A Field Study on the Script Structure of English Drama in Education in Chinese Primary and Secondary School

Shelin Ma[1] & Jie Liu[1]

[1] School of Foreign Languages, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou, Jiangxi, China

Correspondence: Jie Liu, School of Education Science, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou, Jiangxi, 341000, China. E-mail: 29194774@qq.com

Abstract

Drama in Education (DIE) is believed to play a specially positive role in helping students in primary and secondary schools to form language awareness and develop language abilities. It has gradually formed its own script structure characteristics in the practice of local English teaching. By analyzing the scripts of 31 dramas staged by three local schools in the English culture and drama festivals, this paper summarizes the implementation characteristics of DIE from the aspects of story source, script source, students' involvement, and theme distribution. In addition, this paper also analyzes the script structure favored by local teachers and students from four stages: the beginning, the development, the climax and the ending, which will greatly help solve the problem of drama creation for primary and secondary school teachers and students, and improve their enthusiasm to implement DIE in English classroom.

Keywords: drama in education, script structure, English teaching

1. Introduction

The 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education issued by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Standards) states that the goals of English course in compulsory education is to cultivate students' core qualities in language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. The Curriculum Standards repeatedly emphasizes that students should learn English phonetics, vocabulary, grammar and pragmatic knowledge in a specific context, and that students can gradually form language awareness and develop language abilities in such language practice activities as perception, experience, accumulation and application. The Curriculum Standards also clearly points out that the language expression goals of all three key stages require students to be able to complete role playing, short play, story performance, and public speech independently or in groups with the help and guidance of teachers. Besides, according to the teaching advice, performing drama is also an important teaching activity for teachers in all the three key stages. Therefore, it is obvious that the new Curriculum Standards affirm the important role of drama in English teaching.

DIE, originally known as drama teaching method, started in Europe and the United States and can be traced back as far as to the ancient Greek era. In the 20th century, the relevant practices and theories developed rapidly and were introduced to China. In its early development, Rousseau (2012) put forward the proposition of learning in practice in *Emile*. Dewey (2005) pointed out that children had the instinct of acting and emphasized the thought of "learning from doing" in real situations. They both laid a theoretical foundation for the development of DIE. Two British educators, Finlay-Johnson (1911) and Cook (1917) applied drama teaching method to history and literature teaching, and had achieved good results. In the 1960s and 1970s, two parties had emerged from the practice of DIE in the UK and the USA. One party, represented by Heathcote (1987), treated drama as a learning medium. The other, represented by Hornbrook (1989), advocated that DIE should be kept as a complete dramatic art, and should be given the position of an independent subject. Finally, Bolton, Dobson and Heathcote (1983) put forward the proposition that both drama in classroom and theater in education (TIE) are two different learning forms, but they share the same core, which is to learn by means of drama. Since the end of the 20th century, drama getting into the curriculum has become a trend in Britain, America and several other western countries.

In the early 20th century, China was going through a turbulent and innovative time, and drama attracted the

attention of some scholars because of its function in social education. Since then, drama had become a tool of enlightenment of the ordinary people. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that Sun (1984) and Hua (1990) translated and introduced the concepts of DIE and TIE in Chinese mainland area (Wang, 2019), and Li (2013) vigorously promoted the practice of DIE. Besides, campus drama such as textbook-based drama and psychological melodrama had become important extracurricular activities. Since 2010, DIE has been given intense attention and more researches have been done in its practice and theory. At present, the classroom drama, which applies drama elements and skills to classroom teaching, has become the main practice mode, and an important means to promote the cultivation of students' core literacy.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Questions

In order to promote the practice of DIE in English classroom in Chinese primary and secondary schools, the author intends to help solve the problem of English drama script creation by means of analyzing certain characteristics shown in the choice of scripts of 3 schools in Ganzhou city in their practice of English dramas, and working out the typical script structure of English drama in education. To achieve the purposes, the author mainly focuses on the following questions:

(1) What are the story sources of the English drama in education?

(2) What are the script sources of the English drama in education?

(3) What is the script theme distribution pattern of English drama in education?

(4) What is the typical script structure of English drama in education?

2.2 Research Instruments

This study mainly used field research, observation method and text analysis method for quantitative and qualitative analysis. Between October of 2021 and June of 2022, the author had been to two primary schools and one secondary school in Ganzhou city to observe three English culture and drama festivals. An observation sheet mainly focusing on the questions above was prepared, and specific details and data were taken down while observing. Then great efforts have been given to analyze the drama scripts to work out the structure. In total, 31 scripts have been studied, among which three stories have been adapted by two schools respectively.

3. Results and Findings

3.1 The Story Sources of the English Drama in Education

Although the moralizing role and the educational function of DIE have been fully affirmed, and actively applied to English teaching, English is still a foreign language, and students in primary school and secondary school have learned it merely for a short time, so the creation of scripts has become the biggest barrier in the practice of DIE. For both students and teachers, script creation is the key problem, because they not only have to consider the principles of interest and education of the story, but also have to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the language. After analyzing those 31 scripts of English dramas in the three English culture and drama festivals, the author has worked out the story sources of all the scripts. Among the 31 dramas, there are 20 Chinese stories, accounting for 64.5%, three stories from the UK, three from Germany, two from the United States and Greece respectively, and still one from Italy. It can be seen that a majority of students prefer to perform Chinese stories. One reason for this preference is that students have more accesses to Chinese stories than to foreign stories. They can learn these stories from books, picture books, TV, movies, the Internet and so on, while most of students' knowledge of foreign stories can only be acquired by reading books and watching movies. Another reason is that students are much more familiar with Chinese stories than with foreign stories. With the continuous strengthening of family members and school, these classic Chinese stories are well known to students, and they equipped the students with the initiative and enthusiasm to create the English drama scripts. Compared with the simplified version of foreign stories from books and movies, the classic Chinese stories have a better student foundation for understanding as audience and acting as performers.

3.2 The Script Sources of the English Drama in Education

The main sources of scripts used by students from the three schools include classic-adapted drama, textbook-based drama, self-created drama, cartoon-based drama, and website-downloaded drama. Among them, the classic-adapted dramas, which are adapted from famous classic stories at home and abroad, were most picked, with 12 dramas, such as "The Hare and the Tortoise", "The Last Leaf", "Three Little Goats" etc. The classic-adapted drama has a complete story line, fierce conflicts, and a number of different versions for reference, so it is relatively less difficult for the script adaptation. That is why it has become the most favored source of the

drama script for primary and secondary school teachers and students. At the same time, the classic-adapted drama has a good audience base, so in the performance, the audience can achieve a better understanding and give a more positive response, which will provide a solid guarantee for the performance effect.

The textbook-based drama ranks second in the script sources, with a total of 8 dramas. The textbook-based drama mainly refers to the drama works adapted from the articles in the Chinese textbooks for primary and secondary schools, and the drama works created according to the discourse and language knowledge of the English textbooks. The textbook-based drama comes from Chinese and English textbooks, so the themes and topics are more in line with the course goals. Moreover, one objective of the textbook-based drama is to train students' communicating ability by using the knowledge of English phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, discourse and pragmatics. The language used in the drama fits the students' English level of understanding and appreciation. Whether as performers or audiences, students have consolidated their language knowledge and improved their language ability through the drama. In daily teaching, due to its flexibility and simplicity, the textbook-based drama can be created by students in groups either by themselves or under the guidance of teachers. It is also an effective drilling for the teaching content in class. Thus, it has become teachers' favorite script source of DIE.

In contrast, there are only three self-created dramas, a lot less than the two kinds above, and each school has only one. The main reason is that it is more difficult to create dramas for primary and secondary school teachers and students. They should not only create interesting stories and guarantee the language appropriateness, but also ensure the positive stance and correct details, so that it can achieve the goal of cultivating students' core literacy, which is a great challenge.

Apart from those, there are three cartoon-based dramas, which are created on the basis of the popular animated films or animated TV series released in recent years. The cartoon-based drama has a broad student base, and the same generation has the same animation memory. Thus, students have a deep understanding of the characters and a good grasp of the humor expressed in the cartoon-based drama. The things they need to do are to determine the theme and topic of the script, to translate the typical language of the typical characters according to their own language knowledge, and to write part of the dialogues to complete the creation of the script. Therefore, the cartoon-based drama often shows a positive and clear theme, simple plot and language, funny and humorous quality, and good audience response.

Finally, in the statistics, five scripts are found to have directly downloaded from the Internet. It is indeed very difficult to create English drama script for teachers and students in primary and secondary schools. When they are given a task to put on an English drama, their first response is to find resources on the Internet. Since the website-downloaded drama has not involved teachers and students in its creation, the language used here is not necessarily suitable for the language ability of the performers and audiences. As a result, it often brings about a heavy memorizing task of the lines for the performers, and a lot of burden for the audiences to understand, which consequently will undermine the language acquisition function of DIE to its full play.

3.3 Students' Involvement in English Drama in Education

The concept of students' involvement was first explicitly proposed by Kuh (2001) at Indiana University, America. According to his point, students' involvement refers to the time and efforts that students spend in effective teaching activities. He also believes that the core element of education quality is the degree of students' involvement. Zhang (2007) emphasized that classroom involvement should not be a teacher-driven behavior, but the result of students' voluntary initiative, and that students' interest in learning should be the drive of their classroom involvement. However, at present, most of the English classes in primary and secondary schools are still teacher-centered, and the teachers dominate the class by explaining the language points, leading students to read loud, and frequently asking questions, which helps to create the illusion of students' active involvement. However, when the teachers lead students to read the new words and key sentences, they separate the words and sentences from specific contexts. Through mechanical repetition, they do have strengthened students' memory and helped them remember the words and sentences, but the students will not be able to use that language knowledge flexibly and appropriately. Asking questions is the most frequently used teaching method, either asking the whole class or asking one individual. Although the classroom seems lively with so many interactions between the teacher and students, students still have not well developed their speaking skill, for they have been answering the questions with single and simple answers, like "Yes!" , "No!", or words instead of complete sentences. They are accustomed to answering but not asking questions. Therefore, even though they have learned English for a long time, their intention to communicate in English is not strong.

DIE brings about an incomparably positive effect on improving students' involvement. In the whole process of from script writing to drama performing, students need to actively participate in it and cooperate with each other, while teachers only play the roles of instructors, facilitators and observers, which can be shown by the number of students who got involved in the final performing. After analyzing all the 31 English dramas, there are around ten participants on average in all five types of drama. In terms of the average number of students participating in the final performance, self-created drama and textbook-based drama have most students involved, with 14 and 13 students respectively. The average number of students performing in classic-adapted drama and cartoon-based drama is the same number of 11. Since the script creation process is completed with the joint efforts of students and teachers under the guidance of the goal to encourage more students to take part in it, the number of performers is relatively high. In contrast, there are fewer performers in website-downloaded drama, with an average of nine students, which is because there is a fixed drama script and the fixed number of characters, and in that case, it is impossible to arbitrarily get more students involved. Besides, in the process of practicing DIE, the enthusiasm of the performers and the audience is more significantly improved compared with that of the traditional teaching method.

3.4 The Script Theme Distribution of English Drama in Education

Theme is one of the six elements that constitute the course content, and plays the roles of connecting and guiding the other five content elements such as discourse, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies, and it provides a context for language learning and student educating. There are three categories of theme: man and himself, man and society, as well as man and nature. In terms of theme, none of the 31 scripts covers the theme of man and nature, and there is nothing about natural ecology, environmental protection, disaster prevention or space exploration.

The most frequently chosen theme by teachers and students is man and society, with 17 scripts representing the theme, and involving five sub-themes, as is shown in Figure 1.
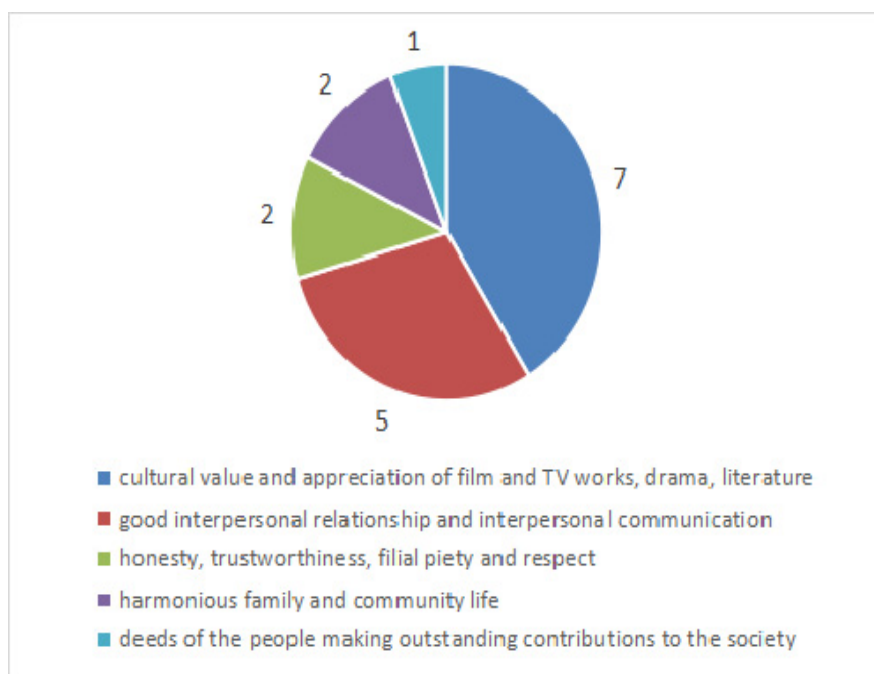

Figure 1. The sub-themes of the theme man and society

As can be seen in the pie chart above, there are 7 dramas about the sub-theme of the cultural value and appreciation of Chinese and foreign film and television works, drama, literature and other forms of art; there are 5 dramas about how to establish a good interpersonal relationship and interpersonal communication; 2 dramas are about teaching students honesty and trustworthiness, filial piety and respect; another 2 are about maintaining a harmonious family and community life; there is still one self-created drama "Eight Sons", which conveys the sub-theme of the great deeds of the people who have made outstanding contributions to the society, and which has a great educational significance to the young generation.

Figure 2. The sub-themes of the theme man and himself

As Figure 2 shows, the remaining 14 scripts mainly reflect the theme of man and himself, which also include five sub-themes. There are 6 dramas about the sub-theme of self-awareness, self-management, and self-improvement; 3 dramas reflect the difficulties, problems and solutions in life and learning; another 3 are about sports and games, safety and precaution awareness; and the rest 2 respectively guide students how to use their allowance to achieve reasonable consumption and how to develop a positive attitude towards life.

3.5 The Script Structure of English Drama in Education

The great western drama theorist Aristotle (1996) and the Chinese classical drama theorist in Qing Dynasty Li (2017), both regarded structure as the foremost element of drama (Yang, 2011). The Chinese drama art represented by traditional Chinese operas follows a four-step structure in its composition: opening, developing, changing and concluding, while the western drama art represented by European dramas and plays also divides the drama structure into four stages: beginning, development, climax and ending (Dong, 2015). To the essence, they are the same. Through field observation and script analysis, all the 31 dramas are found to have followed the tradition of open structure of Chinese drama, where the plots are arranged in time order, and there is usually only one protagonist, occasionally two or more, to carry out the story.

The beginning of the drama is to create a specific context in which the story takes place. At the beginning, the background information, character introduction, and primary conflict will be presented to the audience. Specifically, all the 31 dramas studied in this paper began with English songs, group dances, and self-introduction. It is believed that the embryonic form of drama came from the primitive sacrificial ceremonies and celebration activities, of which songs and dances are an important part. The great tragic dramatist of ancient Greece, Aeschylus, shaped the European drama by reducing the number of singers and increasing the number of actors in a play (Zheng, 2016). Besides, singing English songs is an expressive skill that both primary school and secondary school students need to develop. Therefore, almost all dramas contain one or more English songs, some at the beginning, some at the ending, and some others throughout the drama. Along with the singing comes the dancing. Dancing helps greatly to increase students' involvement, especially for those who are poor at English language and lack of confidence to show it, so it is also a popular way to start or to end. Most of the character introduction is in the form of monologue. The characters will come onto the stage and introduce their names, personalities, interests, and needs. As for the personality, it is usually extremely difficult to reflect the character's personality through his language and actions because of the time limit, so monologue by the character is more preferred. The primary conflict is also presented through the monologue of the protagonist, which is also shown in the beginning of the drama.

In the development stage of the drama, in order to solve the primary conflict presented at the beginning stage, the protagonist will encounter several secondary conflicts here, and as the secondary conflicts are resolved one by one, the drama approaches the climax stage. This stage will decide the length of the drama, usually occupying 60% of the time, so it is the most important part of the entire drama. Gradually presented with various problems, the audience will be experiencing the process of problem solving along with the protagonists. The more difficult the problems are to solve, the more empathy the audience feel for the protagonists, and the more easily they will accept the protagonists' physical and mental changes. At this stage, the stories in most dramas adopted the structure forms of parallel repetition and progressive repetition. For example, in "The Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mummy", the little tadpoles repeat the search process for four times, using exactly the same language, asking the duck, the goldfish, the tortoise and the frog respectively, and found their mummy at the fourth attempt. This story is taking the form of parallel repetition, for the first three animals are of the same importance, and changing the order of their appearance will not influence the story logic and result. Another example, "Three Little Pigs", takes the form of progressive repetition. In the drama, the wolf has destroyed yellow pig's straw hut, pink pig's wooden cabin, and finally is caught in blue pig's stone house. The same language and the same actions have left a deep impression on the audience. But since the house is getting stronger and stronger, progressive repetition is applied here.

The climax is the stage when the primary conflict is resolved, when the fate of the protagonists or the events change dramatically, and when the characters' and the audience's emotions reach the peak and then are released. The theme of a drama is fully expressed in the climax stage, and the climax, as an important part of drama structure, is a touchstone to test the quality of a drama. As far as the climax clue is concerned, all dramas studied in this paper adopt the single-clue climax. As the plot advances step by step, the protagonist, with his own efforts and the help of others, solves all the secondary conflicts, and eventually resolves the primary conflict in a specific situation. In terms of the formation of climax, most of the dramas applied the plot climax which is commonly found in traditional Western dramas, focusing on conflicts in dramas, such as in "The Peacocks Southeast Travelling", "The Pocket Money" and "Wu Song Fought the Tiger" etc. However, there are also several textbook-based dramas and self-created dramas taking the emotional climax of traditional Chinese operas, which helps to achieve the lyrical purpose through simple actions and rich dialogues. For example, at the climax of the self-created drama "Eight Sons", the mother stands alone on the stage after learning that all her eight sons have died. Her tearful inner monologue did not only show her deep love for her sons, but also let the audience thoroughly realize the huge price that people have paid for the pursuit of peace, highlighting the theme of the drama. In another self-created drama "The Mother", when the mother suffers from constant overwork to take care of her son and is finally sitting in a wheelchair, the role of the son has changed from the care-receiver to the caregiver, and the emotional action line of the drama rises to the peak. The audience's long-accumulated blame for the psychologically unmatured son finally gets some relief, but also feels a little regret. On this basis, the audience will be touched and reflect on how they get along with their mother.

The ending, the last stage of drama structure, is the conclusion of the drama, and the reflection of the story, which usually plays the role of clarifying the theme. The American playwright Miller once said that the form of the drama depends largely on how the drama ends up (Zhao, 2016). Overall, every analyzed script has a closed ending, and the primary conflict is resolved after all secondary conflicts are sorted out, and discrepant awareness has been eliminated. Among the 31 dramas, there are two main forms of ending. In the first form of ending, the protagonist or the narrator will sum up the message conveyed in the drama in one or two sentences, and clearly state the theme and moral connotation as well, which functions as a means of educating. Such ending can be found in "The Tiger's Teeth", "A Baby Bear", "The Pocket Money", "Little Duck" and so on. The other form of ending is group dance, which allows the audience to be immersed in the celebratory atmosphere of the protagonist's success in overcoming the difficulties and solving the problems, and such ending can be found in "The Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mummy", "Wu Song Fought the Tiger", "Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf", "A Proud Peacock" and so on.

4. Conclusion

The Curriculum Standards repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of creating a specific context for learning language knowledge, and DIE can meet this need and help students gradually form language awareness and develop language abilities. It has gradually formed its own script structure characteristics in the practice of local English teaching. In the drama script creation, Chinese stories are preferred to foreign stories, and two major script resources are classic-adapted drama and textbook-based drama, which also have the largest number of students involved in them. The themes of the scripts focus on man and society as well as man and himself. As for the script structure, the teachers and students advocate beginning the dramas with singing, dancing, and

self-introduction, developing them with parallel repetition and progressive repetition in the hope of helping the audience better understand the stories and learn the language, choosing the plot climax and emotional climax according to the purpose of the drama due to the fact that they are both quite effective, and presenting a closed ending to meet the expectation of the drama composers and the audience. The study of the drama script structure will greatly help with the solution to the problem of drama script creation for primary and secondary school teachers and students, and promotes the enthusiasm of implementing DIE in English classroom.

Acknowledgements

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