

# Constructivist Research on Drama Teaching for College English Drama Competition

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## Abstract

From the perspective of constructivism, based on Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee college English drama competition, with semi-final contestants as the research object, conducting a series of such performance choreography routine training and seminar as pronunciation correction, speech imitation, character analysis, script reading and so on, to produce excellent drama entries, through training records, teacher interview and written test evaluation, track record of college English test scores, etc., to observe the change of students' English knowledge, culture and thinking level, this paper aims to understand the English drama contest can be held to better cultivate students' ability of cross-cultural communication, to improve their spoken English and enhance their creativity and thought, and at the same time, to explore the effective application of drama teaching method in the second class activities of college English, and summarize the specific implementation methods.

## Keywords

English Drama Competition; College English; Drama Teaching; Constructivist Theory.

## 1. Introduction

At present, the main problem confronted by most English learners is lack of practice. College English classroom teaching is still a large class teaching, and teachers give priority to teaching, supplemented by interaction, or with even no interaction. Therefore, not every student can make full use of the foreign language they have learned in class, and they can only get more opportunities to practice the language by participating in English activities in the second class.

Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College English Drama Competition has a history of 12 years. It is a popular second class activity of college English among students. It is also a discipline competition held by the school for a long time, and it is also a platform to show contemporary college students' English communicative competence and style. Every year the number of applicants is close to 300 people, a total of more than 40 teams to enter the first round of the audition that will eliminate half of the teams. At intervals of 2 to 3 weeks, semifinals are held, from which 6 to 8 teams are selected to advance to the finals. In order to improve the English level of the participating students and improve the quality of the works, the college will organize teachers to give systematic tutoring to the participating students every year.

Another drawback of traditional foreign language classroom teaching lies in the disconnection between theory and practice, that is, the emphasis on language learning and the neglect of cultural practice. That is to say, the traditional foreign language classroom teaching rarely involves the knowledge and skills of intercultural competence of college students, let alone the practical part. Language environment is the basis for the implementation of foreign language teaching. Without language environment, students often find it difficult to have interest and motivation in language learning. (Wang Te, 2017) During the tutoring process, some positive changes took place in the students, such as the improvement in pronunciation and intonation, oral expression, reading comprehension and adaptation of the script, etc., which aroused the

researchers' thinking. College English drama teaching method, which is to use English drama and stage performance skills to assist classroom teaching, is helpful to stimulate students' interest in English learning and enhance their awareness of intercultural communication. In the process of drama performance, students can feel the role of cultural identity and social relations at close range, and fill the gaps of language and culture in book learning. If drama teaching method can be applied in classroom teaching, then, in the second college English classroom, whether teachers can also use drama teaching method, how to use this method, and how to make it play an important role to better develop students' cross-cultural communication ability, to improve their spoken English and enhance their creativity and critical thinking ability, are the questions researchers put forward and also the problems to be solved in this subject.

From the perspective of constructivism, based on Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee college English drama competition, with semi-final contestants as the research object, conducting a series of such performance choreography routine training and seminar as pronunciation correction, speech imitation, character analysis, script reading and so on, to produce excellent drama entries, through training records, teacher interview and written test evaluation, track record of college English test scores, etc., to observe the change of students' English knowledge, culture and thinking level, this paper aims to understand the English drama contest can be held to better cultivate students' ability of cross-cultural communication, to improve their spoken English and enhance their creativity and thought, and at the same time, to explore the effective application of drama teaching method in the second class activities of college English, and summarize the specific implementation methods.

## **2. Constructivist Mode of Drama Teaching for College English Drama Competition**

### **2.1. Effective Situation Creation**

The theory of constructivism holds that real learning occurs in certain situations, not only because real learning tasks are conducive to stimulating learners' learning initiative, but also because objective activities are the source of individual construction of knowledge. (Li Zhihou, 2010:12) For English learners, context refers to the situation and environment in which English is used to communicate. However, on the one hand, domestic students generally do not have a pure English communication language environment in their spare time; on the other hand, college English classes cannot fully simulate the real life scenes, so that not every student can participate in language practice. Therefore, the rich variety of second-class English drama activities are the supplement and extension of classroom language teaching, and also the most likely practical platform to realize effective situation creation. Drama in English teaching, based on the real language materials and almost perfect learning environments, puts students easily into a multi-level, real context. (Wang Xiaoping, 2014) In the process of drama performance, with students as the center, teachers need to combine the Western culture contained in the works to create a real situation, so that students can feel the happiness, anger, sorrow and joy of the characters and the exquisite beauty of the language in the interlinked plot. Students then can constantly use English to carry out a series of interesting practices, such as lines imitation, dialogue interaction, improvising after forgetting words, role play, etc., to create characters and show themselves.

A week before the training, teachers ask students to read the original works, understand the characteristics of the writing background, the story and characters, and the position, function and importance of the extracts in the whole book. At the same time, students are required to read the script, find some words' pronunciation and meaning, watch a movie and imitate the pronunciation and intonation. The first training aims to help students understand the original time background, the purpose of the script writing, and the character's personality, pay

attention to the establishment of the situation, lead students into the role, and let them feel the charm of time and space in the story different from the reality, look with eyes of personae, think with thoughts of personae, and understand events with mind of personae. First, the teacher prepares some questions about the storyline to help the students review their understanding of the works from different angles, and then enter the situation. Then, the teacher asks the students to analyze the characters.

## **2.2. Effective Collaboration**

Constructivism holds that learning is a process of meaning construction realized by means of interpersonal cooperation with the help of others in a certain context, that is, in a social and cultural background. In the situation of positive and mutual trust created by teachers, students achieve common understanding and knowledge through cooperation with teachers and classmates, acquire new knowledge from what they have learned through the existing cognitive structure, retain it in long-term memory, and maintain an open state for further processing or restructuring. (Li Zhihou, 2010:52) the idea of drama teaching method is to make students become the leader of the activity performed, the teachers are the organizer and facilitator who let the student, through the practical activities such as role playing, scenario simulation session in the second classroom of English drama, to exercise the language, learn how to collaborate effectively with teachers and classmates, and improve their English comprehensive application ability and the team cooperation ability.

The second and third training sessions are designed to help students explore the different scenes and characters of the play in depth, focusing on the collaboration between teachers and students, and among students, and choosing the best form of stage performance. First of all, the instructor asks the students to put forward the details that make them difficult to understand or cannot understand, and then we discuss them together and express our own opinions. Secondly, the stage performance of each scene is discussed from the basic pronunciation and intonation, dialect accent, body language, emotional expression, time and space restoration, the imagination and creation of the blank space in the script and other perspectives. Then, the teacher asks the students to read the script in turn according to the roles and emotions, so as to make the audience feel that the tone of the characters will vary in accordance with the development of the event and the change of the emotion, and feel the unique stage tension and performance of the drama. After discussion and reading aloud, students think about what is the best way to present the character in the plot, as well as the form of dialogue, eye contact and body movements that should occur among the characters. After the reading, the teacher will comment on each student's performance and remind the students to learn from each other and make up for their weaknesses. Then, the students divide themselves into several groups. They act out different scenes one group by another and judge which one offers the best performance. In the process of preparing for the performance, students will remind each other and share their experiences through group discussion and negotiation, so as to incorporate new knowledge and experience into their own cognitive system and promote the construction of meaning.

## **2.3. Effective Communication**

Constructivism holds that knowledge is constructed by the subject of cognition, and each person interprets the meaning of knowledge according to his or her own experience, and knowledge has different meanings for different individuals. (Gawain, 2008:223) Through effective conversation and negotiation, different learners' views and experiences on the same phenomenon and connotation can collide with each other, complement each other, bring forth the new from the old, narrow the blind area of cognition and expand their horizons. However, when learners are forced to learn or are in a high-pressure environment, the learning effect is poor and the learning efficiency is not high. Therefore, teachers need to create a good

atmosphere for students to relax their body and mind, fully release themselves in learning, and develop effective dialogue and interaction between teachers and students, and among students, teachers and texts from multiple angles, so that students can form the understanding, digestion and absorption of knowledge and ideas in continuous practice. In application of drama teaching method in the second class, the students do not have the pressure from the school, only to produce excellent works to join the English drama competition, show on the stage and compete for prizes, to learn a new language knowledge in the effective communication and culture, and to have the flexible use of English skills, bold creation or adaption of the screenplay. The most important is that in drama, in the real and quasi-real situations and scenes on specific occasions, students can more easily understand the information conveyed; besides, the vivid scenery can activate their thinking, and stimulate the desire to express their thoughts. (Liu Niu, 2017) Step by step, they would bravely express their views on characters and plots, deepen their understanding of drama literature, strengthen their full grasp of social factual knowledge on similar topics, establish correct outlook on life, values and world, and improve their innovative and critical thinking ability and intercultural communication ability.

The fourth and fifth training sessions are designed to help students interpret sentences and expressions with complex structures and obscure semantics, pay attention to the conversation and communication between teachers and students, among students themselves, and among teachers and students and texts, so as to improve their language aesthetic level and enhance their literary appreciation. First, the instructor organizes the students to compete for the roles. If there are two or more actors competing for the same role, the actors will try out one by one, and the cast will be voted on. Secondly, after the roles are assigned, they are divided into groups according to the different camps that the roles belong to, and the image, personality, stance, emotion and dialogue of each role are discussed. After the discussion, the teacher guides the students to summarize and conclude the results, and analyze and explain the difficult and important lines or some punch points from the aspects of pronunciation, word selection, grammar, syntax, grammar and rhetoric. At the same time, teachers encourage students to use their own words to explain the lines. After all, once students forget the words during the performance, they can flexibly change the script according to the general idea. The performance is not only more natural, but also more conducive to training students' oral English. Then, the teacher asks the students to make bold adaptations or innovations to the original lines, storylines and stage presentation, and provides timely help to work together to polish the details of the script. Finally, the teacher provides the same movie clips, and asks the students to input the final lines into the video to replace the original sound and form the video and audio materials.

## **2.4. Effective Meaning Construction**

Constructivism holds that learning is a process of constructing internal mental representation. Instead of transferring knowledge from the outside world to memory, learners construct understanding through interaction with the outside world on the basis of their existing experience. (Gawain, 2008:202) Meaning construction is not only the construction of new knowledge and experience, but also the reconstruction of previous knowledge and experience, and it is the result of the interaction between new and old knowledge and experience. Effective meaning construction requires teachers to stimulate students' interest in independent learning, guide students to combine new and old knowledge and experience in collaborative learning and practical exploration at all levels, constantly examine, adjust and revise cognitive content and process, and complete the meaning construction of knowledge and experience.

The sixth to eighth training sessions aim to enable students to apply the accumulated language knowledge to the practice of drama performance, pay attention to the construction of knowledge meaning, and enable students to have a deeper understanding of cultural conflicts

and thinking differences reflected in language knowledge. Students attending the English drama contest have a keen interest in the works and they like it very much and are eager to show on the stage, so in the case of game, and the process of training, they will be more proactive to master lines, adapt to different cultures and ways of thinking, and never retreat in the face of a part of the script difficult to be understood. Teachers make the good use of students' internal motivation, put forward questions about the script language, culture, performance and other related issues, guide them to dismantle problems in group discussions, exchange views, finish a deep understanding of the content in the text analysis, find new problems, correct mistakes in practice, and solve the problems, constantly motivate students to complete the integration of old and new knowledge and experience, and in one story scenario after another, realize the effective meaning construction of knowledge and experience.

In general, in the process of the whole race and coaching, teachers should be careful when design question, guide the student to read the script, lead them into the learning situation, and let students experience the charm of drama language and culture, correctly master the language by osmosis and understand Chinese and western cultural differences, which will help enhance their interest in learning English, improve their comprehensive English learning ability and intercultural communication ability. Through question-answering, brainstorming, reading scripts, group performances and other activities, we encourage students, or teachers and students together to cooperate in learning, which helps students to further consolidate knowledge, improve learning efficiency, practice oral English, and trigger innovative thinking. Teachers organize students to play a role, and request the student according to the role of group discussion and analysis on the lines, in order to inspire students' enthusiasm towards adaptation or innovation of script, film dubbing, etc. and at maximum realize the dialogue and exchange. Besides, it helps to cultivate the students' innovation consciousness, expand horizons, and treat things with a dialectical view. During the repeated rehearsals and competitions, the students' multi-faceted potential can be tapped to promote the effective construction of their knowledge meaning. After a series of research and evaluation methods are carried out on the research objects and reference objects, the conclusion is drawn that the application mode of college English drama teaching method in the second class is positive and effective, which can cultivate students' intercultural communication ability, improve their oral English level, and enhance their creativity and critical thinking ability.

## 2.5. Effective Evaluation

Constructivism believes that the evaluation of learners' learning effect should not only rely on the summative evaluation method such as closed book examination, but should combine with the formative evaluation and adopt multiple evaluation methods including knowledge evaluation, technical evaluation, performance evaluation and authenticity evaluation. Different from classroom teaching, the quality and level of the activities in the second class, as well as the teaching effect and learning effect, cannot be measured simply through the paper-and-pencil test, especially for the performance competition activities with strong practical types like English Drama Competition. If we want to improve the quality of the works and the English level of students, the researchers must keep track of the students' English learning in different stages. Therefore, applying drama teaching method to the activities in the second class, the evaluation mode should adopt the formative evaluation based on questionnaire survey, training record, teacher interview, comparison and contrast between college English mid-term and final score to name just a few, and the summative evaluation based on oral English test, ability test of innovative thinking and intercultural communication.



### 3. Conclusion

Under the influence of early 2020 the outbreak of COVID - 19 this semester, there is no classroom teaching, students cannot come back to school, and the various departments of various curriculum also all adopt the form of online teaching. As a result, some already-planned teaching activities subsequent to English drama competition have to be cancelled, which brings a lot of difficulties to the research data collection. In other words, the validity of the research results is inadequate to some extent. In addition, there is no scientific and systematic method for data analysis, no valid pre-test for innovative thinking and intercultural communication competence, and the evaluation criteria for oral English tests need to be further improved. The sample size of the research object and the reference object is too small to distinguish the subject background. The analysis of the test results of innovative critical thinking and intercultural communication competence is too general, and the changes of innovative critical thinking competence and intercultural communication competence are not analyzed separately. The above contents are still shortcomings of this study, and I hope to continue to explore and find solutions in the later teaching practice and theoretical research.

This study was to explore the application mode of drama teaching method in the second classroom of College English, by organizing English drama competition, providing lectures on language, culture and stage performance for participating students, contrast the change of the students before and after the competition and tutoring, and through analysis of the collected data, conclude that students' oral English level and cross-cultural communication and innovation ability have been improved, and the effectiveness of the proposed application mode has been verified. It is hoped that this study can arouse English educators to attach more importance to English drama teaching method and make bold attempts, and jointly explore the possibility of its universal application in college English teaching.

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