

Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on: **Faitaki, F., Liggins, S. & Murphy, V.A. (under review). The effectiveness of a drama intervention in developing young children's oral language and communication skills.** The manuscript resulted from the project ["Improving Oral Language in children with English as an Additional Language through a Drama-Based Intervention"](#), which was supported by a John Fell Fund award to Dr Faidra Faitaki and Professor Victoria Murphy.

Developing Oral Language through a Drama-Based Intervention.

What is this research about and why is it important?

Oral language refers to the linguistic skills needed to understand and produce spoken discourse. Children's oral language and communication skills at the earliest stages of education are known to determine their later success at school. Improving oral language and communication skills is achievable through targeted intervention programmes, and theatre can be a suitable medium for developing oral language and communication, as it makes use of a wide range of relevant (linguistic, as well as social and cognitive) skills and has the potential to develop these skills further. However, there are very few studies exploring the potential of drama for improving children's L2 oral language and communication skills. We therefore aimed to design, implement and evaluate the potential of a drama-based intervention for developing the oral language and communication skills of primary-school children.

What did we do?

41 children in Years 1-3 took part. Of these, 21 children were in the intervention group: 9 completed text-based drama activities and 12 completed movement-based drama activities. To ascertain the effectiveness of the intervention, we also recruited a control group, consisting of 20 children who did not take part in the drama club. As we were interested to find out whether drama is an effective tool for developing children's oral language and communication skills, as well as what worked (and what could be improved) with regards to the intervention, we adopted a mixed-methods approach – combining quantitative measures (in the form of oral language assessments administered before and after the intervention) and qualitative measures (in the form of observations during the intervention, and semi-structured interviews conducted after the intervention).

What did we find?

Participating in the drama workshops did not improve children's oral language relative to a control group. Moreover, the two intervention approaches (text-based and movement-based) had similar effects on children's oral language. However, the participants enjoyed being a part of the project. In particular, they seemed to appreciate the freedom of expression that the activities afforded. Most students said that the drama club had helped them feel more confident when talking to their friends and in class. Some felt that drama had made speaking in English a little easier, and half of the

participants claimed that they picked up new words during the workshops. During the sessions, children were observed to become more expressive, less anxious and more eager to assume leading roles in the group activities and discussions.

What does it all mean anyway?

This pilot demonstrated that a drama-based intervention can be willingly and enthusiastically completed by participants, and may lead to improvements with regards to communication skills (e.g., expressiveness) and affective factors (e.g., anxiety), which could be important for developing oral language. The question of whether drama can also be an effective tool for developing oral language remains. Based on the positive initial results of this substantive pilot, we are confident in calling for a scale-up of the present intervention. Scaling up the intervention would require the teachers' involvement, but we recognise that not all teachers are comfortable with using drama. As a first step to mitigating this issue, we prepared a Drama Activities Booklet that includes 15 tried and tested activities that teachers can incorporate in their current classroom practice.

Drama Activities Booklet available from the [Department of Education website](#).

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