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THE EFFECT OF DIGITAL DRAMA ON EFL STUDENTS' SKILLS IN THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

Intercultural communication is concerned with the sharing of information between different cultures and social groups, including individuals with religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Cultural factors have a great impact on how people conduct diplomatic, economic, and educational activities in the era of international integration. The application of innovative methods in teaching Intercultural communication courses at universities is extremely necessary in order to break down cultural barriers and build awareness of cultural norms, as well as to enhance selfawareness, language skills and communication skills in a multicultural environment. At the same time, it helps learners to explore, preserve and promote the national cultural identity. The theatrical (drama) technique has been recognized as one of the powerful means of education and propaganda. One of the proposed methods is integrating drama in the context of digital transformation. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of applying theatrical integration and online teaching tools via Zoom in teaching the Intercultural module to create a borderless cultural class. The quantitative method was conducted through experimental convention and questionnaires with the participation of students majoring in English at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Specific steps have been taken to improve intercultural communication skills and intercultural interaction will enhance the ability to communicate and promote personal image as well as showcase national culture. The research has shown that using the digital drama model in the classroom as a teaching method not only helps learners academically but also provides knowledge about socio-cultural development.

Keywords: digital drama, intercultural communication, language skills, digital transformation

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1. Introduction

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of information, ideas, and meanings between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It plays a crucial role in fostering understanding, collaboration, and effective communication in an increasingly globalized world. In essence, intercultural communication involves effectively and appropriately interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. It includes possessing the necessary communication abilities, knowledge, skills, and attitudes to engage in successful cross-cultural interactions (Byram, 1997). Incorporating intercultural communication in English teaching and learning helps learners become more proficient language users, effective communicators, and culturally sensitive individuals. It prepares them to navigate diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes, fostering mutual understanding and promoting global citizenship in the development of intercultural communication in the context of digitalization (Oleksandrivna & Gustavivna, 2023; Shorova *et al.*, 2024).

The study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of using integrated digital drama to teach the Intercultural module, and to find out how this method helps both lecturers and students for the purpose of learning and exploring culture. In addition, through the opinions of English majors, the study analysed the effects of using digital drama on the development of language skills and communication skills of learners. The study also provides recommendations to support innovative approaches more effectively to cultural teaching in English. As for the role of digital drama on students' skills in terms of developing students' language skills and their intercultural communication, this study aims to answer two following research questions focusing on students' language skills development and intercultural communication skills development:

- Research question 1: What is EFL students' perception of the effect of using digital drama on their language skills development in the cultural class?
- **Research question 2:** What is EFL students' perception of the effect of using digital drama on their intercultural communication skills development?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Communication

English is a global language with multiple variations influenced by different cultures and regions. Intercultural communication helps learners understand and appreciate these variations, including dialects, accents, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references. It enables them to communicate effectively with English speakers from different countries and regions, fostering mutual understanding and reducing communication barriers (Gün & Yavuz, 2023).

Intercultural communication has gained significant significance in contemporary society due to its increasing relevance in understanding the diversity of global cultural expressions (Ilie, 2019). Having a better understanding of other cultures and developing

international communication skills can facilitate easier, more open, and tolerant intercultural interactions. By embracing intercultural communication, individuals can bridge cultural gaps, foster mutual understanding, and navigate the complexities of a diverse world. It allows for meaningful connections, promotes cultural appreciation, and contributes to a more inclusive and harmonious global community. However, it raises challenges concerning how we understand the relationship between languages and cultures in intercultural communication (Baker, 2011).

Effective and appropriate intercultural communication necessitates the integration of both intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity. It refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to communicate effectively across cultures, including understanding cultural differences, adapting communication styles, and demonstrating cultural empathy. On the other hand, intercultural sensitivity refers to the mindset and attitudes that enable individuals to appreciate and respect diverse cultures, challenge their own cultural biases, and approach intercultural interactions with openness and curiosity (Gün & Yavuz, 2023).

In general, intercultural communication has gained significance in contemporary society due to its increasing relevance in understanding the diversity of global cultural expressions. Consequently, almost all universities included it as one of the compulsory subjects in the curriculum.

2.2 Digital Drama Technique in Intercultural Communication Learning

Intercultural communication is evolving rapidly in today's globalized world, undergoing significant transformation due to the widespread use of information and digital technologies (Shorova *et al.*, 2024). In today's interconnected world, intercultural communication has become increasingly important due to globalization and advancements in information technology. These factors have facilitated greater crosscultural interactions, both in physical and virtual spaces. As a result, individuals are now more likely to encounter people from diverse cultural backgrounds in various personal, professional, and digital contexts. The information technology sector has played a significant role in facilitating these intercultural interactions. The widespread use of digital platforms, social media, and communication technologies has made it easier for individuals from different cultures to connect, collaborate, and exchange information (Ilie, 2019). This has created new opportunities and challenges for intercultural communication (Kaldarova, 2024).

Among teaching techniques for fostering intercultural communication, the roleplay technique is a commonly used method in the classroom. According to Brown (2001), drama involves individuals or groups representing specific roles or characters with the goal of achieving a predetermined outcome. It provides an opportunity for students to engage in interactive speaking practice and temporary communication with others. Drama allows students to immerse themselves in imagined situations and encourages creativity in a safe learning environment. For many scholars, drama in education involves encouraging students to engage in performance-based activities where they either create

an original plot or act out a previously read story in an improvisational manner (Thao, Yen, Khang, Khoi, & Quyen, 2022). Their study revealed that teachers and students perceived the technique as positively affecting EFL students' learning. Furthermore, in addition to giving students the opportunity to work on their favourite scripts in the project, teachers are also expected to be good resources for learning materials (Eripuddin *et al.*, 2023). This approach emphasizes the use of students' own knowledge and discourages reliance on translation or memorization. By incorporating drama into the learning process, students can benefit not only in terms of language acquisition but also in fostering their creativity. While drama is often associated with professional performances on stage or screen, it is also utilized as an educational tool. In educational settings, students assume the roles typically played by actors, and the experience of actively participating in a drama is believed to positively impact students' motivation and academic performance, according to educators.

However, there are some challenges associated with the application of role-play. It requires active participation from students as they take on specific roles, which can be daunting for some individuals (Ilie, 2019). Despite this, drama remains an important means for students to practice and enhance their communication skills. It provides a platform for students to communicate and interact with one another in a simulated context. By engaging in a drama, students can develop their communication skills, boost their confidence, and gain a deeper understanding of different perspectives and situations. It offers an interactive and dynamic approach to language learning, enabling students to apply their language skills in practical and meaningful ways.

In conclusion, the development of a complete drama with a digital platform is an innovative approach that combines traditional techniques with digital technology to create an immersive and interactive learning experience. In this method, students engage in a scripted or improvised dramatic performance using digital platforms such as video conferencing, virtual reality, or online collaboration tools, which opens a great chance for both students and lecturers to explore and evaluate intercultural situations.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Empirical Quantitative Method

The study was carried out by empirical quantitative method through the stages:

• Stage 1: Students surveyed the effectiveness of the drama in the cultural classroom before applying this method. involves conducting a survey to assess the effectiveness of using drama as a teaching method in a cultural classroom setting. This approach aims to understand how students perceive and benefit from the use of dramatic techniques to enhance their cultural learning experience. Quantitative questions may focus on measuring the perceived impact of drama on various aspects of cultural learning, such as knowledge acquisition, engagement, and retention. Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much they believe drama activities helped them understand and appreciate different cultures.

- Stage 2: The lecturer introduced the dramatical method to students through instructional video clips. By observing multimedia resources, students were provided with a comprehensive and engaging learning experience that highlights the key principles and techniques of using drama in the classroom. Thereby, they may highlight specific cultural knowledge or intercultural skills. After each video clip, the lecturer encouraged students to reflect on what they observed and analyze the impact of the dramatical method on cultural learning. This could involve posing deep-insight questions or facilitating discussions to deepen students' understanding of the instructional techniques and their potential benefits, which helps them to create their own scripts through building the characters and plots of the stories, etc.
- **Stage 3:** The lecturer guided students to utilize various tools with different support functions available in the Zoom platform specifically for the purpose of role-playing. Students were asked to research how to immerse themselves in their roles, maintain engagement, and effectively interact with other participants. Some of the tools that can be utilized to enhance the role-playing experience include:
 - o Breakout Rooms: The breakout rooms feature in Zoom allow the lecturer to divide students into smaller groups for role-playing exercises. Each group can be assigned a specific scenario or role to play out. The lecturer can provide instructions, prompts, or scripts to guide the role-playing activity. Students can engage in dialogue, enact scenarios, and interact with each other within their respective breakout rooms.
 - Video and Audio Settings: Zoom provides options for adjusting video and audio settings, which can be leveraged to enhance the role-playing experience. Students can use their webcams to visually represent their characters, gestures, and expressions during the role-play. They can also use the audio settings to ensure clear communication and effective portrayal of their roles.
 - O Chat and Emojis: The chat feature in Zoom can be utilized during role-playing to enable students to communicate in-character or share additional information relevant to their roles. Students can use chat to exchange messages, responses, or cues to enhance the immersive experience. Additionally, Zoom's emoji reactions can be used to express emotions or reactions within the role-play.
 - Screen Sharing: Screen sharing can be employed to display relevant visuals, such as images, slides, or documents, to support the role-playing activity. The lecturer or students can share relevant visual aids to provide context, reference materials, or props that enhance the role-playing experience.
 - Recording: Zoom's recording functionality allows the participants to capture the role-playing sessions. This can serve as a valuable resource for reviewing the roleplays, providing feedback, or for later analysis and reflection. The recordings can be shared with students for self-assessment or used as a reference for future discussions.

- **Stage 4:** Students were provided worksheets with cultural-themed topics to help them select which one they want to practice role-play. Besides, the worksheets incorporated elements that encouraged students to make cross-cultural comparisons.
- Stage 5: Students worked in groups and chose the culture they wanted to discover and conduct scenario research according to the lesson topic and context of that country; show comparison and contrast with Vietnamese culture. Students were asked to compare cultural practices, traditions, or values between different cultures. This fostered a deeper understanding of cultural diversity, promotes empathy, and helps students recognize the similarities and differences across cultures.
- **Stage 6:** The lecture supported students in the process of scenario-building and roleplaying practice through observing the role-plays, providing guidance, and offering constructive feedback to enhance students' performance and learning outcomes.
- Stage 7: Students performed their skits in front of the class via Zoom.
- **Stage 8:** Students engage in evaluating the effectiveness of the process of applying digital drama.

3.2 Participants

The study employed a convenience sampling method (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) to recruit the participants who were final-year English majors at a public university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, hereafter referred to as Mekong University (pseudonym). The total number of participants was 77 English as a foreign language (EFL) juniors from the Department of English Linguistics, Translation and Interpretation, the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Mekong University. They participated in the Intercultural Communication class in the first semester of the 4th year of university, the learning process takes place both in the classrooms and online through the teaching software - Zoom. Details about the participants are described in the following figures.

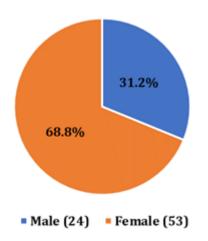


Figure 1: The participants according to gender

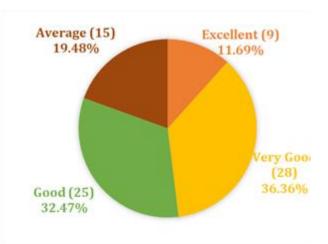


Figure 2: The participants according to their academic levels

3.3 Research Instruments

This research used two questionnaires to collect data before and after applying the digital platform into dramatical practice. The participants were asked to show their answers on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was delivered in Vietnamese to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding of the content. The questionnaire consisted of three parts developed based on key aspects related to students' information and how they perceived the effect of digital drama on their language and intercultural skills development. The first part asked about the participants' personal information including gender, age and educational background. The second part focused on participants' perceptions of their confidence in language skills development when using digital drama. The third part concentrated on participants' perceptions of their confidence in intercultural communication skills.

The data from the questionnaire responses were subjected to the Statistics Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for data analysis. Before beginning with the analyses, the scale test was run to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The results of the scale test showed that the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire satisfied the statistical reliability (α = .962). Therefore, the questionnaire was reliable for data analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Effect of Using Digital Drama on Language Skills Development

First of all, the descriptive statistics test was run to find out the average level of participants' improvement in their language skills.

In general, the participants showed a high degree of confidence in improving most aspects of their language skills. The results show that the score in the post-test is superior to the pre-test. It supported the conclusion that students have a positive improvement in their language skills development after applying digital dramatical techniques. The results from Figure 3 show that EFL students felt more confident in pronunciation (M=4.0 on pre-test and M=4.5 in post-test) than in other aspects in language skills such as English speaking skills (M=3.9 on the pre-test and M=4.3 in post-test), English listening skill (M=3.7 in pre-test and M=4.1 in post-test), English reading skill (M=3.6 in pre-test and M=4.0 in post-test), English writing skill (M=3.3 in pre-test and M=3.7 in post-test) and knowledge of English grammar (M=3.5 in pre-test and M=4.0 in post-test). It means that EFL students had more improvement in expressing their pronunciation when they role-play than the others. Besides, the results displayed the improvement in English writing skills had the smallest mean score among the aspects of language skills and knowledge.

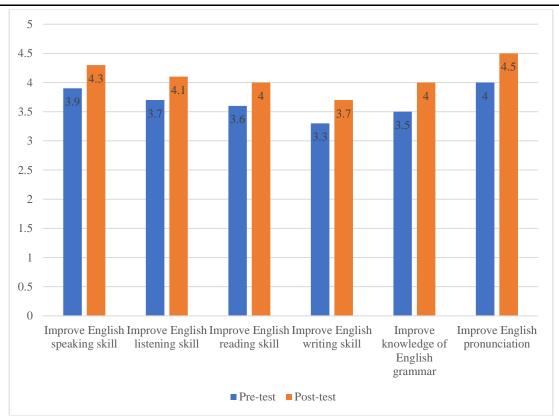


Figure 3: Language Skills Development

In general, the participants showed a high degree of confidence in improving most aspects of their language skills. The results show that the score in the post-test is superior to the pre-test. It supported the conclusion that students have a positive improvement in their language skills development after applying digital dramatical techniques. The results from Figure 3 show that EFL students felt more confident in pronunciation (M=4.0 in the pre-test and M=4.5 in the post-test) than in other aspects of language skills such as English speaking skills (M=3.9 in the pre-test and M=4.3 in post-test), English listening skill (M=3.7 in pre-test and M=4.1 in post-test), English reading skill (M=3.6 in pre-test and M=4.0 in post-test), English writing skill (M=3.5 in pre-test and M=4.0 in post-test). It means that EFL students had more improvement in expressing their pronunciation when they role-play than the others. Besides, the results displayed the improvement in English writing skills had the smallest mean score among the aspects of language skills and knowledge.

The results from the open-ended question section were quite interesting when students added that they found it quite challenging to compose a play script because they had to research many cultural documents on the same topic in the country they represent to re-enact as well as imitate gestures and speaking style. The plot in the script was also quite difficult as they had to translate it into English but still retain the soul of the native dialogue style, especially in Asian countries. This was also the reason why students felt that the level of improvement in writing skills was not high even though the results

showed positive effects before and after applying the digital drama technique. Additionally, students also said they felt excited when researching and practicing English pronunciation according to the intonation and tone of the characters who they built to ensure cultural elements were conveyed. This drama helped them feel quite excited about learning phonetics because it might bring them entertainment and comfort.

4.2 The effect of using digital drama on intercultural communication skills development

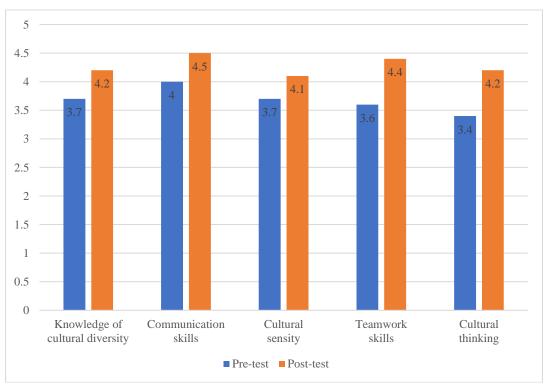


Figure 4: Intercultural communication skills development

Overall, the participants showed a high degree of improvement in their intercultural communication skills development. The results also show that the score in the post-test is superior to the pre-test. It supported the conclusion that students have a positive improvement in their intercultural communication skills after utilizing digital drama techniques. The results from Figure 4 show that EFL students felt more confident in communication (M = 4.0 in the pre-test and M = 4.5 in the post-test) than the others such as knowledge of cultural diversity (M = 3.7 in pre-test and M = 4.2 in post-test), cultural sensity (M = 3.7 in pre-test and M = 4.1 in post-test), Teamwork (M = 3.6 in pre-test and M = 4.4 in post-test), and cultural thinking (M = 3.4 in pre-test and M = 4.2 in post-test). It means that EFL students had more improvement in communication skills when they role-play than the others.

The results from the open-ended questions show that students are very excited about discovering cultural knowledge when performing drama. The process of character research and cultural adaptations in the script makes them feel more alive about the

subject. Students also noted that they could enrich their multi-dimensional thinking, cultural awareness, appreciation, and the ability to compare and contrast different cultures as the role of both viewers and actors. In addition to cultural skills, they also said they had improved information technology skills. However, they found it quite difficult to access technology in converting backgrounds to suit the context, interacting with objects, as well as operations on Zoom. Some students thought that when working in groups they had to take turns or assign members to control the slides, but when changing the background, they had to do it themselves, leading to forgetting the lines or being unnatural.

4.3 Discussion

Overall, the research aligns with existing literature and offers insights into potential solutions for learners. It was considered to offer a positive impact on EFL students' learning as the original drama technique has been approved in previous studies (Kaldarova, 2024; Thao, Yen, Khang, Khoi, & Quyen, 2022; Ilie, 2019; Brown, 2001). The researchers noted that educational drama has been proven to have numerous positive effects in foreign language classrooms. For many scholars, drama in education involves encouraging students to engage in performance-based activities where they either create an original plot or act out a previously read story in an improvisational manner. This approach emphasizes the use of students' own knowledge and skills in learning a language. By incorporating drama into the learning process, students can benefit not only in terms of language acquisition but also in fostering their creativity. While drama is often associated with professional performances on stage or screen, it is also utilized as an educational tool. In educational settings, students assume the roles typically played by actors, and the experience of actively participating in a drama is believed to positively impact students' motivation and academic performance, according to educators.

Although most of the benefits of the digital drama technique listed in this current study were perceived in terms of language skills. The study revealed that. Learners' understanding of other cultures and developing international communication skills can facilitate easier, more open, and tolerant intercultural interactions. The intercultural learning resources, as a result, have practical effectiveness. The inference above made by the authors is supported by Eripuddin *et al.*, (2023). It implied that they must demonstrate appropriate content, organizational skills, linguistic proficiency, and the ability to apply language in different circumstances.

5. Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are drawn to help both English lecturers and students in researching and learning cultural courses.

Firstly, the lecturers can pursue professional development opportunities specifically focused on digital drama instruction. They can attend workshops, conferences, or webinars that provide training and guidance on effective strategies for

incorporating digital drama into the classroom. This can help the lecturer gain new insights, learn best practices, and acquire practical skills in instructing students to use digital drama. Besides, they should explore scholarly articles, books, and online resources that discuss the theory and practice of digital drama in education. By staying informed about current trends, research findings, and innovative approaches, the lecturer can enhance their knowledge base and instructional strategies.

Secondly, lecturers should experiment with more different instructional techniques and approaches when incorporating digital drama into their lessons. They can invest time in familiarizing themselves with relevant software, applications, or online platforms that facilitate digital drama activities. They can try out various tools, platforms, or activities to determine what works best for their students and learning objectives. It is also important for the lecturer to reflect on their experiences, gather feedback from students, and adjust based on their observations and insights.

Last but not least, the lecturer should reflect on the technique through the evaluations and feedback provided by students, considering them as valuable input for refining and enhancing the implementation of digital drama in future lessons or courses. Students' evaluations contribute to ongoing improvement efforts and inform decision-making regarding the integration of digital drama as a learning tool. Through the evaluation process, students can develop critical thinking skills, self-reflection abilities, and the capacity to provide constructive feedback. Moreover, this fosters a student-centered approach, empowering students to actively participate in shaping their own learning experiences. This approach allows students to apply theoretical concepts to practical contexts, encourages collaboration, and enhances their understanding and appreciation of different perspectives as well as concerns regarding potential social and cultural impacts, etc.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that using drama in the classroom as an innovative teaching method not only helps learners academically but also provides knowledge about socio-cultural development. The application of the "Integrating Digital English Theater" in teaching intercultural communication at the university helps learners to understand cultural values and relevant issues which can occur in communication due to cultural differences, forming a borderless cultural class. Specific steps that can be taken to improve intercultural communication and interaction skills will enhance the ability to communicate and promote the individual image and showcase the culture of the nation. This form of communication allows students to tailor their skill sets to meet the crosscultural collaboration needs of those global agencies, organizations, companies, and businesses value. This method helps students develop multi-dimensional thinking, cultural awareness, appreciation, and the ability to compare when learning about different cultures. Students learn to respect cultural differences, contribute to preserving and promoting Vietnamese cultural traditions, and at the same time, integrate into the

global culture to develop a broader perspective on the world around them. By integrating digital drama techniques, educators can create dynamic and immersive learning experiences in intercultural communication. This approach allows learners to actively explore and practice effective communication strategies that bridge cultural gaps and foster mutual understanding. This is an innovative method worth using in intercultural communication courses.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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