



THE IMPACT OF DRAMA ACTIVITIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The paper will present the results of experimental research on the impact of drama activities on the development of pupils' communication competence in primary education. The study was conducted on a sample of pupils in the fourth year of primary school (N=344) in the City of Zagreb, Croatia. An experimental model with equal parallel groups was applied. The procedure was carried out according to the following scheme: K-control group - traditional Croatian Language classes (lecturing and presenting) and E-experimental group – where drama activities were performed in Croatian Language classes. The pupils' communication competence was measured by a written composition evaluated at three levels: content, language, and handwriting. The results of the analysis showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the communication competence of pupils between the control and experimental group at two of the three levels.

Keywords

Communication Competence, Drama Activities, Language Learning, Primary Education

Introduction

Mastering the Croatian language, as the mother tongue language, is the fundamental goal of learning and teaching the Croatian language as a teaching subject in primary and secondary schools. It is about teaching content which is at the same time the mother tongue, but also the communication basis for the acquisition of another educational one's content. Therefore, all participants in the educational process are expected to encourage the development of language competencies. The development of functional communication in a positive institutional environment, and with the purpose of better and easier communication, should be the central content of teaching curricula (Pavličević-Franić, 2005). In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR-L-Council of Europe, 2001), communicating in the mother tongue is the first and most important of eight key competencies, and its development begins with the acquisition of basic language activities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which should ultimately result in a high level of communicative competences.

In learning and teaching the Croatian language, a key question arises: What methods and techniques should be used to encourage and develop the ability of successful and meaningful communication of pupils to become communicatively competent people?

In early language learning, the child is in the phase of concrete thought operations, and it is necessary to teach them the language clearly, based on examples from everyday communication (Aladrović Slovaček & Pintar, 2013). According to Pavličević-Franić (2005), learning and selecting language content should be in the early phase of acquiring the mother tongue, connected with the pupils' language experience and psychophysical abilities.

Drama corresponds to the communication approach to language teaching because it gives the pupil the opportunity for active participation. The pupil learns by experiencing drama activities such as mime, pantomime, simulation, improvisation, role-playing, dramatized reading of a text, acting of a text, and the like. According to Kao and O'Neill (1998), Stinson (2008) and Stinson and Freebody (2006), it has been shown that drama opens the possibility for communication in the target language and encourages fluency, engagement and active participation in young learners and intermediate pupils. Drama helps “language learners with their pronunciation, acquisition of new vocabulary items, and fluency, and, with the familiarisation with the target culture, fosters interculturality”

(Fuentes 2010, p. 322). Drama allows pupils to speak in a context where the roles are clearly defined. The pupils adjust their language according to the role they play. In this way, drama provides embodied language (Neelands, 2004). Placed in different dramatic contexts, pupils` practice and apply codes of communication.

Drama Activities for Language Acquisition

Language is a uniquely human phenomenon, an abstract system of signs that mainly serves for communication, although it has numerous other roles, such as understanding the world, a means of action, a means of creation, a means of identification, etc. However, definitions of language and the determinants of language are numerous; linguists today mostly agree that it is a system of signs that is realised through different linguistic activities (Jelaska, 2005). In the early language phase, the aim is to develop expressive communication skills of all kinds, especially training pupils to navigate everyday communication situations, both oral and written. When students acquire the psychophysical and cognitive prerequisites, they gradually move on to abstract grammar codes, which imply learning the theoretical foundations of the language (Aladrović, 2008). Grammar, i.e. the Croatian language, should be taught clearly, with examples from everyday communication situations, including systems that transmit linguistic information and relationships between communicating persons, i.e., including cognitive, communicative, and psychosocial elements (Pavličević-Franić, 2005). Mastering the grammatical structures of the language is an essential prerequisite for its sovereign use. On the other hand, grammar cannot (and should not) be bypassed in language learning - the only question is how to approach its teaching properly (Kodrić, 2013). Richard Via (1976) states three essential determinants of drama in language learning:

- 1) Drama enables the use of natural, conversational language in a meaningful context; dramatic characters are created whose interaction is motivated by the dramatic context, which allows students to get into the essence of the character and gain motivation for real, meaningful communication, which other methods rarely generate.
- 2) Drama develops sensibility for body language and the cultural determinants of the society whose language the person is learning: distance from the interlocutor, attitude towards tactility or eye retention, level of linguistic formality, handshakes and the like.
- 3) Drama creates highly motivating classroom activities for language learning of intermediate and advanced students.

Thus, drama, as the context closest to nature in classroom conditions, is mostly favoured by more advanced language users (Kodrić, 2010). According to Wessels (1987), drama activities in language teaching encourage the use of meaningful interlocutor interaction that is close to real communication, the correct use of prosodic means, and new words, concepts and phrases in authentic contexts.

In addition to the goals, tasks, and many common contents, the methods and forms of work enable connecting the Croatian language and drama (correlation and integration) in several ways:

- applying methods and forms of drama education in the teaching of the Croatian language;
- application of methods and forms of Croatian language teaching in the teaching of drama education;
- processing the same content with the same goals and tasks;
- processing the same content with different, specific goals and tasks;
- applying standard methods and forms of work and processing the same contents with the same goals and tasks.

In addition to the aforementioned possibilities of establishing correlations and integrations between the subject Croatian language and drama, it is also possible to connect them based on the fact that the subject Croatian language and drama often independently achieve the same correlations with other teaching and non-teaching areas, especially with social and artistic groups of subjects. In that case, they are connected at the level of content, methods, and forms of work, as well as correlation and integration with other subjects, whereby drama can be a bridge, a link with other subjects and extracurricular areas of life.

Methodology

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The aim of the research was to investigate whether the use of drama activities in the fourth grade of primary education affects the development of pupils' communication competence, that is, to perform an experimental verification of the connection between drama activities and the development of pupils' communication competence. Two research questions were formulated:

- (1) Is there a significant difference in the results of the experimental and control group pupils on the communication competence test before and after the application of drama activities?
- (2) Changes in the experimental group will be more pronounced for girls than for boys for all investigated variables.

Hypothesis 1: After performing drama activities in the experimental group, better results on the test of communication competence are expected.

Hypothesis 2: After performing drama activities in the experimental group, better results on the test of communication competence are expected among girls.

General Characteristics

An experimental model was applied with equal comparison groups. The procedure was carried out simultaneously according to the scheme: K-control group (traditional Croatian Language classes - lecturing and presenting) and E-experimental group (drama activities were performed in Croatian Language classes). The research was conducted on a sample of pupils in the fourth year of primary education in the City of Zagreb, Croatia. Before the start of the experimental research, the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia, approved the research proposal.

Sample

The experimental research was conducted in eighteen classes in the City of Zagreb on a sample of pupils (N=344) in the fourth grade of primary school. Nine classes made up the control and nine experimental groups; that is, in each school, there was one control and one experimental group. The sample of schools was chosen conveniently, while the classes that would participate in the research, in case there were more Year 4 classes in the school, were chosen randomly.

Also, by random selection, it was determined which department would be the experimental group and which would be the control group. After the selection of the sample, it was checked that the groups were equal in terms of gender, age, and the pupils' success in the Croatian language subject. Although the pupils knew that they were part of an experiment, they were not familiar with its goals, so it would not affect their attitudes and behaviours during the experiment. An equal number of teaching hours was planned for the implementation of this research in both groups. The control groups' teachers conducted the lessons according to the learning outcomes of the Curriculum for the Croatian language (2019). The teachers of the experimental groups taught according to specially prepared lesson plans for teaching the Croatian language, in which the focus was on the application of drama activities throughout all teaching stages.

Of the total number of participants, the experimental group consisted of N=182 pupils (52.9%), and the control group consisted of N=162 (47.1%) pupils. Of the total number of pupils, N =170 (49.4%) were boys, and N= 174 (50.6%) were girls. There were N=95 (52.2%) boys and N=87 (47.8 %) girls in the experimental group. There were N=75 (46.3%) boys and N=87 (53.7) girls in the control group.

Procedures and Data Collection

In order to determine their initial communication competence, the pupils created a written composition on the topic *Everything is possible in a dream*. The pupils wrote the composition for 60 minutes. Specially prepared lesson plans for teaching the Croatian language, in which the focus was on the application of drama activities throughout all teaching stages, were carried out three times a week for six months. After the special preparations saturated with drama activities in the experimental group and according to the usual plans in the control group, the final examination of the pupils' communication competence was carried out, for which the same instrument as in the initial testing was used.

Operationalisation of Variables and Instruments

Since the written composition implies a complex activity, it requires an equally complex evaluation system that takes several variables. There are no standardised criteria for assessing and evaluating writing activity in Croatia, only proposed approaches (Aladrović Slovaček & Kolar Billege, 2011). In 2008, the National Centre for External Evaluation suggested descriptors for assessing pupils' written compositions. The descriptors are explained in three categories and broken down on scales from two to four degrees. They related to content and language level and handwriting.

At the content level, they include composition, originality, and intertextual connection. A factor analysis using the method of principal components was performed on the descriptors' evaluations of the content level on a scale from 0 to 3 (composition, originality, and intertextual connection). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO=.701) and Bartlett's sphericity test ($\chi^2 = 352.717$; $p = .000$) determined that the data were suitable for factorisation. The

analysis resulted in one factor explaining 74,261% of the total variance. Cronbach's α reliability coefficient is .823, which is considered good reliability.

The written composition was evaluated at the language level according to these descriptors: vocabulary and style, writing sentences, writing words and spelling. A factor analysis using the principal components method was performed on the descriptors' language level assessments on a scale from 0 to 2 (vocabulary and style, writing sentences, writing words and spelling). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test ($KMO=.739$) and Bartlett's sphericity test ($\chi^2=275.777$; $p=.000$) determined that the data were suitable for factorisation. The analysis resulted in one factor explaining 56.449% of the total variance. Cronbach's α reliability coefficient is .737, which is considered acceptable reliability.

At the handwriting level, orderliness and accuracy of letter formation were determined. Handwriting was assessed with only one dichotomous assessment. The same criteria were used in evaluating written compositions in our experimental research.

Data Analysis

The computer program SPSS 19 was used for the statistical data analyses. The factor structure of the instrument was verified by factor analysis, using the principal components method.

In order to check the influence of the application of drama activities on communication competence, a two-way analysis of covariance was used, with the initial measurements of these variables in the first measurement as covariates.

Covariance analysis is a method that enables the comparison of two or more groups while including covariates (variables) that may be related to the dependent variable in some way. As pupils' scores on the dependent variables in this study in the second measurement are related to their scores in the first measurement, initial scores were used as covariates. Analysis of covariance allows us to determine whether boys and girls in the experimental and control groups differed in their results on the dependent variables in the second measurement while statistically controlling for their results in the first measurement.

McNemar's test was used to determine the differences between the experimental and control groups for the handwriting variable. This test is used to identify any differences before and after experimental treatment for dependent dichotomous variables (Adedokun & Burgess, 2012). A statistical significance level of .05 was used to accept or reject the hypotheses because this is an acceptable level in research in the field of education (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Results

Table 1 shows the measures used in the research, their associated subscales with the number of particles they contain, the range of responses, and arithmetic means and standard deviations in the first and second measurements on the entire sample.

Measure	Subscale	Number particle	Min	Max	M1	SD1	M2	SD2
Descriptors of Communicative Competence	Content level	3	0	3	1.41	.78	1.87	.87
	Language level	4	0	3	1.33	.48	1.43	.47
	Handwriting	1	0	1	*n.p	*n.p	*n.p	*n.p

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on the entire sample for the first and second measurements

*n.p. – not applicable

Regarding communication competence, the pupils in the first measurement had slightly below-average ratings of content and language competence. At the same time, there was no statistically significant difference in the evaluations of content and language level of communication competence ($t=1.489$, $p=.065$). The pupils had equally developed content and language communication competence.

In order to answer the question of whether the application of drama activities affects the dependent variables, a two-way analysis of covariance was performed. The independent variables were the type of teaching (traditional teaching/teaching with drama activities) and gender (boys/girls). The dependent variables were the results on the subscales of communication competence (content and language level). The results on the same subscales in the first measurement before the introduction of drama activities in classes were treated as covariates. It was impossible to perform a covariance analysis on the handwriting data because the dependent variable was dichotomous, so the McNemar test was performed.

Content level

Analysis of covariance showed a significant main effect of type of teaching ($F = 121.235$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .316$). The main effect of gender was not significant ($F = 2.939$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .011$), and neither was the interaction between the type of teaching and gender ($F = 1.358$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .005$). Arithmetic means in the first and second

measurements, as well as adjusted arithmetic means in the second measurement are shown in Table 2. From this table, it can be seen that there was a significant improvement in communication competence at the content level in the experimental group. Based on the size of the η^2 effect, it can be concluded that 31.6% of the differences between the groups at the content level can be attributed to the introduction of drama activities in the classes.

		Control Group			Experimental Group		
		1 st measurement	2 nd measurement	adapted M	1 st measurement	2 nd measurement	adapted M
Boys	M	1.1	1.11	1.16	1.12	2.17	2.25
	SD	0.74	0.75		0.67	0.72	
Girls	M	1.7	1.49	1.42	1.61	2.35	2.31
	SD	0.75	0.7		0.8	0.75	
Total	M			1.29			2.28
	SP			0.07			0.06

Table 2: Arithmetic means in the first and second measurements, adjusted arithmetic means in the second measurement and standard deviations for communicative competence at the content level

It can be concluded that the application of drama activities had a significant impact on the improvement of communication competence at the content level in the experimental group, equally in boys and girls.

Language level

The covariance analysis showed a significant main effect of the type of teaching ($F = 84.408$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .243$) and a significant main effect of gender ($F = 4.481$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .017$). The interaction between gender and type of teaching was not significant ($F = .793$, $p = .374$, $\eta^2 = .003$). Arithmetic means in the first and second measurements, as well as adjusted arithmetic means in the second measurement, are shown in Table 3. From this table, it can be seen that there was a significant improvement in communication competencies at the language level in the experimental group. Based on the size of the η^2 effect, it can be concluded that 24.3% of the differences between the groups in language competence can be attributed to the introduction of drama activities in the classroom. Also, girls generally have a higher level of language competence than boys. However, this result should be taken with caution, considering that Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was significant, and statistical significance is not less than .01 according to the stricter criterion. Also, the effect of gender is relatively weak, as only 3.5% of the differences in language level can be attributed to gender. There was no significant interaction between the type of teaching and gender, which means that the introduction of drama activities had an equally good effect on the language level of both boys and girls.

		Control Group			Experimental Group		
		1 st measurement	2 nd measurement	adapted M	1 st measurement	2 nd measurement	adapted M
Boys	M	1.21	1.08	1.1	1.22	1.55	1.59
	SD	0.57	0.5		0.47	0.39	
Girls	M	1.42	1.26	1.24	1.45	1.69	1.65
	SD	0.46	0.49		0.4	0.31	
Total	M			1.17			1.62
	SP			0.04			0.03

Table 3: Arithmetic means in the first and second measurements, adjusted arithmetic means in the second measurement and standard deviations for communicative competence at the language level

It can be concluded that the application of drama activities had a significant impact on the improvement of communicative competence at the language level in the experimental group, equally in boys and girls.

Handwriting

Since pupils' handwriting was assessed using only two categories (0 and 1), covariance analysis could not be performed on these data because the conditions for its implementation were not met. Therefore, McNemar's test was performed. The first step in conducting this test was to determine the number of participants in each group who received a certain combination of scores in the first and second measurements (0 in both measurements, 1 in both measurements, 0 in the first, and 1 in second or 1 in the first and 0 in the second measurement). Table 4 shows the number and percentage of students with letter grades 0 and 1 in the experimental and control groups in the first and second measurements. After that, a 2x2 table was constructed, in which there are only those subjects whose results differ in the first and second measurements (Table 5).

		Second measurement			
		Experimental Group		Control Group	
First measurement		0	1	0	1
	0	102 75.00%	34 25.00%	86 87.80%	12 12.20%
	1	10 43.50%	13 56.50%	4 33.30%	8 66.70%

Table 4: The number of pupils with letter grades "0" and "1" in the experimental and control groups in the first and second measurement

	Experimental group	Control group
0 in 1 st , 1 in 2 nd measurement	34	12
1 in 1 st , 0 in 2 nd measurement	10	4

Table 5: Classification of participants for the McNemar test

Table 5 shows the frequencies of pupils who scored 0 in the first measurement and 1 in the second, and vice versa for the experimental and control groups. It can be seen from the table that in the experimental group, 34 pupils had a better grade in handwriting after the introduction of drama activities in classes, and 10 of them had a worse grade. In the control group, 12 pupils had a better grade in handwriting after the introduction of drama activities, and 4 had a worse grade. Testing differences using the chi-square test did not show significant differences ($p=1.00$), so it can be concluded that neither in the experimental nor the control group was there a difference in the number of students with grades 0 and 1 between the first and second measurements. Therefore, the introduction of drama activities in classes did not lead to changes in students' handwriting.

It was not possible to conduct an analysis specifically for girls and specifically for boys because the frequency in certain categories was 0.

Discussion

Based on the first problem, we wanted to determine whether there is a significant difference in the results of pupils of the experimental and control groups on the test of communication competence before and after the application of drama activities; the hypothesis was confirmed.

Hypothesis 1: After performing drama activities in the experimental group, better results on the test of communication competence are expected.

Analysis of covariance revealed an increase in the level of communication competence of pupils in the experimental group. This analysis allows us to determine whether pupils in the experimental and control groups differ in their results on communication competence in the second measurement while statistically controlling their results in the first measurement. Pupil communication competence was measured with a written composition that was evaluated on three levels: content and language level and handwriting. Each level consisted of several descriptors. The analysis of the results of the final communication competence test revealed a statistically significant difference in the communication competence of the pupils of the control and experimental groups at two of three levels of communication competence.

The analysis of differences showed a greater success of the experimental group on the content ($M=2.28$, $SP=0.06$) and language ($M=1.62$, $SP=0.03$) level compared to the control group (content level $M=1.29$, $SP=0.07$; language level $M=1.17$, $SP=0.04$). At the third level, handwriting, there was no improvement in results in the experimental group. We believe that the reason for this is that in the research, drama activities were used exclusively for developing oral and written expression. Not a single drama activity or task during the research required pupils to write neatly and legibly.

Based on these data, it can be concluded that the introduction of drama activities in the teaching of the Croatian language led to a significant improvement in communication competence, i.e., the pupils who learned the teaching content using drama activities achieved better results compared to the pupils who learned the content using the teaching-demonstrating method. This confirms the stated hypothesis, which is in line with earlier studies that showed that the application of drama activities increases pupils' written expression, develops a more emotional and expressive vocabulary (Eccles, 1989; Wray & Medwell, 1991; Moore & Caldwell, 1993; Wooland, 1993; Wagner, 1994; Booth, 1998; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Moore, 2004), encourages originality and imagination when shaping one's ideas into written work (Crumpler & Schneider, 2002; Baldwin, 2012), and develops writing-in-role, in which emotional and cognitive identification with the role and a better understanding of the role in written expression are encouraged (McNaughton, 1997; Maley & Duff, 2005). Based on the second problem, we wanted to determine whether the changes in the experimental group would be more pronounced for girls than for

boys for all investigated variables. The hypothesis was not confirmed.

Hypothesis 2: After performing drama activities in the experimental group, better results on the test of communication competence are expected among girls.

In order to check whether there is a significant difference in the communication competence of the pupils in the experimental group with regard to gender, we conducted a covariance analysis, where the dependent variable was communication competence, checked on two levels, with initial and final testing, and the independent variable was gender. The results of the covariance analysis are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

From Table 2, the analysis of covariance showed that the main effect of gender was not significant, as well as the interaction of gender and type of teaching. Although there was generally an increase in communicative competence at the content level in the experimental group, this increase was the same for boys (adj. M_{kont} = 1.16; adj. M_{eksp} = 2.25) and for girls (adj. M_{kont} = 1.42; adj. M_{eksp} = 2.31).

From Table 3, the analysis of covariance showed that the main effect of gender was not significant, as well as the interaction of gender and type of teaching. Although there was generally an increase in communicative competence at the language level in the experimental group, this increase was the same for boys (adj. M_{kont} = 1.10; adj. M_{eksp} = 1.59) and for girls (adj. M_{kont} = 1.24; adj. M_{eksp} = 1.65).

In the communication competence research (Littlewood, 2000; Vilke, 2007; Pavličević-Franić & Aladrović Slovaček, 2010; Aladrović Slovaček & Pintar, 2013) results showed that girls have better-developed communication competence compared to boys. However, according to hypothesis 2, after the implementation of drama activities in the experimental group, a more pronounced improvement was expected on the test of communication competence in girls than in boys. This hypothesis was not confirmed. In the experimental group, there was a significant improvement in communication competence at the content and language level compared to the control group, but equally in boys and girls. The obtained results show that after six months of application of drama activities, progress was observed in boys and girls in composition structure and organisation, sentence structure, punctuation and spelling. The most considerable improvement was observed in controlling different sentence constructions, understanding the narrative structure when writing, and increasing the vocabulary.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the conducted experimental research, we can conclude that the application of drama activities in the teaching of the Croatian language had a positive effect on the development of the communication competence of fourth-grade students in primary schools. The influence of drama activities proved to be greater compared to traditional lecture-demonstrating classes of the Croatian language. Pupils who adopted the teaching content of the Croatian language through the use of drama activities achieved better results at all levels of communication competence, i.e., they were more successful at the content and language level and thus showed a better-developed communication competence.

Gender was shown to be a determinant that has an impact on the development of the communication competence of pupils who learned the teaching content through the application of drama activities. On the initial test of communication competence, the girls in the experimental group showed better success than the boys. However, on the final test, there was a significant improvement in communication competence at the content and language level in both girls and boys.

These results indicate the need for deeper implementation of drama activities in the educational system, starting from the first grade of primary school and in all teaching areas of the Croatian language subject. However, the application of drama activities in practice is still at the individual level. Modern curricula support and recommend modern strategies and methods of learning and teaching, which are not new and unknown in the world but are certainly insufficiently represented in Croatian education. Therefore, greater attention should be directed towards the popularisation and practical application of drama activities.

Since there is a lack of professional and scientific literature and researches on drama education in Croatia, the results of this study showed that drama activities could provide an effective alternative to traditional ways of teaching the Croatian language.

Works Citation

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