projects, distribute the cognitive load and reduce the pressure on any single student. This creates a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) where peers can scaffold each other's learning. For students with weaker English foundations, working in a small group provides a safe rehearsal space before performing in front of the entire class. This aligns with the findings of Li & Zhang (2021), who demonstrated that collaborative tasks significantly increased participation rates among passive learners in Chinese university English classes.

Finally, the use of drama and performance-based techniques offers a powerful tool for making language learning meaningful and memorable. By asking students to embody characters and engage with authentic (or semi-authentic) dialogues, role-playing and dubbing move learning beyond abstract vocabulary lists into the realm of experiential learning. According to Davies (1990), such techniques "break the monotony of the classroom" and foster empathy and emotional connection with the language. While numerous studies have explored drama in language education, this study contributes to a narrower gap in the literature by examining its specific application to the under-researched context of associate degree students in a large, mixed-major English class in China. Most existing research focuses on English majors or smaller classes, making this inquiry both practical and timely.

In summary, the proposed intervention synthesizes these established ideas: it uses a collaborative, drama-based activity to lower the affective filter, thereby aiming to increase participation and build the confidence that is a precursor to improved writing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an action research methodology. Action research is a reflective process of progressive problem-solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a "community of practice" to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. This design was deemed most appropriate as it allows a practicing teacher to investigate a specific classroom problem (low participation) and assess the effectiveness of a practical intervention (role-playing and dubbing) within their own teaching context.

3.2. Participants

The participants were 70 first-year students enrolled in an associate degree program at a private undergraduate university in China. The students, specializing in Chinese Language and Literature and Preschool Education, were enrolled in a compulsory University English course. The class was characterized as a large-sized group, presenting a typical challenge for fostering communicative language practice.

3.3. Role-Playing and Dubbing Activity

The intervention was a week-long pedagogical activity centered on role-playing and dubbing. The activity spanned four class hours and was structured as follows:

1. Group Formation: Students were divided into 12-14 small groups, each consisting of 4-6 members.

2. Task Selection and Preparation: Groups were tasked with selecting a short video clip (2-3 minutes) from a movie, TV series, or animation of their choice. A key innovative aspect was the encouragement for groups to choose clips from Chinese comedies and create their own English translations for dubbing, thereby integrating translation practice. Students were responsible for sourcing the video, preparing the script (either using existing English subtitles or creating their own translations), and distributing parts among group members.

3. In-class Performance: The designated class hours were used for group rehearsals and the final dubbed performances. Each group performed their dubbed video in front of the class.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

To triangulate findings and ensure the robustness of the observations, data was collected through the following means:

- Participant Observation: The teacher-researcher conducted systematic observation during the group preparation and performance phases, focusing on levels of engagement, willingness to communicate in English, and collaborative dynamics.
- Analysis of Student-Generated Materials: The prepared scripts, particularly the student-translated versions, were collected and analyzed as evidence of linguistic engagement and creativity.
- Informal Feedback: Casual conversations and informal feedback from students regarding their experience were noted after the activity.

This multi-faceted approach to data collection allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's impact beyond mere participation metrics.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The implementation of the role-playing and dubbing activity yielded markedly positive outcomes, primarily observed in the shift in students' behavioral engagement and the classroom atmosphere.

The most significant result was the dramatic increase in voluntary participation. Notably, students who had previously remained silent throughout the semester actively contributed within their small groups. During the preparation phase, all groups were highly engaged in selecting their materials, with a strong preference for humorous animation clips. This choice naturally led to performances that were characterized by strong comedic effect. Students did not merely read their lines; they enthusiastically embodied their characters, adding exaggerated vocal inflections, facial expressions, and physical actions to enhance the performance. The classroom environment, typically quiet and reserved, was transformed

into a space filled with laughter and active, collaborative learning.

4.2. Discussion

The results strongly support the theoretical framework established in the literature review. The success of the intervention can be attributed to three main factors derived from the activity's design.

First, the activity effectively lowered the affective filter (Krashen, 1982). The combination of self-selected, humorous content and the safety of the small group structure significantly reduced the anxiety associated with speaking English. The "character mask" allowed students, especially the shy ones, to express themselves without the fear of personal judgment. When a typically silent student performs a funny character, the focus shifts from their linguistic accuracy to their theatrical contribution, thereby freeing them to experiment with the language. This aligns with the findings that reducing anxiety is a prerequisite for spontaneous language use.

Second, the principles of collaborative learning were fully realized. The observed peer-to-peer coaching during preparation—where more proficient students helped others with pronunciation and intonation—exemplifies Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding. The shared goal of creating a successful performance fostered a supportive environment where the cognitive load was distributed, making the task feel achievable for all. The necessity to coordinate actions and dialogue further deepened their collaborative engagement.

Third, the drama-based approach unlocked students' intrinsic motivation and embodied cognition. The fact that students voluntarily added actions and comedic timing indicates a deep level of engagement and ownership over the learning process. This moves beyond rote memorization to authentic, meaningful communication. By physically acting out the language, students created stronger memory associations, which can facilitate long-term retention.

4.3. Linking to Writing Motivation

While this study did not directly measure writing proficiency, the observed outcomes suggest a positive indirect link. The confidence gained from a successful oral performance can diminish the "fear of the blank page" often associated with writing. Furthermore, the task of translating Chinese comedy clips into English required a creative engagement with language structures and vocabulary—a form of low-stakes writing practice itself. This successful experience in manipulating language for communicative purposes can build a foundational confidence that is transferable to more formal writing tasks. Future research with a longer duration could directly measure the impact of such activities on writing scores.

5. Conclusion

This action research study demonstrated that the integration of role-playing and dubbing activities is a highly effective strategy for addressing the challenges of student passivity and low engagement in a large University English class for associate degree students. By leveraging student-selected, humorous materials and a collaborative group framework, the intervention successfully transformed the classroom dynamics. The significant increase in participation, especially among previously silent students, and the observed enthusiasm during performances underscore the power of this approach.

The primary implication for teaching practice is that creating a low-anxiety, experiential learning environment is crucial for motivating non-English major students. When students are empowered to make choices and engage in tasks they perceive as enjoyable and relevant, their affective filter is lowered, paving the way for more effective language acquisition. This confidence, built through successful oral communication, is a vital foundation for developing writing skills.

Despite these positive outcomes, this study has limitations. Its short duration (one week) and the lack of quantitative data on long-term language gains mean that the findings primarily speak to immediate engagement and motivation. Therefore, future research should investigate the long-term impact of such drama-based activities on specific language skills, such as vocabulary retention and writing proficiency, through longer-term studies and pre- and post-test measurements.

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