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Title	Educational drama and theatre pedagogy: An integral part of training English-as-a-Foreign-Language teachers
Authors	Mages, Wendy K.
Publication date	2020
Original Citation	Mages, W. K. (2020) 'Educational drama and theatre pedagogy: An integral part of training English-as-a-Foreign-Language teachers', Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, XIV(1), pp. 11-23. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.14.1.2
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/scenario.14.1.2
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Download date	2026-11-15 13:50:34
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10224



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

ISSN 1649-8526
DOI https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.14.1.2
Scenario
Language • Culture • Literature
Volume 2020 · Issue 1
http://scenario.ucc.ie

Educational Drama and Theatre Pedagogy: An Integral Part of Training English-as-a-Foreign-Language Teachers [1]

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1. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.14.1.2

Abstract

This mixed-methods research documents the integration of educational drama and theatre into a teacher-preparation program for Austrian teachers-in-training who plan to teach English-as-a-foreign-language to Austrian school children. Observations were conducted of the plays developed and performed in English by two cohorts of Austrian teachers-in-training who participated in the teacher-preparation program. Observations were also conducted of the second cohort's process developing a script based on an English young adult novel, as well as their process of producing and performing the play in English for middle-school and adult audiences. In addition, a survey of participants' perceptions of the program was conducted. This study investigates how the teachers-in-training responded to the process of creating and performing a play in English, and their perceptions of its benefits and challenges for themselves, as well as for their future students.

1 Introduction

This study investigates the use of educational drama and theatre in an Austrian teacher-preparation program for teachers-in-training who plan to teach English to German-speaking Austrian school children.[2] This research focuses on the capstone project of an innovative two-semester, teacher-education curriculum that integrates training in educational drama and theatre into teacher-preparation coursework (Mewald, Wallner & Weitz-Polydoros 2016). The curriculum combines the study of English-language literature, specifically the study and analysis of young-adult novels, with the affordances of educational

[2] This study was conducted as part of a Fulbright Specialist Grant and, in accordance with the requirements for research with human subjects, permission to conduct this study was granted by the Mercy College Institutional Review Board.

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drama and theatre to foster fluency and proficiency in English, as well as enhance the abilities of the teachers-in-training to use drama and theatre pedagogy to create dynamic English-language instruction for their Austrian pupils. As part of this program, the teachers-in-training adapt an English-language, young adult novel into a play. The program culminates with the teachers-in-training presenting a theatrical performance of the script they developed for adolescent and adult audiences. The capstone project of this curriculum, designed to foster English-language proficiency and communicative competence in the teachers-in-training, while better preparing the teachers-in-training to incorporate drama pedagogy into their English-language classroom praxis, provides the context for this study.

This study builds on and extends research on contexts and strategies that foster language and teacher professional development. Research studies focusing on educational drama and teacher training have investigated a diversity of outcomes and employed a variety of methods and theoretical perspectives (Athiemoolam 2013; DeCoursey & Trent 2016; Garcia 1996, 2000; Mages 2007, 2012; McCammon, Miller & Norris 1997; Schewe 1998; Stanton, Cawthon & Dawson 2018; Waldschmidt 1998). For example, Garcia (1996) found that elementary school teachers often use drama in their praxis and put on plays with limited resources. Mages (2012) found providing teachers with training in educational drama and theatre techniques and strategies can have a positive impact on the teachers' pedagogy and praxis. Significantly, Schewe (2002: 73) noted, "Language pedagogy can benefit considerably from practice in drama in education, theater in education, and professional theater." Similarly, Waldschmidt (1998: 97) explained, "Bilingual and drama education involve the purposeful use, enrichment, or acquisition of spoken languages in meaningful contexts through improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered work," and found bilingual teachers-in-training who "experimented with drama in their second language classrooms" experienced personal transformations (ibid. 107). Notably, Athiemoolam (2013: 35) found "that the implementation of drama-in-education in teacher training programmes could serve a dual purpose in that it could enhance the oral communication skills of pre-service teachers, as well as motivate them to implement interactive approaches in their classes instead of merely adopting the teacher-centred approach." Drama has also been used in foreign language instruction to nurture a more profound appreciation for the subtleties and import of the role of culture in communication (Fleming 1998; Schewe 1998). If, as the research literature suggests (Podlozny 2000; Lee et al. 2015; Wagner 1988; Conard 1992; Kardash & Wright 1987; Mages 2008), drama and theatre can improve language development, then curricula that draw on the power of drama and theatre pedagogies may be ideal when implemented with teachers-in-training who aspire to teach English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) in contexts where English is not the lingua franca or the language of instruction.

In addition to fostering language acquisition, educational drama has been shown to be a beneficial context for fostering teacher psychosocial development

(Mages 2007). Psychosocial competencies include one's ability to take the perspective of others, develop friendships, maintain trusting interpersonal relationships, and resolve conflicts (Aðalbjarnardóttir & Selman 1997). Teachers with higher levels of psychosocial development are better able to nurture the psychosocial development of their students. Thus, training teachers in the use of drama and theatre strategies and techniques has the potential to provide multifaceted benefits for the teachers-in-training and their future students.

2 Method

This international, interdisciplinary, investigation of educational drama and theatre in an innovative teacher preparation program used an experiential participant-observer approach. An international collaboration, developed as part of a Fulbright Specialist Grant[3], provided an opportunity for an American researcher, with expertise in educational drama and theatre, to participate and observe the development of the capstone project of an innovate teacher education paradigm designed by Austrian colleagues. This paradigm capitalized on the disciplinary affordances of educational drama and theatre, teacher preparation and pedagogical training, English as a foreign language instruction, and literary analysis, to create a dynamic educational opportunity for teachers-in-training. All teachers-in-training who participated in the program were eligible to participate in this research study and were invited to do so.

This study was conducted in two phases: each phase of this research involved a separate cohort of teachers-in-training. As part of Phase 1 of this study, the American researcher, funded by a Mercy College Faculty Development Grant, attended International Week, a conference hosted by Austrian colleagues. This conference not only provided opportunities for the American and Austrian partners to meet in person and plan for their formal collaboration, which would take place the following academic year, but fostered key insights about the context and content of the innovative teacher-in-training paradigm and served as a foundation for the Fulbright sponsored partnership.

Phase 1 began with an observation of a play, based on the book *Wonder* (Palacio 2014), that was adapted, produced, and performed by Austrian teachers-in-training who were preparing to be English-language teachers in Austrian schools. Observations were conducted during a live performance and additional analyses were conducted using videos of the performances. Phase 2 took place the following academic year and focused on a second cohort of teachers-in-training. This second phase of the research began with analyses of multiple drafts of a theatrical script, based on the young adult novel, *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo 2002), that the second cohort of teachers-in-training had

[3] The Fulbright Specialist Program "pairs highly qualified U.S. academics and professionals with host institutions abroad to share their expertise, strengthen institutional linkages, hone their skills, gain international experience, and learn about other cultures while building capacity at their overseas host institutions" (Fulbright Specialist Program, n.d.).

adapted for performance. Holistic analyses of the script revealed the increasing proficiency of teachers-in-training to identify, depict, and hone key scenes from the English-language book to produce a play in English that faithfully reflected the content of the novel, while using the tools of theatre, such as scripting natural-sounding oral language, performance techniques, staging, sound effects, set design, and music, to create a fully-realized production. These analyses also noted the iterative process of playwriting, rehearsal, and script refinement used by the teachers-in-training. These analyses were conducted in conjunction with observations of both the rehearsal process and the three performances of the play performed by two different casts of teachers-in-training.

Multiple sources of documentation of the script development, the rehearsal process, and the performances were used as evidence for this study. These modes of documentation included video recordings, photographs, observations, and field notes, as well as hard-copy and electronic documents. In addition, in Phase 2 the teachers-in-training were invited to participate in an electronic survey designed to garner their perspectives on the efficacy, benefits, and challenges of integrating drama and theatre into teacher-preparation programming for teachers-in-training planning to teach English as a foreign language. The survey, which was administered in English, was created, administered, and managed in REDCap, a secure, Web-based, software platform for developing, administering, and managing electronic data collection instruments (Harris et al. 2009; Harris et al. 2019). Using an electronic survey instrument afforded respondents the opportunity to take the survey on the type of device they found most convenient; respondents could take the survey on a computer, a tablet, or a smartphone. The survey questions for this study combined survey questions designed specifically for this research project with questions influenced by Stern (1983). In an effort to encourage teachers-in-training to provide honest and full responses to the survey questions, all survey responses were anonymous.

3 Research Questions

- Were the teachers-in-training able to script, produce, and perform a play in English that reflected the essence of the novel on which the play was based, while providing a meaningful theatrical experience that capitalized on the medium of live theatrical performance and on the tools, techniques, and strategies of the theatre?

- Which drama and theatre techniques and strategies did the teachers-in-training integrate into the script and into the performance of the play?

- What were the perceptions of the Austrian teachers-in-training about the efficacy, benefits, and challenges of using drama and theatre in a teacher-training program?

4 Findings

The teachers-in-training in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 created an hour-long performance. This limited timeframe required the teachers-in-training to judiciously select key scenes that would retain the integrity of the story and maintain its narrative arc, while allowing the audience to experience the story's emotional impact. Thus, each scene had to be carefully crafted and succinctly written using contextually-appropriate English. The scripts incorporated monologues and dialogs, as well as stage directions, in English. The shows, which were double cast, included a variety of drama and theatre techniques including mask work, stage combat, pantomime, choreography, and a Greek chorus (see Table 1).

Table 1: Most Prominent Drama and Theatre Techniques, Strategies, and Skills the Teachers-in-Training Demonstrated in Performances of the Plays

Scripted in English
• Use of a Narrator
• Monologues
• Dialogues
• Stage Directions
Development of Multiple Characters
Mask Work
Physical Theatre Techniques and Staging
• Stage Combat
• Pantomime
• Choreography
• Split Stage
• Freezes
Created All Sets and Props
Designed Costuming
Used Sound Design
• Sound Effects
• Used Music
  • Recorded Music
  • Instrumental
  • English-Language Vocal Music
  • Live Music
  • Singing in English
  • Live Instrumental Music
	Use of "Freeze" and "Split" Strategies
	Created Multiple Sets with Multimedia Projections
	• Photographs of Interior and Exterior Settings
	• *Wonder* (Palacio, 2014)
	  • Home
	  • School
	  • Cafeteria
	  • Hallways
	  • Doctor's Office
	  • Camping Trip in the Woods
	  • Etc.
	• *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo, 2002)
	  • Nigerian Garden
	  • British Immigration
	  • Video Store
	  • BBC Broadcasting
	  • Home
	  • School
	  • Etc.

The teachers-in-training created multiple sets through the effective use of multimedia projections and the judicious use of props and set pieces. They collected appropriate wardrobe items to serve as costumes. The teachers-in-training also integrated a variety of sound effects and incorporated both live and recorded music. In addition to including projections that suggested the environment of the scenes (e.g., a home, a school, a forest, a BBC television studio, etc.), these projections included a variety of forms of English language text, including email messages (which appeared to be typed onto the screen during the performance), Facebook messages, handwritten Post-It Notes, and "thought bubbles."

The scripts were well-constructed and used well-chosen, thoughtful selections of scenes and dialog that created a dynamic and emotionally engaging performance for the audience, while demonstrating the English-language competence of the teachers-in-training. Each of the plays, and the books on which they were based, deal with important and topical subjects; *Wonder* (Palacio 2014) focuses on physical differences and discrimination and *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo 2002) focuses on refugees and immigration. The scripts and productions created by the teachers-in-training were sensitive and evocative. The attention the middle school (known in Austria as lower secondary school) and adult audiences gave to the performances, as well as the audience members' post-show comments about the show and about their emotional reactions to the show, indicated that the plays were intellectually and emotionally engaging. Perhaps due, in part, to the political salience of refugee issues at the time of the production of *The Other Side of Truth*, some of the adult members were visibly emotional at the conclusion of the play. For example, during the question and answer period directly following the performance, one of the adult audience members wiped away tears as she commented on her personal response to the play and to its focus on refugees and immigration. Moreover, the performance of these English-language plays clearly and succinctly communicated important ideas and events to the audiences, even though some of the audience members, particularly the middle school students, were still studying English and developing their English-language proficiency. Thus, the productions provided ample evidence that the teachers-in-training could take advantage of the linguistic and non-linguistic elements of theatre to effectively script, produce, and perform a play in English.

The teachers-in-training demonstrated their ability to use English effectively to communicate the themes, characters, and plot of the novels *Wonder* (Palacio 2014) and *The Other Side of Truth* (Naidoo 2002) both in the scripts they had adapted and through their production and performance of the plays. The teachers-in-training were able to successfully integrate a wide variety of drama and theatre techniques and strategies into their scripts and productions. Moreover, the scripts the teachers-in-training created focused on themes appropriate for performances by school-aged Austrian English-language learners and employed language that these learners could understand and use. Thus, the teachers-in-training could use or adapt the scripts they created for use in their own teaching praxis.

The creation, production, and performance of these plays, in which English was the medium of communication, elicited the active engagement and participation of the teachers-in-training. This level of engagement may be similar to that found in a study on drama-in-education to enhance the oral communication skills of pre-service teachers (Athiemoolam 2013). In that study, Athiemoolam (2013: 34) found, "The fact that the students are able to identify and empathise with the characters within their drama presentations leads to more authentic and engaging learning experiences that encourage active student participation."

In addition to observing the engagement of the second cohort of the teachers-in-training and what they were able to do and accomplish, this study sought to ascertain the perspectives of the teachers-in-training and allow them to voice their responses to the paradigm. Thus, the teachers-in-training were invited to participate in a survey on the efficacy, benefits, and challenges of integrating drama and theatre into teacher-preparation programming for teachers-in-training who aspire to teach English as a foreign language. Twenty-five percent of the forty Cohort 2 teachers-in-training participated in the electronic survey, which contained both questions where participants could click their response on a Likert-style scale, as well as questions that provided opportunities for qualitative or narrative responses. The survey responses indicate that many of the teachers-in-training had little or no previous experience with drama. For example, when asked if they had ever taken a drama or theatre class in primary or secondary school, only one respondent had taken a drama or theatre class in elementary school and not a single respondent had taken a drama or theatre class in secondary school. Similarly, when asked whether they had participated in a class where a teacher had used drama or theatre to support instruction, all but one teacher-in-training responded, "No."

As indicated in Figure 1, the drama-infused teacher-training program helped the teachers-in-training become more comfortable with the use of drama and theatre in educational contexts.

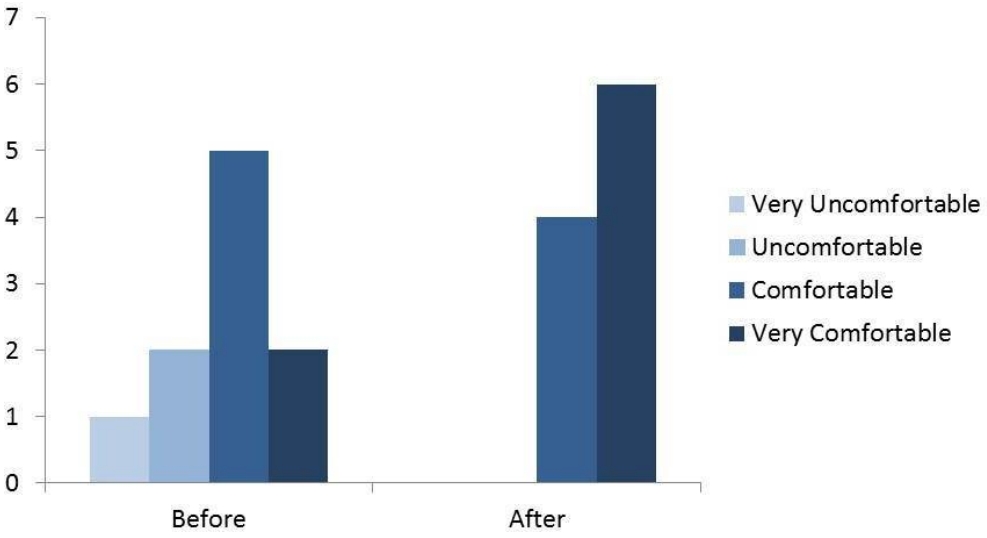


Figure 1: Level of comfort with drama and theatre (survey data collected from Cohort 2)

Through the drama-integrated curriculum (see Mewald, Wallner & Weitz-Polydoros 2016), teachers-in-training had the opportunity to try a variety of drama and theatre techniques and strategies and found many to be useful (see Table 2).

In addition, most of the teachers-in-training felt that participating in

Table 2: Perceived language improvement: "Participating in the program helped me. . . " (survey data collected from Cohort 2)

90%	Writing the Play (n=10)
100%	Rehearsing the Play (n=10)
78%	Improvisation (n=8)
80%	Character Work (n=10)
80%	Vocal Work (e.g., Pronunciation, Loudness, Tempo) (n=10)
60%	Mask Work (n=5)
80%	Pantomime (n=5)
100%	Stage Combat (n=3)
100%	Dance or Choreography (n=2)
50%	Split Stage (n=6)
90%	Freezes (n=10)
78%	Tableau (n=9)
88%	Creating Sound Effects (n=8)
78%	Integrating Music into Drama (n=9)
78%	Integrating Multimedia into Drama (e.g., Video, Photography, etc.) (n=9)
70%	Designing or Creating Sets, Scenery, Props, or Costumes (n=10)

educational drama and theatre helped them improve their language skills (see Figure 2).

The only teacher-in-training who participated in the survey but did not report any improvement in English language skills wrote, "This drama course didn´t improve my English or my drama skills as I already felt comfortable both in English and in drama. . . .On the other hand it was clear from the beginning that many of my colleagues had a great benefit out of it. In cases like this, what is good for the majority of the people should be chosen."

A number of the teachers-in-training shared their perceptions of how the drama and theatre program affected language development. One teacher-in-training wrote, "It makes the pupils learn correct sentences by heart, which improves grammar and vocabulary skills, but also talking in front of groups and showing emotions." Another commented that it was beneficial "because it improves all important skills you need to become a good English teacher (e.g., fluency, confidence, vocabulary, etc.)." Similarly, another response noted, "I loved drama because it improved all important skills in a short amount of time."

One teacher-in-training wrote, "Drama techniques make learners more confident using the target language and helps social class development." Thus, in addition to commenting on the way drama and theatre influence language development, some of the teachers-in-training commented on the positive impact that drama and theatre can have on social cohesion and "team building." This perspective can also be seen in the following response, "It shows the positive effect of such a project on group dynamics," as well as a response indicating that drama and theatre can benefit "teambuilding, increase vocabulary, fluency, [and] self-confidence."

The teachers-in-training also noted some of the challenges of developing a

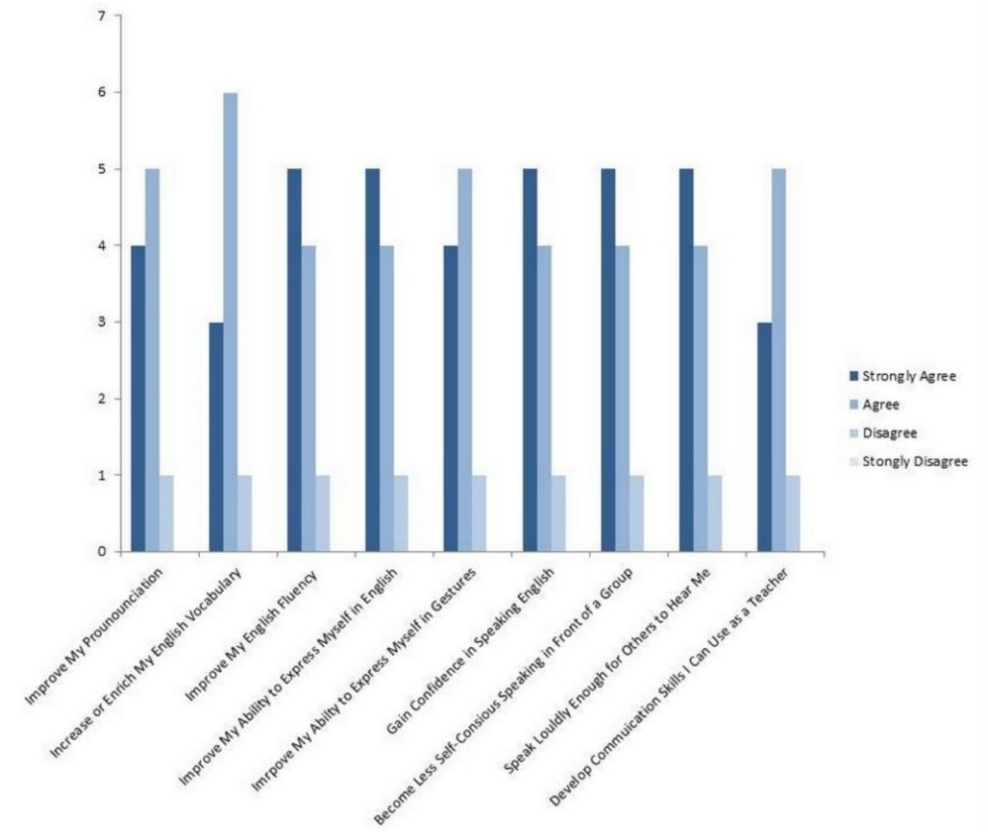


Figure 2: Is integrating drama and theatre beneficial? (survey data collected from Cohort 2)

script and producing and performing a play: "Now we know how much work it is to create a play." Hence, some of the teachers-in-training indicated that they would be more likely to include "shorter role plays" or "shorter projects." Another response focused on the role of participants in producing a play, "I suppose most pupils prefer acting to regular lessons. The only difficulty is, to make as many pupils as possible participate in the LANGUAGE parts of the drama, so they really improve their English, not only their skills to invent costumes or handle spot lights or sound effects or whatever. Doing the play helped our 'class' to grow together and to become [unified]."

5 Conclusion

The Austrian Drama Integrated Teacher-Education Curriculum (Mewald 2015: 7), designed specifically for teachers-in-training who planned to teach English in Austrian schools, combined content and language integrated learning (CLIL) with project work to "encourage authentic student engagement with language." It is important to note that the teachers-in-training not only used English

within the plays, but also used English as they negotiated the staging and stagecraft of the plays. In accordance with Bruner's (1990: 70) assertion that "being 'exposed' to a flow of language is not nearly so important as using it in the midst of doing," the integration of educational drama and theatre into the teacher-preparation program afforded the teachers-in-training a variety of authentic opportunities to use the English language "in the midst of doing" a theatrical performance of a script they had developed. Thus, this innovative curriculum enabled the teachers-in-training to meet the program learning outcomes and hone their literary analysis skills, while developing a script based on a young adult novel, designing the set, props, and costumes for the production of the play, and staging and performing the play for middle school and adult audiences. This work not only fostered the language and literacy skills of the teachers-in-training – in the present study, for example, they reported improvement in language fluency, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as in their confidence in speaking English – but many of the materials they created could be used as teaching materials in their future classrooms (Mewald 2015).

This research indicates that integrating drama and theatre into the training of future teachers who are planning to teach English-as-a-foreign-language can afford the teachers-in-training a variety of opportunities to practice and improve their English language competence. The work the teachers-in-training did in drama and theatre also seemed to enhance their sense of community and social cohesion with their fellow teachers-in-training. Moreover, the introduction of drama and theatre pedagogy into the curriculum provided the teachers-in-training with a new set of teaching strategies and techniques that they could readily incorporate into their teaching praxis. In addition, the scripts the teachers-in-training developed could be utilized or adapted for performances by their school-aged Austrian English-language pupils. If, as some of the teachers-in-training indicated, they would be more likely to include "shorter role plays" or "shorter projects," scenes from the plays could be readily adapted for use in their EFL classrooms. The teachers-in-training also acquired the skills necessary to adapt other works for performance, or even to guide their future students through the process of developing a script based on a compelling piece of literature.

Although this is a small-scale case study, and only 25% of the teachers-in-training who were invited to participate in the survey elected to respond to the survey, it is important to note that the majority of those who responded to the survey felt that participating in drama and theatre enhanced their English language skills, created social cohesion, taught them new and useful teaching strategies and techniques, and that the skills they learned would be beneficial in their work teaching school-aged Austrian English-language learners. In sum, this study describes the overwhelmingly positive responses that teachers-in-training reported after participating in a teacher-preparation program that incorporated drama and theatre pedagogy, and suggests the impact of drama and theatre pedagogy in training English-as-a-foreign-language teachers warrants further investigation and research.

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