

Radio Drama Competition as an Effective Tool to Boost the Motivation and Self-Confidence of Primary and Secondary School English Learners in Hong Kong

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Received: November 30, 2021

Accepted: December 21, 2021

Online Published: December 29, 2021

doi: 10.5539/elt.v15n1p154

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v15n1p154>

Abstract

In this report, we investigate the use of a radio drama competition to boost motivation, self-confidence, and cooperation in language learning for primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong. The results suggest the radio drama competition had a positive impact on increasing motivation, collaboration, and confidence in language learning.

For the study, we used online surveys and interviews with students and teachers who participated in the radio drama competition to examine their perceptions of the competition. We have included the surveys and interview results of two competitions in consecutive years, and both years' results indicate students had positive views about their experience. Both students and teachers believed the competition enhanced collaboration and teamwork, confidence, and communication skills most.

This paper contributes to the literature by shedding light on the pedagogical implications of English teachers incorporating more radio drama and language arts into their classrooms to improve students' language learning. Well-selected language arts materials could increase students' language learning process as well as their motivation and self-confidence to learn the target language.

Keywords: radio drama, motivation and self-confidence, integrated skills, collaborative learning, communication skills, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

The Hong Kong Education Bureau's *English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1–Secondary 6)* (CDC, 2017) provides the overall direction for the development of the English language education key learning areas (KLAs) for the upcoming 5 to 10 years. It recommends curriculum planning and strategies for enhancing teaching, learning, and assessment at different critical stages for the subject of English language learning. The guide states students must become motivated, independent, and responsible for their own learning to use English effectively (CDC, 2017). Students' development of a positive attitude (e.g., confidence when using English and eagerness to participate in various language activities) is an important part of the English language curriculum.

In fact, motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety are three main factors that influence the affective filter in second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2005). Krashen's (1995) five hypotheses on second language acquisition include the affective filter hypothesis, which suggests the language learner's attitude can affect their language development. For example, learners with self-confidence, high motivation, and a healthy self-image tend to perform well in second language acquisition. In addition, low anxiety tends to benefit second language acquisition (Krashen, 1995). Therefore, it is important to lower the affective filter (e.g., create a low-anxiety environment) with rich comprehensive input so that learners can pick up the language easily. We discuss second language acquisition theory in greater depth in the next section.

2. Radio Drama: Putting Theory into Practice

Thus, the crucial question is one of how we can put theory into practice. What are teaching strategies and activities that can lower the affective filter during second language acquisition? Sze (2006) suggested producing

a radio drama can boost students' motivation in improving their language skills; interschool podcasting and radio drama provide students with an authentic purpose to communicate and produce the play. In addition, radio drama can help promote student collaboration in a low-stress environment that encourages speaking and integrates reading, writing, and listening skills (Maiullo, 2018). Radio drama can help students develop their speaking, pronunciation, and intonation skills and can increase their collaborative skills because producing a radio drama requires teamwork (Schuchat, 2005; Sze, 2006). Dörnyei (2005) suggested students are more motivated by stimulating tasks and group dynamics (e.g., working together in small groups to achieve a common goal), which increase language learners' motivation.

Cooperative learning encourages teamwork to enhance learning because students work together to achieve goals. Olsen and Kagan (1992) suggested motivation can be increased because of accountability to the team. Cooperative learning also generally provides a more relaxed and enjoyable environment than that of a traditional classroom. A laid-back and positive environment can lower students' affective filter during second language acquisition.

3. Objective of this Study

Although many studies have shown promising results from using radio drama or drama components to improve students' motivation, self-confidence, and cooperation, little is known about the effects that radio drama has on Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong. This study adds to the literature by evaluating whether radio drama in the context of a competition can lower the affective filter in second language acquisition for primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong. In this study, we used both quantitative and qualitative research methods: online surveys and in-person interviews with competition participants for the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. We asked participants to reflect on their perceptions of their radio drama competition, and we collected and analyzed 2 years of data to ensure consistency in the responses obtained. Additionally, we performed qualitative analysis by interviewing the students and teachers who took part in the competition. Our data collection methods included open-ended interviews and informal discussions with the principals, teachers, and students involved.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Language Acquisition Theories

First, we review literature on language acquisition theories (e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 2006) to better understand how students acquire a first language (L1) and learn a second language (L2). There are three primary theories. The statements to the right are simplified versions of the theories, as explained by Lightbown and Spada (2006).

Behaviorist Theory ("Say what I say")

Per this theory, learning a language is equivalent to a verbal behavior. One learns the language through stimuli given to them, and the learner's responses are conditioned through reinforcement.

Innatist Theory ("It's all in your mind")

Chomsky (1965) argued that we all possess a language acquisition device (i.e., an innate template for language) that allows us to master a language. In addition, Chomsky proposed the "universal grammar" notion that some learning rules are universal to all languages.

Interactionist Theory ("A little help from my friends")

Piaget and Vygotsky (1978) claimed learners acquire language through interaction with others and the environment.

Nor et al. (2018) rightfully noted each aforementioned theory has room for improvement, and English teachers should not base their pedagogy on one theory to teach the language.

4.2 Hypotheses in Second Language Acquisition

Because we built this study upon how radio drama can lower the affective filter in second language acquisition, we must review Krashen's (1995) principles of second language acquisition. Krashen proposed five important hypotheses in second language acquisition: (a) the acquisition–learning distinction, (b) the natural order hypothesis, (c) the monitor hypothesis, (d) the input hypothesis, and (e) the affective filter hypothesis.

In Krashen's acquisition–learning distinction, he stated that language acquisition is a subconscious process; learners are unaware that they are acquiring the language, and they use the language only to communicate. The result of such acquisition is considered acquired competence, which is how native speakers usually acquire their first language. Learners concentrate on meaning rather than pattern, structure, and other aspects. By contrast,

language learning refers to a conscious process in which learners are aware of the second language, grammar, and other factors when they develop competence in that language. The acquisition–learning hypothesis indicates older children and adults can acquire second languages similar to how people acquire their first language.

The natural order hypothesis states that the acquisition of grammatical structures occurs in a predictable order (i.e., naturally). Learners acquire some grammatical structures earlier and others later.

The acquisition–learning hypothesis indicates language acquisition and learning are two separate processes. The monitor hypothesis further suggests the brain has a “monitor/editor” that detects accuracy and error when producing a second language. In essence, the monitor pressures learners in terms of *how they say* something rather than *what they want to say*. The monitor hypothesis also suggests acquisition is more important than learning.

The input hypothesis relates to how learners acquire a language. Humans acquire language only by understanding messages or receiving comprehensible input. If people move from one stage to the next (e.g., from stage i to stage $i + 1$), then they must understand input in the next stage. Moreover, learners should focus on meaning and not form (i.e., acquisition versus learning).

The affective filter hypothesis describes affective factors that can influence the success of second language acquisition. Affective variables refer to factors involving learners’ feelings and attitudes and can be categorized into three groups: (a) motivation, (b) self-confidence, and (c) anxiety. Dörnyei (2005, 2018) suggested motivation supplies the primary stimulus to initiate the second language learning process and is also the impetus to sustain that process. Dörnyei further indicated stimulating and engaging tasks motivate students, and group interaction or collaboration also benefits their motivation. Krashen and Terrell (1983) described self-image as a person’s belief about themselves. A person with a positive self-image will usually be more self-confident than a person with a negative self-image. Moreover, Krashen and Terrell (1983) claimed learners with a positive self-image tend to perform better when acquiring a second language, and Dörnyei (2005) argued that anxiety affects second language learners’ performance. Learners’ anxiety or fear of making mistakes may cause poor performance during language acquisition.

The affective filter hypothesis posits a learner cannot pick up a language properly even with sufficient and comprehensive input, perhaps because of the presence of the affective filter that prevents the learner from using input during the acquisition process. Learners with high motivation and high self-confidence in a low-anxiety situation should have a low affective filter (Dörnyei, 2005; Krashen, 1995).

4.3 Natural Approach to Second Language Acquisition

Krashen and Terrell (1983) also developed the natural approach to second language acquisition. The natural approach emphasizes students’ ability to communicate in the second language and to be understood by native speakers; it places less emphasis on form or the explicit correction of students’ errors. The approach assumes learners will develop fluent speech gradually, and grammatical accuracy will come naturally over time. Krashen and Terrell (1983) further suggested a stress-free environment is needed to lower the affective filter, which allows acquisition to occur.

4.4 Radio Drama Helps Lower the Affective Filter in Second Language Acquisition

Radio dramas generally involve a play or story without physical action and visual effects. Because of the nature of radio drama, the plot can be highly imaginative, and the performers’ voice-acting skills and sound effects bring the story to life. Additionally, radio dramas encourage teamwork because producing a radio drama usually involves more than one character, and students must cooperate to complete tasks such as writing scripts, assigning roles and characters, rehearsing, producing sound effects, and performing the story as a unit.

Research has indicated working on a radio drama can help students increase their motivation and self-confidence while using English in a low-stress environment (Maiullo, 2018; Schuchat, 2005; Sze, 2006). While producing a radio drama, students also work in groups and engage in a cooperative learning setting.

Sze (2006) suggested a radio drama program can benefit students in multiple ways. It can strengthen their writing skills during the script-writing phase, enhance their listening and speaking skills, and better their ability to collaborate because they must work as a team to write and perform the drama (Sze, 2006).

Other researchers have indicated generic skills such as verbal communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity can be strengthened through using drama in children’s education (Ball, 1995; Hui & Lau, 2006). Hui and Lau (2006) recommended integrating drama education into different subjects; by using various role-playing and dramatic activities in subjects other than English, teachers can increase student participation in

a positive and safe environment and thus lower their affective filter. This results in an interactive learning experience and can strengthen students' sense of ownership because many of the activities are based on their own choices and directions.

4.5 Drama-Based Approaches (DBAs) to Improve Students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English

A recent study by Lee et al. (2020) in Canada further indicated drama-based activities can create a safe, relaxing, enjoyable, and motivational learning environment to enhance students' confidence and reduce their anxiety when communicating. Lee et al. (2020) noted L2 confidence, anxiety, and motivation are important factors in both L2 learning and students' WTC. If students find the learning process enjoyable and satisfying, then they will be more motivated and more willing to use the language (Dörnyei, 2018). Moreover, Araki and Raphael (2018) found DBAs could enhance Japanese university students' confidence and motivation in a safe and relaxing learning environment. Galante's (2018) study also indicated using DBAs can improve students' speaking skills and reduce their anxiety when using the second language. Duff (2015) investigated the use of DBAs in Japanese university language classrooms and found incorporating drama methodology into English classrooms can reduce students' barriers to English usage as well as decrease the affective filter, thus enhancing language proficiency.

4.6 Drama Tasks to Improve Collaboration

Carson (2012) reported that dramatic tasks designed for postgraduate students had a positive effect on improving their collaborative ability and language proficiency; this is consistent with Olsen and Kagan's (1992) observation that collaborative tasks can increase students' motivation and provide them with a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, and this lower affective filter environment can improve their overall academic performance. Compared to a traditional classroom setting, collaborative tasks can provide students with further opportunities to speak and interact with one another and mirror the complexities of real-life communicative situations.

In addition, collaborative learning supports cooperation among students of varying abilities and achievement levels. Researchers have found (e.g., Olsen & Kagan, 1992) that both high and low achievers can benefit from working together and developing their communication skills.

Drama activities can make collaborative learning successful and can emphasize the communicative skills and meaningful input required by the aforementioned natural approach.

5. Research Questions

In the preceding literature review, we outlined multiple studies that have shown drama can be effective in improving students' language skills. However, many of these studies were designed for students at the university level and for students in other countries. Only a small body of research specifically addresses how radio drama helps Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong—particularly primary and secondary students. In addition, few studies have examined drama's efficacy implemented in the form of a competition. The radio drama competition can extend learning beyond the traditional English classroom and provide students with further learning opportunities in a relaxed and enjoyable environment; this aligns with the Education Bureau's curriculum, which recommends teachers extend and enrich students' language learning experiences in real and authentic contexts (CDC, 2017). Because of this research gap regarding the effects of a radio drama competition on English learners in Hong Kong, with this study, we aim to answer the two following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Can a radio drama competition improve the motivation and self-confidence of Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong?

RQ2: Can a radio drama competition enhance collaboration among Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong?

6. The Study

We conducted this study using an online survey and in-person interviews. We conducted the surveys and interviews in English. The participants included students and teachers who took part in the 2019–2020 and/or 2020–2021 radio drama competitions; the radio drama competition is open to primary and secondary school students, and the competitions are divided into primary and secondary school sections. The survey and interviews were completed within 1 month after the final competition in both years.

6.1 Background of the Radio Drama Competition

Can a radio drama competition be an innovative approach to improve students' confidence and language skills?

We had set objectives in carrying out this study. The first radio drama competition was conducted in 2009. At the beginning of the school year, all primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong were invited to participate in

each year's competition. The organizing committee's reason for holding the competition is to help students experience the magic of sound and the creativity of their voices through radio drama. Primary and secondary school students can learn and enjoy script-writing and acting, develop team spirit, improve their Chinese and English language skills, better their communicative and collaborative skills, and enhance their self-confidence.

The competitions we studied were open to students attending full-time schools in Hong Kong. Schools can participate in the competitions voluntarily, and students can form teams of no more than five members and submit a 5-minute script of a radio drama play.

Teams submit their radio drama scripts during the first phase, and the panel of judges picks the best 30 teams (15 from each section) to enter phase two. The judging criteria for the radio drama scripts include content (40%); use of language and grammar (40%); creativity in story, plot, and character development (20%); and expressiveness (20%).

The semifinalists then produce their radio drama in mp3 format, and their radio dramas are uploaded to the competition websites. Students must collaborate, create their own scripts and sound effects, and devise other means to make their radio drama programs appealing. They have the opportunity to use four skills (listening to others, drafting the script, revising the script, and performing the play) while producing the plays, and they need communication and collaboration skills throughout the competition. In addition, students require a certain level of information technology (IT) skills to edit the audio and produce sound effects while completing their radio play.

The general public votes for their favorite radio drama program online, and the panel of judges selects five teams from each section to enter the final competition to perform their radio drama live in front of an audience.

In this study, we invited participating teams to attend 2-hour workshops on script writing and voice/sound effects. Teachers gave students suggestions and stimuli in terms of how to produce a good drama program. Topics included how to write narratives effectively (e.g., setting, plot, characters) and how to use voice acting and sound effects to boost storytelling and engagement. The workshops originally were planned to be held in person, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were conducted online via Zoom.

Because of the pandemic, the final competition for the 2020–2021 school year was conducted live via Zoom. Finalists' live radio drama performances were judged based on the following criteria: content; creativity in story, plot, and character development; narrative skills; expressiveness; use of articulation; voice projection; thoughtful use of sound effects; and teamwork and cooperation.

There were a total of 148 teams, and 50 teams participated in the radio drama competition for the 2020–2021 and 2019–2020 school years, respectively. We experienced a lower participation rate for the 2019–2020 school year because of the pandemic because schools were closed for most of that year. The public cast more than 10,000 votes to select the most popular radio drama program. The 2020–2021 radio drama competition marked its 13th year; as part of this study, we evaluated its efficacy and looked for ways to improve future competitions.

6.2 Method of Study

We conducted a mixed method study after the radio drama competition ended. On the quantitative side, we prepared an online survey to help us better understand participants' perceptions of the competition and evaluate its usefulness and efficacy. The questionnaire was anonymous, and students participated voluntarily. All questions were written in English (see the Appendix) and distributed via Google Forms. We invited all students and teachers who participated in the competition to complete the online survey. Students and teachers completed the same questionnaire, which was distributed after the final competition. Participation or nonparticipation did not affect students' performance. The data collection procedures complied with the Hong Kong Government's Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance.

On the qualitative side, we sent invitations to the participating teams to garner a more in-depth, in-person interview after the competition. We asked teachers and students questions regarding ways in which the competition helped their language acquisition, detailed descriptions about their competition experience, feelings about their radio drama program and performance, and improvements that could be made. Teachers and students participated voluntarily. Because we conducted the interviews after the final competition, nonparticipation did not affect students' performance. The interviews were aimed to help us improve future competitions.

In this study, we included data from 2 years' competitions to ensure data consistency and reliability. We asked questions related to students' perceptions on the radio drama competition and how it helped them, and participants completed the survey online. We sent a total of 740 and 250 survey invitations to the 2020–2021 and 2019–2020 competition participants; we received a total of 186 (25.1% return rate) and 81 (32.4% return rate)

completed surveys, respectively. In addition, we interviewed 19 students and five teachers from four schools (two primary and two secondary schools); we asked them to share their perceptions of how the competition helped them in their English language learning and improvements they would like to see in future competitions.

6.3 Measures

The survey was on a Likert-type scale that consisted of questions examining participants' perceptions of their motivation, self-confidence, teamwork and collaboration, creativity, and communication skills after they took part in the competition. We adapted the survey from the survey used in Lee et al.'s (2019) study. In addition, we asked students to provide feedback regarding the script writing and voice/sound effects workshops. During the in-person interviews, we asked students and teachers what improvements they could observe in students after the competition and invited them to offer suggestions to improve future competitions. Participants had the choice to be interviewed together or separately. Of the participants from the four schools interviewed, three schools chose to have us interview students and teachers separately, whereas one secondary school chose to have us interview students and their teacher together. We triangulated the data while conducting interviews.

In addition, we video-recorded, transcribed, organized, coded, and analyzed the interviews. We hoped the quantitative and qualitative data would complement and confirm each other's findings. The quantitative data may help mitigate any potential researcher bias that could occur during interviews. Finally, we adopted the t-test to evaluate the statistical differences between the 2 years' survey data.

6.4 Analysis

To answer both RQs, we evaluated the results from the completed questionnaire, combined with the in-depth interviews. In addition, we carefully examined the in-person interview texts for student and teacher feedback.

7. Results

For both RQ1 and RQ2, the survey results showed 72% of the participants very likely agreed and strongly agreed that the radio drama competition helped boost self-confidence in using English. Of the participants, 70% agreed that the competition enhanced their motivation to use English to communicate. More than 80% of the participants said they would likely join the competition again; 85% of the participants believed they would recommend others join the competition; and 75% of the participants very likely agreed or strongly agreed the competition helped improve their collaboration and teamwork.

We recorded an average score of 3.90 on a 5-point scale (5 being significant, 3 being moderate, and 1 being minor) regarding whether the competition could help improve students' motivation to use English. Average scores of 4.17 and 4.08 on a 5-point scale were recorded regarding whether the competition helped enhance students' self-confidence when using English and their collaboration and teamwork, respectively.

In the survey, we also asked students and teachers for their feedback on the script writing and voice/sound effects workshops. Of the participants, 92.9% thought the workshop was extremely useful; 85% thought the workshop motivated them to express the character's emotions; 80% agreed that the workshop increased their confidence in rehearsing and training; 81% thought the workshop taught them pronunciation and the use of sound effects; and 84.6% thought the workshop was conducive to their confidence and mastery of language learning.

The in-person interviews produced consistent results. We asked teachers what types of improvement they noted in their students after the competition. One teacher said students were shy and spoke softly before, but after the competition, they gained confidence and spoke clearly and loudly. Another teacher said her students improved their English speaking, collaboration, and communication skills. One primary school teacher agreed that the competition provided an opportunity for his students to shine, be part of a team, boost their confidence, and improve their voice-acting skills. Another teacher stated the competition helped students understand English in an art form, and then they could appreciate and enjoy using it.

Moreover, we asked students to share their experience. One student said he was shy before, but his team members motivated him, and he began to speak more confidently and loudly in English. Another group of students thought the competition gave them a satisfying and challenging experience, and they learned a lot in a teamwork environment—each member was responsible for their own tasks, and the sense of ownership motivated them to perform. Some students were motivated by the opportunity to act, write scripts, and practice voice projection. Another team said the competition gave them the opportunity to collaborate and compromise because students were from different grade levels and had varying schedules, so finding time to meet and rehearse was challenging. However, they persevered and finally completed the play (i.e., performed live in the

final competition). A teacher described their students' improvement by being able to "own" the characters in the radio drama, meaning they were confident and motivated enough to act and perform using English.

In our follow-up interviews, we asked teachers and students about the activities they enjoyed most throughout the competition and topics that they found most stimulating during the workshop. Three teachers suggested students found voice-acting activities fun, and they allowed students to boost their confidence in using the language in an interactive and low-stress environment. One primary school teacher commented that they could ask students to produce a radio drama following the themes of the school-based English language curriculum. Students would have more enjoyable learning experiences and could make connections between these experiences. Another teacher suggested they could encourage similar language and literary activities, such as interclass radio drama competitions.

Because of the pandemic, the radio drama competitions were conducted online (live via Zoom) in the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. Many students and teachers provided feedback that they would like to have a live onstage performance. Doing so would eliminate any technical issues that might arise, and students would be even more motivated to perform live in front of the judges and audience.

The participants' responses suggest radio drama competitions can be an effective measure to help improve students' collaboration and teamwork, confidence, and communication skills in their language learning process. The radio drama competition can extend language learning beyond the classroom, where students have further opportunities to collaborate and communicate in a low-stress affective filter environment. This is in line with the works of Schuchat (2005) and Maiullo (2018). The results also suggest schools could conduct more radio drama activities because producing a radio drama is a beneficial task for students to demonstrate their learning and apply their language skills in authentic situations (CDC, 2017).

8. Limitations and Future Research Considerations

Undoubtedly, further research in this area can be explored. This study includes only 2 years' data, but a longitudinal study could be conducted to measure the improvement of students' integrated language skills over time. Researchers could evaluate the results of summative and formative assessments of students' language learning over two to three school terms, before and after their participation in a radio drama competition.

Another focus area could be to examine whether the radio drama competition is effective in boosting students' confidence and communication skills in students from different age groups. For example, would the competition be more effective for primary school students or secondary school students? Researchers could also investigate whether the radio drama competition is more effective in improving students' English or Chinese language skills. Another interesting research area is whether the competition could be an effective tool to help improve the Chinese language skills of non-Chinese-speaking (NCS) students in Hong Kong; it may facilitate NCS students' local education and mastery of the Chinese language.

Additionally, it may be of benefit to examine the role of teachers in this collaborative learning environment to improve students' language learning via radio drama.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the findings of using a radio drama competition as an effective way to enhance confidence and collaboration in language learning for Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong.

We suggest other researchers conduct further studies, including longitudinal studies to measure students' quantitative improvement; investigate the effectiveness of radio drama for NCS students; and explore students' various key learning stages.

In addition, this study's findings may have pedagogical implications. Because the radio drama competition appeared to boost students' confidence and collaboration in language learning, we recommend that schools include radio drama activities in their curriculum design so that students can demonstrate their learning, collaborate, and apply their language skills in an authentic setting.

Acknowledgements

The Chinese/English radio drama competition for schools was organized by the Smart Education Charitable Foundation and sponsored by the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR). SCOLAR was established in October 1996 to advise the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region on general language education issues as well as the use of the Language Fund. With support from the Language Fund, SCOLAR aims to engage community partners in organizing language-related events and competition-based projects to promote biliteracy and trilingualism.

Notes on Contributors

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Appendix

The following list describes the survey items given to students and teachers who participated in the radio drama competition:

1. The radio drama competition has helped boost my/my students' confidence in using English.
(From 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
2. The radio drama competition makes me/my students more motivated to use and learn English.
(From 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
3. The radio drama competition is a useful tool to improve collaboration and teamwork.
(From 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
4. The script writing and voice training workshop was useful.
(From 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
5. The workshop helped my/students in the following area(s):
(From 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
 - a) Increase confidence in rehearsing and training
 - b) Improve pronunciation and the use of sound effects
 - c) Boost my/their self-confidence in using English
6. Will you join the radio drama competition next year?
(From 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
7. Would you recommend that others join the radio drama competition?
(From 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
8. What future changes to the radio drama competition would you recommend?
(Open-ended answer)

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