



Improving Students' Engagement in Learning English through The Use of a Small-group Project (Drama)

Zukrina Kholis¹, Isna Sarinastiti², Lestiana Nindya Putri³

¹IAI Nurul Hakim, West Lombok, Indonesia

²Yogyakarta State University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

³Yogyakarta State University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

zukrinakholis@gmail.com, lestiananindya03@gmail.com, isnaastiti@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Students' engagement in the classroom is significant for the progress of teaching and learning practice. The fact that there are still many students who are passively involved in the classroom, it becomes a forever dilemma for a teacher to encounter. Therefore, this study intended to improve the students' engagement through a small-group project (drama) in a Senior High School. This action research comprises two cycles: the first consists of 3 meetings, and the second consists of four meetings. A questionnaire and interview were utilized to collect the data. The result of the study shows that the use of drama as a project in a smaller group for the students can improve their engagement. Smaller groups work better to enhance students' attention and engagement in joining the group discussions. Involving in a smaller group makes the students feel safe expressing their opinions and ideas in front of a few people.

Keywords: *Students' engagement, Small group project, Drama and English Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Observing students actively participating in the classroom is a gratifying sight for any teacher. Conversely, when students display passive involvement most of the time, it can be quite frustrating for teachers. These situations serve as a yardstick for a teacher's success in their teaching, as they indicate the level of student engagement. Prioritizing student engagement is crucial as it enhances their learning and helps overcome issues that may lead to boredom and low achievement rates (Ming & Degol, 2014). Consequently, creating a conducive atmosphere where students willingly immerse themselves in the teaching and learning process becomes a challenging task for teachers. They must determine which approaches and strategies best suit their classroom to support student engagement in learning English.

According to Parn (2006), students' engagement in classroom activities can be observed when they actively listen and pay attention to the lesson. Engaged students contribute psychologically to the classroom and strive to comprehend knowledge that will benefit them in life. On the other hand, disengaged students disrupt the learning process, skip classes, and fail to complete assigned tasks (Young, 2005).

However, the ideal situation where students cooperate, remain productive, attentively follow the teacher's instructions, and submit tasks on time is often lacking in schools today. Based on our teaching experience, only a few students actively participate in the classroom. Additionally, during observations at a Senior High School in Yogyakarta, most students appeared engrossed in their own world, engaging in activities such as using their mobile phones, reading novels, gossiping with classmates, eating, or even sleeping throughout the class. Therefore, addressing student engagement is crucial for their achievement in learning, as it directly impacts their scores (Parn, 2006) and is vital for successful learning (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008 cited in Ming & Degol, 2014). Consequently, an engaging classroom environment and effective classroom management are essential for improving students' behavior and achievement (Oliver et al., 2011).

To tackle this issue, this research proposes a project-based strategy utilizing drama. Drama was chosen due to its requirement for collaboration, activity, and creativity among students. As Nguen & Do (2017) also noted, students exhibited positive attitudes toward using drama-based role-play activities in their Speaking classroom practices. Drama provides a unique opportunity for developing speech skills, as it inherently motivates students who desire to be heard and understood clearly. It creates a stress-free environment that encourages classroom participation, boosts students' confidence, and fosters their willingness to engage (Saraç, 2007). Consequently, this paper formulates the research question: "To what extent does the implementation of a small group project (drama) improve students' engagement in the class?"

1.1 Students' Engagement

According to Parn (2006), engaged students are those who are actively focused on the teaching and learning process. This can be observed through their body language, gestures, eye contact with the speaker, proper sitting posture, and facing the speaker. Engaged students also come prepared for their learning, having their writing tools ready and completing tasks on time. Additionally, they actively respond to the ideas being taught, ask questions, and participate in discussions. Thus, student engagement encompasses various aspects and is not simply defined as participation or involvement in the classroom.

Davis et al. (2012) also discuss three areas of student engagement that are relevant to this study: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement.

- Behavioral engagement refers to students' effort in participating socially and academically. It reflects their motivation and the quality of their learning in the classroom. Examples of behavioral engagement include compliance with school or classroom rules and actively participating in class.

- Cognitive engagement involves students' willingness and attention to understand or master complex material. It requires psychological investment, where students are motivated to learn and actively participate in classroom activities. Cognitive engagement includes completing tasks, using effective learning strategies, and developing good learning habits.

- Emotional engagement relates to students' affective reactions and feelings towards classroom activities. Encouraging students to be emotionally engaged in their learning is important as it influences their willingness to learn. Students may experience feelings of interest, boredom, enjoyment, sadness, anger, or anxiety.

In addition to these engagement types, Fredricks (2004) identifies several factors that can influence students' engagement in the classroom, including teacher support, classmates, classroom structure, autonomy support, and task characteristics. These factors should work together to support the improvement of students' English learning.

To effectively improve students' engagement in learning English, Davis et al. (2017) suggest various strategies, such as differentiated instruction, the flipped class strategy, project-based learning, blogging, games, gamification, simulation, animation, and role play. Vygotsky (1962) also emphasizes the importance of students' interactions with their peers and teachers in the learning process. Therefore, teachers can create a conducive learning environment that encourages discussion and collaboration among learners.

1.2 Engaging students through drama

Engaging students in speaking activities can be challenging, as many EFL teachers find that students are less confident using the target language compared to their mother tongue. Common problems include fear of face loss, lack of experience in oral English practice, lack of confidence, and unwillingness to speak. To address this, it is important to consider activities that actively engage students in using the language to communicate orally. Communicative tasks, which require active

interaction among participants, are suggested to increase students' engagement in using the target language.

Drama is one such classroom activity that has been recommended by experts (Cockett, 2000, 2002; Holden, 1982; Mok, 2012; Sirisrimangkorn & Suwanthep, 2013 as cited in Nguyen and Do, 2017) for promoting communicative engagement in speaking activities. Thornbury (2005) also highlights the advantages of using drama, such as improving English skills, fostering friendships, and creating a fun and stress-free environment. Similarly, Saraç (2007) emphasizes the positive impact of creative drama on student involvement, creating a sense of safety and relaxation. Atas (2015) reports that drama helps students overcome fear and nervousness, leading to increased participation and willingness to speak. Stern (1983) further adds that drama activities increase self-confidence and decrease feelings of embarrassment. This increased self-confidence widens students' opportunities for interaction and communication. Additionally, drama-oriented role-play activities can foster a learning community where students help each other and reinforce their knowledge of language forms (Nguyen and Do, 2017). Based on these expert perspectives, the researchers in this study utilized drama as a group project to enhance students' engagement in learning English.

1.3 Theories of Grouping

Group definition

A group is defined as two or more individuals who come together with a common interest and shared goals and objectives. According to Cranton (1996), groups can be classified as formal or informal. Formal groups are created by organizations with the intention of achieving specific objectives, while informal groups are formed spontaneously when individuals interact with each other and do not have a specific purpose.

In the context of teaching and learning, cooperative learning is often based on the formation of groups. These groups may be formed for a single class period or for an extended period of time to work on projects. Through these groups, students learn and become comfortable applying different working techniques together (Johnson et al., 2006). On the other hand, informal groups are established by individuals who choose to interact with each other. These groups usually do not have a specific purpose and are often formed based on common interests, social needs, physical proximity, and mutual attraction. Factors such as personal characteristics, opportunities for interaction, shared interests and goals, and influence and power contribute to the formation of informal groups. In this study, the focus will be on formal groups as the basis for building cooperative English language learning in the classroom.

b. How to group students

Grouping students collaboratively rather than individually is an effective way to enhance learning in the English language classroom. To form groups, it is important to clearly explain the objectives and expectations to the students. Providing specific goals and clear explanations before assigning groups helps students understand what is expected of them.

When forming groups, it is beneficial to create heterogeneous groups. Heterogeneous groups improve social competencies, self-esteem, positive relationships between students from different backgrounds, leadership skills, workplace readiness, and student achievement (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Brown, 2000; Slavin, 1994). Mixing students randomly is considered the best way to form groups, as it allows for speed and avoids the need for specific student pairings. Matching the group size to the assigned task is also important, as time constraints can affect student performance.

Once the groups are formed, teachers should instruct the members about their specific tasks. Each student should have at least one particular job within the group, and teachers can allow students to generate their own ways of breaking down the assignment, depending on its difficulty and academic levels. It is essential to evaluate the progress of the groups throughout the assignment. Conducting frequent checks ensures that students stay on task and make adequate progress towards the educational objectives. These evaluations can also identify students who may not be contributing their fair share of the work.

Assessing groups as a whole and individually is important. Grades for group work should reflect both individual performance and collaborative products. This ensures that individual accountability remains high while maintaining strong group cohesion towards reaching the final goal.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research followed the classroom action research method, as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), which involves a process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The research took place from 12 March 2021 to 24 April 2021 at a senior high school in Sleman Yogyakarta, consisting of two cycles. The first cycle included three meetings, while the second cycle involved four meetings. The participants in the research were a class of tenth-grade students, totaling 30 students, as the school only allowed the researchers to conduct the study in grade ten.

Various instruments were utilized in this research, including an observation sheet, questionnaires developed by Parn (2006), and interviews. The observation sheet was used to identify any problems that arose during the research. The researchers themselves acted as the observers during the planning stage of the first cycle. The questionnaire used in the study focused on students' engagement and was developed by Parn (2006). It consisted of five questions related to students' feelings, focus, responsibility, group participation, and task completion time. Additionally, interviews were conducted with ten participants after the completion of the entire learning process. The interview questions were open-ended.

Data analysis was conducted in three steps: familiarizing and organizing, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing. In the familiarizing and organizing stage, the researchers reread and translated the students' responses. In the coding and reducing stage, they identified units of meaning in each response to recognize patterns and similarities in the data. Finally, in the interpreting and representing stage, the researchers reflected on the students' responses and presented the important insights gained from the data in a table format

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research showed that in the first cycle, the strategy of involving big groups in a drama project did not effectively improve students' engagement in the class. The researchers observed that the students faced difficulties in working collaboratively and lacked motivation during the project. Therefore, in the reflection stage, the researchers decided to revise their approach for the second cycle.

In the second cycle, the researchers made several changes to the plan based on the feedback from the first cycle. We divided the class into smaller groups and assigned each group a specific drama story to perform. This allowed the students to focus more on the content and implementation of their assigned story, rather than spending time deciding on a story. The researchers closely guided and monitored each group throughout the implementation of the new plans.

During the observation stage of the second cycle, the researchers and the English teacher took detailed notes on the learning process and observed any improvements or challenges. The researchers then reflected on the effectiveness of the new approach compared to the previous cycle.

Overall, the second cycle showed promising results in terms of improving students' engagement. The smaller group sizes and assigned stories seemed to enhance collaboration and motivation among the students. However, further analysis and discussion are needed to fully understand the impact of these changes on students' engagement in the English class.

a. Improving students' engagement through drama approach in bigger groups

Table 1. The questionnaire result of Cycle 1

Statements	Average Score Day 1	Average Score Day 2	Average Score Day 3
Feeling	3.033	2.800	2.967
Focus	2.733	3.067	2.83
Responsibility	2.833	2.933	3.100
Group Participation	2.933	3.100	3.033
Task Accomplishment	2.867	3.167	3.100

In Cycle 1, the results of the questionnaire showed that most students were fairly engaged during the first meeting, with some fully engaged and only one student completely disengaged. In the second meeting, the number of students who were fully engaged increased, but there was also an increase in the number of slightly engaged students. In the third meeting, the number of fairly engaged students increased, but there was also an increase in the number of disengaged students. The grouping technique used in this meeting did not work well for the students.

Based on the data provided in the table, it can be observed that the students' feelings towards implementing drama decreased from the first day to the second day. This decline in enthusiasm may be attributed to the fact that the activities included on each of the three days were not exactly similar. One student candidly expressed his thoughts on the matter, stating:

"Drama is not difficult, but it's also not easy. We need to prepare a lot of things and work fast. It's enjoyable, but it's also tiring. I like to work with my friends, but I don't like it when I have done a lot of things, and some of my friends don't offer some help. However, my other friends and I enjoyed the process.[S1]"

The attempt to arrange a larger group for the drama project did not prove successful in improving the students' feelings day by day. This finding contradicts Thornbury's (2005) assertion that drama helps students have fun in the learning process. Based on the results of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that a bigger group for a drama project is less effective in enhancing the students' feelings, which consequently impacts their engagement.

In terms of the students' focus, the data showed an increase in focus from day one to day two, but a subsequent decrease from day two to day three. Some students admitted that they faced challenges during the process, expressing their concerns:

"There are a lot of things to do. I do care about my score. I listened to the teachers' suggestions, but still I was doubtful about the project. I am not sure that I will make it. I mean, even when the teacher had given some suggestions, this task was still too difficult.[S4]"

This data indicates that students encountered difficulties throughout the process. This finding is supported by Fredricks et. al (2004), who state that students' engagement is influenced by factors such as teacher support and task characteristics. In conclusion, it is evident that a larger number of students in a drama project does not always improve students' focus.

With regard to the students' responsibility, it was observed that their sense of responsibility increased day by day, albeit not significantly. On the other hand, task accomplishment showed improvement from the first to the second day, but a slight decrease from the second to the third day. One student expressed their thoughts on working with others:

"Working with other people is challenging. We have to know what to do to make sure everything is done properly. In working with others, sometimes we need to speak, sometimes we need to listen, sometimes we need to clarify, and sometimes we need to work. Because it's such a big project, I know we have a lot of things to do. I know our time is so limited. I know that the contribution of each member is very important. Therefore, I need to ensure I have contributed to this group. I don't want others later to say something bad about me.[S3]"

It can be concluded that in a bigger group project, students were aware of their responsibility to contribute to the project. As Nguen and Do (2017) stated, drama-oriented role-play activities do not appear to discourage students.

Lastly, in terms of group participation, the data reveals an increase in participation from the first to the second day, followed by a decrease from the second to the third day. The students seemed to enjoy the first day of writing the script more than the second day of writing the script in larger groups. This is evidenced by a student who stated:

"We had difficulties in discussing the story to be chosen. We had a lot of choices. We decided on the story based on several considerations. It was fun sharing stories in groups. But when we had decided on the story, only some of us were interested and wanted to do the script writing.[S9]"

This report demonstrates that drama helps students become more engaged in speaking activities. However, a larger group is not entirely effective in maximizing group participation. The example provided illustrates that students' behavioral engagement in bigger group projects is contingent on the tasks assigned.

b. Improving students' engagement through implementing drama approach in smaller groups.

Table 2. The questionnaire result of Cycle 1

Statements	Average Score Day 4	Average Score Day 5	Average Score Day 6	Average Score Day 7
Feeling	2.867	3.100	3.633	4.067
Focus	3.067	3.167	3.833	3.933
Responsibility	3.033	3.633	3.933	4.100
Group Participation	3.267	3.767	4.233	4.767
Task Accomplishment	3.167	3.933	4.767	5.00

In Cycle 2, there was improvement in the number of fully engaged students in the fourth meeting. In the fifth meeting, the number of fully engaged students increased even more, with no students being disengaged. In the sixth meeting, there was no improvement in the number of fully engaged students, but there was an increase in the number of slightly engaged students. In the last meeting, where the students had to perform their drama, the engagement increased further.

The data presented in the table demonstrates that the distribution of students' responses on each criterion has increased significantly after dividing the students into smaller groups consisting

of 10 students each. The findings indicate that students' attitudes towards drama implementation decreased from the last day of cycle 1 to the first day of cycle 2, as they felt tired from completing the teacher's tasks. One student expressed the difficulty of creating their own long narrative story scripts due to the large number of people in their group, which hindered effective discussions in script arrangement.

"It is hard for us to create our own long narrative story scripts with our own words. Because of too many people here (in one group), the discussions in arranging the scripts did not work well.[S2]"

To address this issue, the researchers provided students with shorter stories and reduced the group size. The results showed that after dividing into smaller groups, all aspects of students' feelings, focus, responsibility towards tasks, and participation during group discussions and work improved, as depicted in the data table. By the end of cycle 2, all groups had successfully completed their scripts, conducted rehearsals, and performed the drama. All in all, drama can help students become more communicatively engaged in speaking activities. Thus, forming students into smaller groups is more effective in maximizing group participation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the positive impact of drama on students' communicative engagement in speaking activities. Dividing students into smaller groups proved to be more effective in maximizing group participation, as it enhanced students' overall learning experiences. Group project activities significantly influenced students' engagement in learning English, necessitating the division of large classes into smaller groups to facilitate effective group discussions. Learning in small-group contexts offers students the opportunity to clarify their attitudes and ideas, while also providing more chances to share their thoughts and ideas. Additionally, smaller groups, guided by a mentor (teacher), create a safe environment for students to ask questions and share their opinions. Students feel comfortable seeking assistance from the mentor and expressing their ideas within a smaller group setting. Considering these benefits, assigning students to small group projects is an effective approach to improving their engagement in learning the English language in the classroom.

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