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The Integration of Drama and Literature in Effective Language Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT: Drama-based instruction and literature-based instruction have traditionally been treated as separate strands within English language teaching methodology, the former associated with communicative, oral-skills-focused pedagogy and the latter with reading comprehension, stylistic analysis, and cultural content. This paper reviews the theoretical and empirical literature supporting the integration of these two strands, arguing that drama and literature are complementary rather than competing pedagogical resources: literary texts supply the authentic, culturally rich linguistic input that process drama techniques then require learners to embody, voice, and negotiate meaning through in real time. The review synthesizes second language acquisition theory, including Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain's output hypothesis, and Vygotskian sociocultural theory, with the foundational literature-in-language-teaching tradition established by Collie and Slater, Lazar, and Carter and Long, and the drama-in-language-teaching tradition established by Maley and Duff, Via, Holden, and Wagner. Particular attention is given to process drama specifically, a structured but improvisational dramatic form developed by Heathcote, Bolton, and O'Neill, and its documented application to literary text in Kao and O'Neill's influential classroom-based research. Three small comparative tables set out the specific linguistic skills each pedagogical strand targets, contrast literature-only, drama-only, and integrated approaches across concrete classroom outcomes, and summarize the reported oral-skill and motivational gains documented in the empirical studies reviewed. The paper concludes that integrating drama and literature addresses a documented weakness in each approach used alone, literature's tendency toward passive reception and drama's tendency to rely on invented rather than authentically rich language, and identifies longitudinal classroom research on integrated drama-literature curricula as the central future research need.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching methodology has long drawn on literary texts as a source of authentic, linguistically rich input, and separately on dramatic technique as a means of generating the kind of spontaneous, purposeful oral interaction that structured grammar and vocabulary exercises typically cannot replicate. Widdowson's early argument for stylistics in the teaching of literature

proposed that literary texts offer learners exposure to language used with unusual precision and creative deviation from ordinary usage, and that analyzing this deviation develops a learner's broader linguistic awareness in ways that non-literary texts, constructed specifically for pedagogical simplicity, do not [8]. Brumfit and Carter's edited collection on literature and language teaching consolidated this argument into a wider methodological case, contending that literature's ambiguity, multiple layers of meaning, and cultural specificity, often treated as obstacles to comprehension, are in fact precisely the features that generate the kind of extended classroom discussion and negotiation of meaning communicative language teaching aims to produce [9].

Collie and Slater's widely used practical guide to literature in the language classroom identified four specific justifications for literary text use that have shaped subsequent pedagogical practice: literature provides valuable, authentic material not written for language-teaching purposes; it develops cultural enrichment by exposing learners to the target-language society's values and assumptions; it stimulates personal involvement by drawing learners into a narrative or emotional engagement beyond simple information transfer; and it contributes to language enrichment by exposing learners to varied syntax, register, and connotation [5]. Lazar's comprehensive teacher-training guide extended this justification with concrete methodological guidance, arguing that literature-based activities should move learners through a sequence from initial personal response toward closer language-focused analysis, rather than beginning with decontextualized grammatical or lexical drilling of the text [6]. Carter and Long's parallel treatment of teaching literature identified three broad pedagogical models underlying most classroom practice, the cultural model treating literature as a repository of civilizational knowledge, the language model treating literature as a resource for close linguistic study, and the personal-growth model treating literature as a stimulus for learners' own affective and imaginative engagement, a typology this paper draws on directly when distinguishing literature's contribution from drama's [7].

Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work, developed originally for first-language reading pedagogy but subsequently highly influential in second-language literature teaching, argued that meaning is not contained within a text waiting to be extracted but is instead generated through the transaction between a specific reader's experience and the text at a particular moment of reading, a theoretical position that directly supports classroom activities inviting learners to respond personally and interpretively to a text rather than seeking a single, teacher-validated correct reading [21], [22]. This transactional, reader-response orientation provides a direct theoretical bridge to drama pedagogy, since dramatic embodiment of a literary text, having learners physically enact a scene, voice a character's interior monologue, or improvise a continuation of a narrative, extends Rosenblatt's transactional reading process from a purely cognitive and affective event into a fully embodied, socially negotiated one.

Maley and Duff's foundational collection of drama techniques for language learning argued that structured dramatic activity generates a specific combination of linguistic demands, spontaneous, purposeful, and consequential language use, that more conventional communicative exercises frequently simulate only imperfectly, since a drama activity's fictional stakes give learners a genuine reason to negotiate meaning, resolve misunderstanding, and adjust register in real time [19]. Via's early and influential classroom account, developed from the author's experience teaching English through play production and rehearsal, demonstrated that the repeated, purposeful rehearsal of dramatic dialogue produces measurable gains in pronunciation, intonation, and fluency that decontextualized pronunciation drilling did not achieve to the same degree [21 — see note]. Wagner's synthesis of educational-drama research specifically reviewed the accumulated empirical evidence connecting drama participation to language-arts outcomes, concluding that drama's combination of physical embodiment, emotional engagement, and social negotiation supports vocabulary retention, narrative comprehension, and oral fluency development more robustly than passive reception of the same linguistic content [16].

This paper reviews the second language acquisition theory, literature-in-language-teaching tradition, and drama-in-language-teaching tradition that together motivate integrating these two pedagogical strands, before examining the specific empirical literature on process drama applied directly to literary text.

Research Objectives

- To review the second language acquisition theory underlying both literature-based and drama-based language pedagogy.
- To synthesize the foundational literature-in-language-teaching tradition and its documented pedagogical rationale.
- To examine the foundational drama-in-language-teaching tradition, including process drama specifically.

- To evaluate empirical evidence on integrating drama technique directly with literary text in language classrooms.
- To identify future research priorities for longitudinal, classroom-based evaluation of integrated drama-literature curricula.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Second Language Acquisition Foundations

Krashen's input hypothesis proposed that language acquisition proceeds when a learner is exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current competence level, a formulation that directly supports literature's pedagogical value, since a well-chosen literary text can supply rich, contextually supported input at a level of challenge a teacher can calibrate to a specific class [1]. Krashen's subsequent elaboration of this hypothesis further argued that affective factors, anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence, mediate how effectively comprehensible input is processed and acquired, a claim with direct relevance to drama pedagogy specifically, since dramatic role-play allows a learner to produce language from within a fictional persona rather than as an exposed statement of their own linguistic competence, potentially lowering the affective barrier Krashen identifies [2]. Swain's output hypothesis complemented this input-focused theory by arguing that comprehensible input alone is insufficient for full acquisition, and that learners require opportunities to produce output that pushes them to notice gaps in their own interlanguage and to test hypotheses about target-language structure, a requirement drama activities satisfy directly through their demand for spontaneous, consequential speech production [3]. Long's interaction hypothesis further specified the mechanism through which this productive engagement supports acquisition, arguing that negotiation of meaning during interaction, clarification requests, comprehension checks, and confirmation checks, drives the specific kind of input modification and noticing that promotes acquisition, a negotiation process that both literary discussion and dramatic improvisation generate organically as learners work to understand and be understood [4].

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development, though developed outside applied linguistics specifically, has become a central theoretical reference for both literature and drama pedagogy in language teaching, since Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with more capable assistance, directly describes how scaffolded literary discussion and collaborative dramatic improvisation support learners in producing language beyond their independent competence level [30 — Vygotsky, table position].

2.2 The Literature-in-Language-Teaching Tradition

McKay's early and influential argument for literature in the ESL classroom proposed that literary texts offer a form of linguistic and cultural exposure that non-literary reading materials, deliberately simplified or stripped of connotative complexity, cannot replicate, while cautioning that literature should be selected for genuine accessibility and relevance to learners' interests rather than for canonical prestige alone [14]. Savvidou's integrated approach to teaching literature in the EFL classroom proposed a specific classroom sequence, moving learners from an initial response-based engagement with a text through a language-focused stage examining specific stylistic or grammatical features, and finally to a follow-up stage connecting the text to learners' own experience or creative production, a sequence that closely parallels Lazar's earlier response-to-analysis progression and anticipates this paper's argument that drama activity is a natural, embodied extension of this follow-up stage [6], [15]. Hişmanoğlu's review of teaching English through literature catalogued the specific linguistic and communicative competencies literature-based instruction is documented to support, including vocabulary expansion through contextualized exposure to varied register and connotation, and improved reading comprehension strategies transferable to non-literary text, while noting that literature's contribution to speaking and listening skills specifically remains comparatively underdeveloped relative to its documented contribution to reading and vocabulary [16]. Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan's review of literature in the EFL/ESL classroom reached a consistent conclusion, finding that literature-based instruction is well supported for developing reading skill and cultural awareness but that the reviewed literature offers comparatively less direct evidence for literature's contribution to oral fluency and spontaneous speech production specifically, a gap this paper argues drama-based extension activities are well positioned to address [17].

2.3 The Drama-in-Language-Teaching Tradition

Holden's foundational treatment of drama in language teaching distinguished several distinct dramatic activity types by their degree of structure and improvisation, ranging from tightly scripted dialogue practice through semi-structured role-play to fully

improvisational simulation, and argued that this range allows drama technique to be calibrated to a learner group's proficiency level in much the same way Krashen's comprehensible-input principle calibrates literary text selection [20], [1]. Dougill's practical resource for drama activities extended this typology with a large catalogue of specific classroom techniques, mime, improvisation, scripted performance, and simulation among them, each linked to specific communicative functions such activities are documented to practice, providing teachers with a concrete methodological bridge between drama theory and classroom implementation [22]. Boal's theatre of the oppressed, developed originally as a form of political and community theatre rather than language pedagogy specifically, has nonetheless been influential in language-teaching drama practice through its "forum theatre" technique, in which audience members can intervene and take over a role mid-scene to try an alternative course of action, a technique subsequently adapted for language classrooms as a means of generating repeated, varied practice of the same communicative situation from multiple linguistic and pragmatic angles [24].

Process drama, formalized by Heathcote and Bolton and subsequently by O'Neill, represents the specific dramatic form most directly relevant to this paper's integration argument, since process drama is built not around a scripted or pre-planned performance but around a sustained, teacher-facilitated fictional world that the group collectively builds and inhabits over an extended session, frequently anchored in a specific narrative or textual pretext [25], [26]. O'Neill's framework for process drama specifically emphasized the pretext, the initiating stimulus, frequently a literary excerpt, image, or narrative fragment, around which the entire dramatic world is subsequently built, establishing literary text not as incidental content but as the structural foundation from which process drama's language-generating fictional world emerges [26].

2.4 Integrating Drama and Literature: Direct Empirical Evidence

Kao and O'Neill's book-length classroom study, "Words into Worlds," provided the most direct and extensively documented empirical demonstration of process drama applied specifically to literary text, describing an extended process-drama unit built around a literary narrative and finding that learners engaged in sustained, contextually motivated language production, negotiating character motivation, improvising dialogue consistent with a text's established world, and collaboratively extending a narrative's events, that the authors argue exceeded both the quantity and the communicative authenticity of language produced during comparable non-dramatic literary discussion of the same text [27]. Stinson and Freebody's classroom-based study of process drama's contribution to English oral communication outcomes, conducted with adolescent English language learners, found that students participating in a sustained process-drama program demonstrated measurable improvement in oral communication assessment scores relative to comparison classes receiving more conventional instruction, and specifically identified increased willingness to communicate and reduced speaking anxiety as mediating factors that classroom observation and student self-report both corroborated [28]. Piazzoli's research on process drama and language-anxiety reduction extended this affective-mediation finding directly, arguing that process drama's fictional framing, in which a learner speaks as a character rather than as themselves, creates what the author terms an "affective space" that measurably reduces the anxiety learners report when required to produce spontaneous target-language speech, a finding directly consistent with Krashen's affective-filter hypothesis discussed in Section 2.1 [2], [29]. Miccoli's classroom-based study of English through drama with Brazilian university learners found that a semester-long drama-integrated course produced self-reported and instructor-observed improvement in learners' oral fluency and confidence, with learners specifically identifying the rehearsal and repeated-performance process, rather than any single dramatic technique in isolation, as the aspect of the course they found most beneficial for their spoken English [23].

2.5 Synthesis: Why Integration Addresses Each Approach's Documented Limitation

Read together, the literature reviewed in Sections 2.2 through 2.4 indicates that literature-based instruction and drama-based instruction each carry a specific, well-documented limitation that the other directly addresses. Hişmanoğlu's and Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan's reviews both identify literature-based instruction's comparatively weak documented contribution to oral fluency and spontaneous speech production specifically, even as both reviews confirm literature's strong documented contribution to reading, vocabulary, and cultural awareness [16], [17]. Drama-based instruction, conversely, depends for its linguistic richness on the quality of the language input learners draw upon during improvisation, and Maley and Duff's, and Dougill's drama-technique catalogues, while extensive, do not themselves supply the connotatively rich, culturally embedded language that literary text provides [19], [22]. Kao and O'Neill's, Stinson and Freebody's, and Miccoli's empirical studies collectively demonstrate that combining the two directly, using literary text as process drama's structural pretext, produces oral-

fluency and confidence gains that neither literature-only nor drama-only instruction, considered separately, is as consistently documented to achieve [23], [27], [28].

III. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative research design synthesizing foundational second language acquisition theory, the literature-in-language-teaching tradition, the drama-in-language-teaching tradition, and empirical classroom-based studies evaluating drama-literature integration specifically. Reviewed works were compared along three dimensions: the specific linguistic or communicative skill targeted; the theoretical mechanism, comprehensible input, output production, negotiation of meaning, or affective-filter reduction, through which the approach is argued to support that skill; and, where available, the empirical classroom evidence supporting the claim.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Linguistic Skills Targeted by Each Pedagogical Strand

Table 1 sets the specific linguistic and communicative skills the reviewed literature associates predominantly with literature-based instruction, drama-based instruction, or both, clarifying where the two strands' documented contributions overlap and where they diverge.

Table 1. Linguistic Skills Associated with Literature-Based and Drama-Based Instruction

Skill Area	Literature-Based Instruction	Drama-Based Instruction	Key Sources
Vocabulary and connotation	Strong (contextualized exposure to varied register)	Moderate (situational vocabulary in role)	Collie & Slater [5]; Hismanoglu [16]
Reading comprehension strategies	Strong	Not directly targeted	McKay [14]; Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan [17]
Cultural awareness	Strong	Moderate (embodied cultural scenarios)	Collie & Slater [5]; Carter & Long [7]
Oral fluency and spontaneous speech	Weak-to-moderate (discussion-dependent)	Strong	Kao & O'Neill [27]; Miccoli [23]
Speaking confidence / anxiety reduction	Not directly targeted	Strong	Piazzoli [29]; Stinson & Freebody [28]
Pronunciation and intonation	Not directly targeted	Strong (rehearsed dialogue)	Via [21]; Wagner [16]

4.2 Approach Comparison: Literature-Only, Drama-Only, and Integrated Instruction

Table 2 contrasts the three instructional configurations directly against concrete classroom outcomes documented in the reviewed empirical and methodological literature.

Table 2. Literature-Only, Drama-Only, and Integrated Approaches Compared

Dimension	Literature-Only	Drama-Only	Integrated (Drama + Literature)
Source of linguistic input	Authentic literary text	Learner-generated/improvised language	Literary text as structural pretext for improvisation
Learner role	Reader/interpreter	Performer/role-player	Reader who becomes embodied participant
Primary theoretical support	Comprehensible input; reader-response transaction	Output production; negotiation of meaning	Input, output, and affective-filter mechanisms jointly
Documented strength	Reading, vocabulary, cultural knowledge	Fluency, confidence, pronunciation	Fluency gains anchored in rich, authentic content
Documented limitation	Weak oral-fluency transfer	Input can lack lexical/cultural richness	Requires greater teacher facilitation skill (process drama)
Representative source	Lazar [6]; Collie & Slater [5]	Maley & Duff [19]; Dougill [22]	Kao & O'Neill [27]; Stinson & Freebody [28]

4.3 Reported Oral-Skill and Motivational Outcomes in Empirical Studies

Table 3 summarizes the specific outcomes reported across the direct empirical studies of drama-literature integration reviewed in Section 2.4.

Table 3. Reported Outcomes from Empirical Studies of Drama-Literature Integration

Study	Learner Population	Instructional Focus	Reported Outcome
Kao & O'Neill [27]	Second-language learners (classroom case study)	Process drama built on literary pretext	Sustained, contextually motivated language production exceeding comparable non-dramatic discussion
Stinson & Freebody [28]	Adolescent English language learners	Sustained process-drama program	Measurable oral communication assessment gains; increased willingness to communicate
Piazzoli [29]	Additional-language learners	Process drama and affective space	Reduced language anxiety during spontaneous speech production
Miccoli [23]	University-level Brazilian EFL learners	Semester-long drama-integrated course	Self-reported and observed gains in oral fluency and confidence

4.4 Discussion

The three tables together support this paper's central argument that drama and literature address complementary, rather than overlapping, gaps in language learners' developing competence. Table 1 establishes that literature's documented strengths, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and cultural awareness, and drama's documented strengths, fluency, confidence, and pronunciation, are largely non-overlapping, a pattern consistent with Hişmanoğlu's and Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan's specific finding that literature's contribution to oral skill remains comparatively underdeveloped [16], [17]. Table 2 indicates that the integrated approach does not simply add drama activity onto literature study as a separate follow-up exercise but restructures the relationship between the two, with literary text serving specifically as process drama's structural pretext, the initiating fictional material from which the entire dramatic world is built, a role O'Neill's process-drama framework formalizes directly [26]. Table 3's empirical summary indicates that this integration produces documented gains, in oral communication assessment scores, in reduced speaking anxiety, and in self-reported confidence, that align closely with the specific theoretical mechanisms reviewed in Section 2.1, Swain's output-production requirement, Long's negotiation-of-meaning process, and Krashen's affective-filter hypothesis all find direct empirical support in Kao and O'Neill's, Stinson and Freebody's, and Piazzoli's respective findings [1], [2], [3], [4], [27], [28], [29]. Taken together, this evidence indicates that the integration is not merely additive convenience but is theoretically motivated: literature supplies the rich, authentic linguistic and cultural content that drama's spontaneous production and negotiation processes then require learners to actively use, while drama supplies the embodied, consequential speaking opportunity that literary discussion alone, per Hişmanoğlu's and Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan's reviews, does not reliably generate on its own.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature supporting the integration of drama and literature in language teaching, synthesizing second language acquisition theory, the foundational literature-in-language-teaching tradition, and the foundational drama-in-language-teaching tradition, including process drama specifically. The evidence indicates that literature-based and drama-based instruction, used independently, each carry a specific and well-documented limitation, literature's comparatively weak contribution to oral fluency and spontaneous speech, and drama's comparative dependence on learner-generated rather than authentically rich linguistic input, that the other approach directly addresses. Empirical classroom studies of drama built specifically around literary pretexts report measurable gains in oral communication assessment scores, reduced speaking anxiety, and increased learner confidence, gains that align closely with established second language acquisition mechanisms including comprehensible input, pushed output, negotiation of meaning, and affective-filter reduction. Collectively, this evidence supports treating drama and literature not as separate methodological traditions but as complementary components of a single, theoretically coherent pedagogical approach.

VI. FUTURE WORK

Future research should prioritize longitudinal classroom studies tracking learners across a full academic term or year of integrated drama-literature instruction, since the empirical studies reviewed in this paper, while methodologically informative, are predominantly single-unit or single-semester in scope and cannot establish whether the documented oral-fluency and confidence gains persist over extended periods. Further work is needed to compare integrated drama-literature instruction directly against literature-only and drama-only control conditions within a single controlled study design, since the current evidence base draws these comparisons across separate studies with differing learner populations rather than within a unified experimental framework. Continued research should also examine how process drama's pretext-selection principle, established theoretically by O'Neill, interacts with specific literary genres, poetry, short narrative fiction, and drama text itself, since the empirical studies reviewed in this paper concentrate predominantly on narrative fiction as the pretext source. Finally, future work should investigate teacher-training requirements specifically, since Table 2 identifies facilitation skill as a documented limitation of integrated instruction, to establish what specific preparation language teachers require to implement process-drama techniques around literary text effectively and confidently in their own classrooms.

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