



## Page to Stage: Dramatizing Literature for Language and Life Skills

Alison Larkin Koushki<sup>1</sup>, Shannon Parks<sup>2</sup>

American University of Kuwait, Kuwait<sup>1</sup>  
University of Birmingham, U.K.<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Literature is trending in English language teaching as a platform for organic language engagement. [1], [2] Literature provides a springboard for imagination, higher order thinking, knowledge of self, society, history and culture as well as contextualized practice in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. [3] However, educators may lack strategies for embracing literature, and students may miss its benefits. Another under-utilized approach in language education, drama, can be enlisted to mine the riches of literature. [4], [5]*

*This paper summarizes an MA dissertation by Shannon Parks [6] on a longitudinal qualitative research analyzing the effects of dramatizing literature and language arts on English learners' language and life skills. Performances took place from 2013 to 2020 at a tertiary institution in Kuwait through an initiative called R.E.A.L.L., Read English Actively for Language and Life Skills. Created by Senior Language Educator Alison Larkin Koushki, In R.E.A.L.L. teams, students read, imagine, draw, narrate, and act the story. Multiple intelligences deploy [7] as students choose project roles: script, acting, backstage, costumes, make-up, sound and lights, reporter, advertising, or stage managing. Learners enhance language skills while mining the riches of literature, the arts, and project-based learning.*

*Using qualitative research methods and a grounded-theory approach, twenty-seven students were interviewed on their R.E.A.L.L. experience in a semi-structured format. Interviews assessed the effects of R.E.A.L.L. on students' English proficiency, intrinsic motivation, and life skills including creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and confidence. Using Otter, a program that records, transcribes, and categorizes words from interviews, emerging themes were traced to determine R.E.A.L.L.'s impact on students post-performance.*

*The overall results of the study suggest that students perceive, in themselves and others, growth in English language, life skills, and self-determinism. Implications are important for the Arabian Gulf where many students are sub-literate. More importantly, however, by gathering students' retrospective insights about how their R.E.A.L.L. experience has enriched their English and life skills, this whole-language, whole-person, all-senses approach can be refined and duplicated to benefit English learners everywhere.*

*Keywords: Drama Literature Creativity Project Learning English*

### 1. Introduction

Alison, who has been observing her students grow in numerous areas in their lives as a result of English through the arts, was eager to obtain empirical evidence – from the students themselves [8] -- to verify this. Alison is not alone as many other teachers want to substantiate the benefits of 'Drama in Education' (DiE). [p. 43][9] The intent of this study is to measure the benefits of Alison's drama productions, namely the students' perceived improvement of their English and life skills.

### 2. Literature Review

Literature as content in the EFL classroom offers an effective way of integrating the development of the four language skills. [10], [11], [12], [13], [14] In addition, reading and performing literature provide ways to develop other skills, such as teamwork, stage presence, articulation and many other abilities. [15]

Drama fosters confidence since learners are given the opportunity to experience English in operation. [16], [17] Additionally, drama empowers the student, giving them the opportunity to take pride in their hard work, creativity, initiative and teamwork. [18]



English through the arts is effective in developing the skill of communication because it integrates in creative and dynamic ways 'various components of communicative competence (discourse intonation, pragmatic awareness, nonverbal communication).' [p.126][19] Participants, through dramatic productions, learn much about this skill of reading non-verbal signals, which 'supplement, augment, or substitute for verbal communication' [p. 145][20], and include 'physical appearance and posture...physical proximity, eye contact, facial and head movements, and gestures of the arms and hands'. [p. 145][21]

The performing arts provide opportunities in critical thinking and creativity, or as Royka [22] puts it, 'creative tension' (situations that require solutions). Performing arts for the L2 learners can provide the opportunity to foster their imagination. The participants can go beyond the present time and space and even walk in the shoes of another. [23] Carson [24] discovered her students felt less stressed and freer to be themselves as a result of involvement in drama, and this decreased their inhibitions. Related to this, acting out literature provides the opportunity to release emotion and relieve the tension that accompanies learning a second language, which is done in a safe and nurturing environment where others can share collaboratively in the experience. [25]

As for motivation, Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo [26] found that students in the performing arts were greatly motivated and devoted towards competency and accuracy because of their pride in the final outcome of the public performance.

The student-centered approach means a more hands-on and active approach to learning versus a teacher-centered or a lecture-style approach. [27] Through active learning, 'students are constructing their own knowledge, rather than receiving it'. [p. 44] [28]

Alison recounts an incident that epitomizes the student-centered environment when a student enthusiastically commandeered her teaching podium in class to share a song that represented the novel *Frankenstein*, which the class was studying. At first, Alison found herself resisting this student-initiated episode, but then her 'wise teacher' voice reminded her that the goal of learning is enthusiasm and engagement. The song was perfect for the novel, entitled 'Bring Me to Life' [29]

Teachers and administrators often complain that students are not engaging in their courses, and Koushki's [30] response to this dilemma is:

English through the arts is very much a whole language phenomenon...  
The language profession has gone on a completely wrong track  
by trying to separate language into little discrete parts...separating it  
out of its context is so wrong, and it needs to be put back into the  
context of communication...That is certainly part of English  
through the arts.

Dervishaj [p. 58][31] asserts that drama places learners in situations that seem authentic, thereby making language 'more easily internalized and...remembered.'

### 3. Methodology

The analysis of this study provides empirical evidence that student involvement in the arts improves their English language and life skills. The research questions were as follows:

- 1) How are the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) improved in EFL students through this work?
- 2) How are the seven life skills (communication, confidence, creativity, commitment, critical thinking, compromise and collaboration) developed through R.E.A.L.L.?
- 3) What other ways have the students developed, particularly in capabilities that they find meaningful?
- 4) How could R.E.A.L.L. be more effective?



By using a semi-structured format in the interviews, participants were encouraged to discuss freely and honestly, making the interpretation and analysis insightful and meaningful. This fills a research gap by contributing knowledge which is grounded in data.

#### 4. Results

All twenty-seven interview participants affirmed that their English skills have improved through their performing arts experience with Alison.

Figure 1: Students Citing Growth in English Language Skills

| English Language Skill                                | Reading | Writing | Listening | Speaking | Vocabulary |
|---|---------|---------|-----------|----------|------------|
| Number of students who recognized growth in that area | 17      | 10      | 14        | 18       | 10         |

Additionally, a host of other skills and abilities have developed, according to students' self-perception, as can be seen in the following chart:

Figure 2: Life Skills/Attributes and Number of Students Who have Grown in Those Areas

| Life Skills/Attributes | Number of students who cited growth in these skills/attributes |
|------------------------|--|
| Confidence             | 27   |
| Communication          | 24   |
| Commitment             | 19   |
| Creativity             | 19   |
| Collaboration          | 18   |
| Compromise             | 15   |
| Critical Thinking      | 13   |

Having examined how language and life skills have increased as a result of participation in the performing arts (at least according to interviewees' perceptions), other themes that emerged from the data were examined. These themes emerged as a result of the inductive part of the interviews when the interlocutors were able to respond to the open-ended questions. The figure below shows the foundational nature of opportunity, self-discovery, motivation, and new experience and how they provide a way for the life skills to take root, leading to the development of other abilities. The two-way arrows indicate the recursive process of all of these elements. For example, opportunity provides self-discovery, which, in turn, allows practice in presentations, which yields yet more opportunity to foster other skills, including students finding their voice to make recommendations, which feeds back into opportunity. All of this ultimately leads to shaping the trajectory of their futures and who they become as individuals.

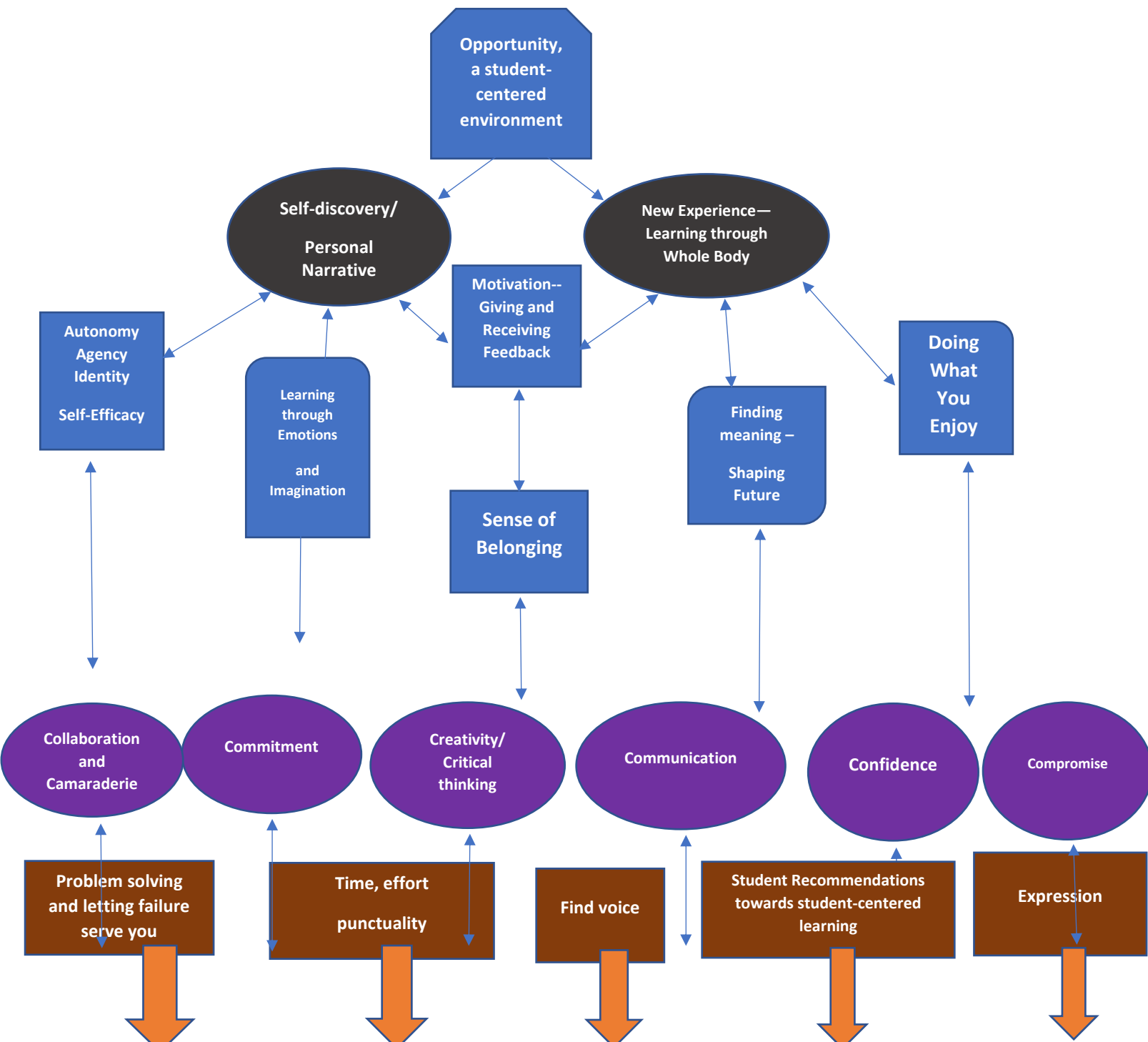


Figure 3: Theory in-Process: Other Emerging Themes and Their Recursive Effects on Life Skills



## 5. Conclusion

The implications of this research are especially important in the Arabian Gulf, where many of the students coming to the university from public schools are subliterare. As instructors in a media-saturated culture, lessons that are delivered through lectures will likely fail to engage the students. If enacting literature kindles a passion for reading and provides a setting where language and life skills can flourish, this should be investigated further, and measures should be taken to implement this in other contexts. The data presented here is compelling, especially since many of the reflections are longitudinal in nature. In addition, overall, the data points to at least the students' perceived improvement in English and life skills, their satisfaction in their experience, and their continued motivation to progress even more in these areas.

## References

- [1] Mart, C. T., 2016. "The Use of Literature in Language Teaching." *Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies in the World*, 2016, 6/2, 77-83.
- [2] Khatib, M., Rezaei, S., and Derakhshan, A., "Literature in EFL/ESL Classrooms." *English Language Teaching*, 2011, 4.1, 201-209.
- [3] Gardner, H., "Frames of Mind: the Theory of Multiple Intelligences." New York, Basic Books, 1983
- [4] Boudreault, C., "The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL Classroom." *The Internet TESL Journal*, 2010, XVI, No. 1.
- [5] Yuanyuan, C., "Enhancing EFL Students' English Competency Through Drama: A Case Study in a Primary School in China." *English Language Teaching*, 2019, 12/7, 68-74.
- [6] Parks, S., "The Impact of the Performing Arts on English Language and Life Skills: A Study of Intensive English Program Students at a University in Kuwait." MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, 2020.
- [7] Healy, C., "Drama in Education for Language Learning." *Humanizing Language Teaching*, 2004, 6(3),1-8.
- [8] Aboudan, R., "Engage Them, Don't Enrage Them – Student Voices and What It Takes to Participate." *English Language Teaching*, 2011, 4/1, 128-134.
- [9] Wright, P.R., "Drama Education and Development of Self: Myth or Reality?" *Social Psychology of Education*, 2006, 9, 43-65.
- [10] McKay, S.L., "Literature as Content for ESL/EFL." In: *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2001, 319-332.
- [11] Hismanoglu, M., "Teaching English Through Literature." *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 2005, 1/1, 53-66.
- [12] Elgar, A.G., "Student Playwriting for Language Development." *ELT Journal*, 2002, 56/1, 22-28.
- [13] Deblase, G., 2005. *Teaching Literature and Language Through Guided Discovery and Informal Classroom Drama.* *English Journal*, 95/1, 29-32.
- [14] Khatib, M., Rezaei, S., and Derakhshan, A.
- [15] Boudreault, C.
- [16] Yuanyuan, C.
- [17] Sirisrimangkorn, L., 2018. "The Use of Project-based Learning Focusing on Drama to Promote Speaking Skills of EFL Learners." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 2108, 9/6, 14-20.
- [18] Boudreault, C.
- [19] Goodwin, J., "Teaching Pronunciation." In: *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2001, 117-137.
- [20] Hall, A. et al., "Drama in English Language Teaching: Two Approaches at the University Level in West Germany." *Applied Linguistics*, 1982, 3/2, 144-160.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Royka, J.G., "Overcoming the Fear of Using Drama in English Language Teaching." *The Internet TESL Journal*, 2002, VIII, 6.
- [23] Boudreault, C.
- [24] Carson, L., "The Role of Drama in Task-based Learning: Agency, Identity and Autonomy." *Scenario*, 2012, VI, 2, 47-60.
- [25] Boudreault, C.



- [26] Ryan-Scheutz, C. and Colangelo, L.M., "Full-scale Theater Production and Foreign Language Learning." *Foreign Language Annals*, 2004, 37.3, 374-385.
- [27] Aboudan, R.
- [28] Eng, N., "Teaching College: The Ultimate Guide to Lecturing, Presenting, and Engaging Students." Norman Eng, 2017.
- [29] Koushki, A.L. Interview with author. Kuwait, 2020.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Dervishaj, A., "Using Drama as a Creative Method for Foreign Language Acquisition." *LCPJ* , 2009, article 6, 2.1 Print [accessed March 1, 2020].