



Perceived Benefits of Drama-based Projects in English Literature Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract: Drama-based projects have gained recognition as an engaging technique in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) literature instruction, yet little is known about how English majors in Vietnam perceive the benefits of this technique for language learning over time. This short-term qualitative case study investigates the perceived benefits across three phases of a drama-based project among English majors at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance. Data were collected from twenty students' biweekly diaries and follow-up interviews with five selected participants over a six-week period. Results reveal that students experienced emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal growth across the phases. Participants' perceptions of drama evolved significantly over the six-week project. Initial anxiety gradually gave way to positive emotional fulfillment, deeper literary understanding, increased engagement with literary texts, and enhanced language and personal skills. Moreover, collaboration progressed from basic task sharing to strong teamwork cohesion. These findings highlight the pedagogical potential of drama in promoting both linguistic and interpersonal development. The study offers implications for integrating structured, reflective drama tasks into EFL literature curricula to foster deeper engagement and holistic learning outcomes.

Keywords: drama; English literature; EFL; English majors; project-based learning.

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1. Introduction

Drama-based projects are an approach that engages students in active learning activities to construct knowledge and are becoming increasingly popular in English literature classes, in which literary works are written in English by authors from countries

such as the United Kingdom and the United States. This method can not only deepen learners' content knowledge, promote their language proficiency (Tseng 2021) but also provide a unique opportunity for students to delve deeper into literary texts, analyze characters, and explore themes through performance (Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa 2021). Additionally, drama-based activities have been found to elevate students' creativity and engagement (Amrullah et al. 2023; Bessadet 2022).

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While prior Vietnamese studies, such as those by Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa (2021) or Le Quang Truc (2019), have shown that drama activities can enhance students' engagement and skills in English literature courses, their designs were largely intervention-oriented or based on one-time surveys. These studies provided valuable insights into how drama can be applied in literature classrooms, but they did not capture how students' perceptions evolve throughout different stages of a project. Moreover, little is known about such evolving experiences in private institutions like the Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF), where the curriculum, support structures, and learner profiles may differ. To address this gap, the present study investigates the perceived benefits of drama-based projects among English majors at UEF by tracing their experiences across three project stages using multiple sources of data. By adopting a qualitative short-term, longitudinal case study design, this research captures how participants' experiences and perceptions shift over time. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following question:

How do English majors' perceptions of the benefits of drama-based projects in learning English literature at UEF shift across the three stages: the pre-phase, the while-phase, and the post-phase?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Drama and its Benefits in Literature Learning

Various definitions of "drama" in language education abound. In simple terms, drama is characterized as being and doing, which allows students to learn via experience (Wessels 1987). Similarly, Amrullah et al. (2023: 88) identify drama as "active learning that uses imagination in

acting as someone else and not oneself". Emphasizing the opportunities for enhancing speaking, listening, and writing skills, Rastelli (2006) underscores drama's capacity to provoke a range of reactions, distinguishing it as a process-oriented activity as opposed to "theater," which primarily focuses on the performance as the final result.

The benefits of incorporating drama into teaching English literature have been extensively documented in the literature, covering affective, cognitive, linguistic, and paralinguistic domains. Regarding the affective dimension, drama-based activities provide students with opportunities to experience various roles and foster emotional engagement (Howard-Jones et al. 2008). By fostering students' creativity and engagement, drama has been found to facilitate a learner-centered learning environment (Amrullah et al. 2023; Bessadet 2022; Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa 2021). In Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa's (2021) study, the findings demonstrate that drama increases students' confidence and passion and fosters a more engaging and stimulating learning environment. Amrullah et al. (2023) agree that drama is a useful tool for increasing student enthusiasm for studying English, as they can actively participate in the learning process through drama activities, intensifying their levels of engagement and interest in the subject. This sentiment is echoed by Bessadet (2022), who highlights drama's capacity to stimulate students' interest and involvement in English learning through active participation. Drama's usefulness in supporting not only students' creativity but also interpersonal skills in the classroom is highlighted by Toivanen et al. (2011). Drama, therefore, helps to elevate students' motivation in their target language (Deblase 2005). A study by Sağlamel and Kayaoğlu

(2013) also demonstrates the efficacy of boosting positive affectivity by building a non-threatening learning environment and reducing anxiety.

Cognitive benefits are also a hallmark of drama-based pedagogy (Bessadet 2022). Students, through drama-based learning, can be intellectually engaged, deepening their understanding of human motivation, behavior, and the self from multiple viewpoints, especially with neuropsychological insights (Howard-Jones et al. 2008). Drama is also found to enhance students' ability to understand and memorize literary works (Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa 2021; Savoia 2010). Additionally, several studies have found that drama has been found to offer opportunities to improve target language skills such as speaking, listening, writing (Rastelli 2006; Schenker 2017), and reading (Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo 2004). Specifically, drama-mediated pedagogy has been shown to be particularly effective in fostering the participants' oral presentation skills (Lee and Liu 2021) as well as their speaking and genre-based writing skills by incorporating drama into the learning process respectively (Nurhayati 2016).

Regarding the linguistic and paralinguistic dimensions, drama serves as a comprehensive tool for language practice and enhancement (Bessadet 2022). Drama-based approaches aid vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and discourse processing (Bessadet 2022; Schenker 2017). In addition to linguistic enhancement, non-verbal communication skills are also honed through drama, as demonstrated by Surkamp (2014) and Toivanen et al. (2011), who highlight that "drama covers a wide area of techniques incorporating physical movement, vocal action, and mental concentration, which traditional classrooms have lacked in

quantity and quality in the past" (Toivanen et al. 2011: 62).

2.2. Project-Based Learning and its Contributions in Educational Context

Project-based learning (PBL) is one of the most effective teaching methods for helping students build their general learning capacities (Barak 2012). Similarly, Tseng (2021: 41) claims that "project-based learning has been advocated for its effectiveness in promoting content knowledge and enhancing language proficiency". PBL is a dynamic, student-centered mode of instruction that emphasizes students' independence, critical thinking, goal-setting, teamwork, communication, and reflective skills (Kokotsaki et al. 2016). Kokotsaki et al. (2016) emphasize the participants' collaboration and engagement in projects where they can learn how to address the potential problems and deal with them to build up and present the final product based on the driving question. In PBL, students seek information by posing queries that arouse their innate curiosity at the beginning of the project and then discover answers through teamwork and collaboration (Bell 2010).

PBL has a positive impact on students' academic achievement as opposed to the vocational approach (Chen and Yang 2019). Blumenfeld et al. (1991) characterize PBL as a comprehensive approach in the classroom that influences motivation and cognition, explores potential obstacles that teachers and students may face when working on projects, and all while maintaining motivation and cognitive engagement. Besides the development of knowledge and motivation, students' learning autonomy is also fostered, thereby boosting their engagement in the project (Guo et al. 2020). Bell (2010) agrees that

students' self-reliance develops through their goal-setting, preparation, and organization process in which they socially collaborate with others, have the freedom to make decisions while studying at their own pace, and produce end products that reflect their knowledge. From all of this, Bell (2010) underscores the students' potential to become adept communicators and sophisticated problem solvers—the hallmarks of skilled 21st-century citizens—through PBL.

2.3. Conceptual Framework

The phased framework adopted in this study is grounded in experiential and project-based learning theories as well as in drama pedagogy. Dewey (1938, as cited in Kolb 1984) emphasizes the continuity of experience, whereby each learning experience both draws on prior ones and shapes subsequent ones. In a similar vein, Kolb (1984) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical and emergent process in which concepts are constantly reconstructed through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, and application. These perspectives highlight that learning is not static but evolves through a sequence of interconnected stages, thereby providing a rationale for analyzing students' evolving experiences in drama-based projects across pre-, while-, and post-phases.

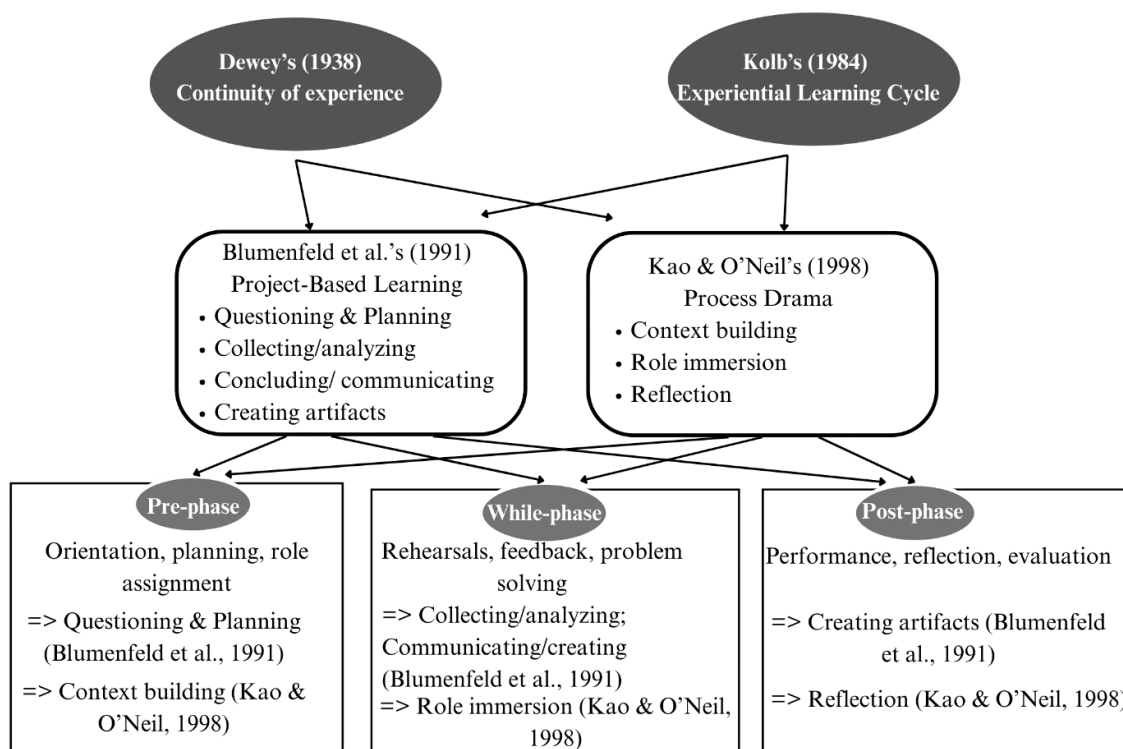
Building on this philosophical foundation, PBL further illustrates how learning progresses through structured steps. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) argue that sustaining students' motivation and

supporting their learning requires engaging them in a sequence of tasks such as asking and refining questions, debating ideas, making predictions, designing plans or experiments, collecting and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, communicating findings, raising new questions, and creating artifacts. These activities underscore that PBL is inherently phased and recursive, echoing the organization of the drama-based projects in this study, where students moved from planning (pre-phase) to rehearsal and enactment (while-phase), and finally to performance and reflection (post-phase).

Drama pedagogy also foregrounds the staged nature of learning. Kao and O'Neil (1998) describe process drama as involving context building, role immersion, and reflection, with the ultimate outcome being not only the performance but also the experience and insights it generates. This conception parallels the phased design of the current study, where pre-phase activities created the dramatic context, the while-phase involved immersion through rehearsals and problem-solving, and the post-phase emphasized performance, reflection, and evaluation.

As shown in Figure 1, the framework used in this present study integrates Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity of experience and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle as the foundation for the instructional models from Blumenfeld et al. (1991) and Kao and O'Neil (1998), which indicate the evolving experience of learning in three phases.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework on phased drama-based projects



(Authors' work)

2.4. Previous Studies

Building on these theoretical benefits of drama and project-based learning, a number of empirical studies have examined how drama projects are implemented in different educational contexts. While these studies consistently highlight drama's potential to foster language skills, engagement, and affective growth, they also vary in scope, methodology, and duration, leaving gaps in understanding students' evolving experiences. For instance, Park (2015) investigated three case studies in Korean universities and found that drama projects fostered positive changes in students' attitudes, cognition, and social skills. The research confirmed earlier claims about the holistic benefits of drama and illustrated its adaptability across institutional settings.

However, the study primarily reported short-term attitudinal outcomes, offering limited insights into how learners' perceptions may evolve throughout different phases of a project. Schenker's (2017) study on a German theatre project at a U.S. private college found benefits in enhancing language skills, motivation, and learner autonomy. Importantly, the study captured students' self-perceived outcomes through feedback surveys, providing evidence of affective and linguistic gains. However, because the project was extracurricular and conducted outside the curriculum, the findings may not directly translate to formal course settings, nor did the study trace changes in students' perceptions across different stages of the learning process.

In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa (2021) conducted an action research study at Van Lang

University with 100 English majors. Drama role-playing was integrated into pre-, while-, and post-literature activities, and interviews showed that students became more interested in the texts and improved their appreciation of the stories. While useful in showing drama's motivational effects, the study mainly reported short-term classroom outcomes and did not capture how students' perceptions developed over time. More recently, Pham Thi My Duyen and Nguyen Thanh Long (2024) investigated dramatization in a British literature course at Ho Chi Minh City Open University. Their findings consistently showed that dramatization techniques enhanced students' understanding and appreciation of English literature, particularly through staged performances. While this study provided valuable insights into teaching practices and student engagement, it largely concentrated on describing classroom activities within a single course and offered limited evidence of how perceptions evolved across different phases of learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A short-term qualitative case study design was employed in this study for several reasons. This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' learning experiences (Gammelgaard 2017). Given the limited timeframe and exploratory purpose, a short-term case study was considered

practical while still generating rich, thick, and context-specific insights.

3.2. Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF), a private higher education institution located in southern Vietnam. The participants were English majors at the Faculty of English who, as part of their curriculum, completed 45 periods of English literature over an eight-week period.

A total of 20 English majors were recruited through convenience sampling to participate in the study. Convenience sampling was used because the study targeted students already enrolled in the literature course where the drama projects were implemented, making them both accessible and relevant. Boddy (2016) notes that even a single case can provide valuable insights if studied in depth, and data saturation may occur with as few as 12 participants in relatively homogeneous groups. With 20 students, this study provided a sufficient variety of perspectives. These participants were from two separate English literature classes. As shown in Table 1, the participants ranged in age from 20 to 23, with the majority being third-year students; 65% were female, and 35% were male. Two participants were sophomores who had registered early for the course. None had any prior experience with English drama-based projects. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identities of the participants.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

No.	Participants	Diary	Interview	Age	Gender	Year of Study at university	Prior Experience in English drama-based projects
1	Na	Diary 1		21	Female	3rd year	None
2	Hung	Diary 2		21	Male	3rd year	None
3	Nhi	Diary 3		21	Female	3rd year	None
4	Han	Diary 4		21	Female	3rd year	None
5	Quyên	Diary 5		21	Female	3rd year	None
6	Thy	Diary 6		21	Female	3rd year	None
7	Nguyen	Diary 7		21	Female	3rd year	None
8	An	Diary 8		23	Female	3rd year	None
9	Ngan	Diary 9		21	Female	3rd year	None
10	Y	Diary 10		21	Female	3rd year	None
11	Hien	Diary 11	Hien_Int	21	Female	3rd year	None
12	Mung	Diary 12	Mung_Int	20	Female	3rd year	None
13	Binh	Diary 13	Binh_Int	21	Male	3rd year	None
14	Hang	Diary 14	Hang_Int	20	Female	2nd year	None
15	Van	Diary 15	Van_Int	21	Female	3rd year	None
16	Sang	Diary 16		21	Male	3rd year	None
17	Danh	Diary 17		21	Male	2nd year	None
18	Ni	Diary 18		21	Female	3rd year	None
19	Hao	Diary 19		21	Male	3rd year	None
20	Nam	Diary 20		21	Male	3rd year	None

3.3. Syllabus and Project Activities

The drama-based projects were integrated into the eight-week English literature course, which consisted of two sessions per week (three periods per session). The syllabus required students to engage with classic English literary texts and to adapt one text into a twenty-minute play. During the first two weeks, the instructor introduced the project and provided a clear orientation on how it would be conducted.

In the pre-phase, students worked in groups to read summaries of literary works, selected a text, collaboratively drafted a script, and assigned roles. Group leaders were asked to submit their scripts for the instructor's review and feedback. The while-phase involved weekly rehearsals in which the students memorized lines and practiced

performance techniques. The instructor offered ongoing support on language use, pronunciation, and interpretation of literary themes. In the post-phase, students staged their plays in front of classmates and reflected on their experiences through diaries and in-person interviews.

These activities were designed not only to enhance literary understanding but also to improve students' communicative skills, teamwork, and creative engagement.

3.4. Research Instruments

Over six weeks, all participants documented their experiences in three diary entries, submitted biweekly, reflecting on stages such as preparation, rehearsal, and performance. Additionally, face-to-face semi-structured interviews (30–40 minutes each) were conducted with the selected

participants to gain deeper insights. An interview protocol, developed from the literature review and revised by two experts in research and English language teaching, ensured that conversations maintained relevance to the research questions. The interview protocol included three parts: (1) participants' background related to learning English literature via drama-based projects, including their roles in the projects and in the plays, (2) their perceptions about the benefits of this learning approach before, during, and after the project, and (3) suggestions for project improvement. Both instruments were translated into Vietnamese to facilitate clear and detailed expression from the participants.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to the main study, a small pilot study was conducted with a separate group of ten students to test the feasibility of the instruments. These students completed diary entries for two weeks, and two of them participated in trial interviews. The pilot helped refine the wording of diary prompts and the sequencing of interview questions. Importantly, the pilot participants were not included in the main study, and the pilot data were used only for instrument refinement rather than analysis. Then in the main study, 20 participants in two separate classes completed diaries throughout the six-week project, and five of them were later interviewed in-person.

Data were analyzed thematically, following Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step procedure: familiarization with transcripts, identification of keywords, coding, grouping codes into themes, refining themes, and constructing a conceptual model illustrating thematic interrelationships and core findings. Two researchers independently coded an initial sample of the diaries and interviews to develop the coding framework.

Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, ensuring a shared understanding of the themes. A high level of agreement was achieved in the initial coding, which strengthened the reliability and trustworthiness of the analysis.

3.6. Rigor in Qualitative Research

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of English majors at UEF regarding the benefits gained during their drama-based project experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the principles of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability were applied. In terms of transferability, detailed descriptions of the research site, participants' demographics, and the structure of the drama-based project were provided (Stahl and King 2020). To enhance credibility, data triangulation was achieved by employing two instruments - biweekly diaries and semi-structured interviews - to explore participants' perceptions of the benefits of drama-based projects in English literature courses. To enhance dependability and confirmability, two experts in language education reviewed the instruments and provided feedback, leading to the refinement of prompts and questions and reducing potential researcher bias.

4. Findings

The qualitative analysis of diary and interview data revealed several interconnected themes across the three phases of the drama-based projects: the pre-phase, involving orientation, team formation, role assignment, and script development; the while-phase, focusing on rehearsals, teamwork, script refinement, and problem-solving; and the post-phase, which

included live performance with props and effects, followed by reflection and evaluation. Across these stages, students demonstrated emotional, cognitive, collaborative, and skill-related growth, though variations emerged according to their year of study, gender, and group roles.

4.1. The Pre-Phase

4.1.1. Emotional Engagement

The pre-phase of the drama-based project, which involved orientation, team formation, role assignment, and script development, revealed several recurring patterns across participants' diaries and interviews. Many students began the project with a sense of curiosity and emotional fluctuation. Some described initial apprehension that gradually turned into excitement as they immersed themselves in the task. As one student reflected,

“[T]he first two weeks have been a significant stepping stone in transforming my initial apprehension into a positive and enriching experience” (Diary 1).

Others reported immediate interest, describing the project as “*exciting*” and “*a more interactive learning experience*” (Diaries 1, 17).

In contrast, the two sophomores (Mung and Danh) reported stronger and more persistent nervousness, suggesting that limited prior exposure to project-based performance tasks made them less confident than their senior peers. This indicates that academic seniority may have shaped how quickly students adjusted emotionally to drama-based learning.

4.1.2. Collaboration

A prominent feature of this phase was the emergence of a strong collaborative spirit. Peer support played a vital role, with ten students expressing surprise and

appreciation for the willingness of their group members to contribute actively. For instance, one student noted:

“Everyone in the group is extremely cooperative [...] if anyone in the group completes his or her work, they support each other” (Diary 12),

Others shared in their first diary that “*I chose the right team*” (Diary 3, 8) and that “[...] *everyone supported each other wholeheartedly, joyfully, and in harmony*” (Diary 3). Similarly, Mung described how the members in her group collaborated to build the script together in this phase as follows:

“We worked together to complete the script, and I learned a lot from my friends since they took the work very seriously.” (Mung_Int.)

At the same time, the data showed some variation across groups and participants' characteristics. For example, group leaders such as Nhi and Han took the initiative to coordinate the team in planning, reading literary texts, drafting scripts, and assigning roles to other members, while participants like Mung and An highlighted the sense of harmony and encouragement they received. This indicates that the collaborative spirit in the pre-phase was not only about dividing tasks but also about building a sense of collective belonging, which reflects the collectivist orientation often emphasized in Vietnamese educational contexts.

4.1.3. Literary Exploration

In addition to emotional and social engagement, participants demonstrated a deepened connection with the literary materials. Role assignment and early character study encouraged students to explore their assigned roles more thoroughly, which in turn deepened their understanding of the plays. For example, one student wrote, “*I had to learn more*

deeply about this character [...] how she behaves, how she talks” (Diary 10), while another reflected on the experience of playing Tybalt—a character in *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare: *“It helped me develop a better understanding of Tybalt’s motivations and the broader themes of honor and feud in the play”* (Diary 16).

These findings were echoed in the interview data. One participant explained that drama allowed them to understand the literary work more holistically:

“Instead of just reading the text in class and answering questions as in a conventional learning method, we got to act it out [...] so we could explore the characters and the work in depth” (Hien_Int).

This shows that even though none of the students had prior experience with drama-based projects, role assignment compelled them to go beyond surface-level reading to develop literary insight.

In summary, these reflections point to the pre-phase as a critical period in which emotional engagement, peer collaboration, and literary exploration converged to lay the foundation for deeper learning in the later stages of the project.

4.2. The While-Phase

4.2.1. Deeper Character Understanding

The while-phase encompassed script refinement, rehearsals, emerging teamwork issues, and collaborative problem-solving. During this stage, participants became more deeply immersed in the literary works, and many reported gaining a richer understanding of the characters they portrayed. For instance, eight diaries reflected how participants gained *“a deeper understanding of [their] character’s motivations and emotions through continuous rehearsal”* (Diary 9) or found that *“acting out the scene from *Pride and**

Prejudice allowed [them] to explore the social dynamics and witty banter between Elizabeth and Darcy” (Diary 17).

This variation shows that drama offered students multiple avenues for approaching literature. Some focused more on the feelings and motivations of the characters, while others paid attention to social issues and themes in the plays. This is quite different from traditional literature classes in Vietnam, where students usually rely on textual analysis and comprehension questions. The drama-based projects encouraged them to take a more active and meaningful approach to interpreting the works.

4.2.2. Enhanced Collaboration

Compared to the pre-phase, the level of collaboration was reported to have significantly increased in this stage. Eight participants expressed satisfaction with their teammates, highlighting mutual support, task engagement, and constructive feedback, which fostered strong group cohesion. Some noted that they worked *“enjoyably and cooperatively, so arguments never even had a chance to happen”* (Diary 11), while others described how they *“gradually formed bonds [...], and grew camaraderie”* among the members (Diary 1). Moreover, tasks were distributed evenly, and each member demonstrated a high level of responsibility. One student shared, *“I was surprised that everyone memorized their lines so quickly, even though the dialogue was long and involved many scenes. [...] Everyone took the initiative to learn their lines, which is so heartwarming!”* (Diary 3). Their collaboration was evident in how students provided feedback on one another’s performances during rehearsals. As one student wrote in Diary 7:

“A major highlight of this process was how we helped each other improve our acting through mutual feedback. It wasn’t

just everyone doing their own part; we tried to understand each other's characters, not just our own." (Diary 7)

Another added that "receiving live feedback from peers [...] about comedic timing, emotional expressions, and overall delivery allows them to make on-the-spot adjustments and refine their performances to better connect with the audience" (Diary 13).

Interview data supported these findings. Three interviewees mentioned the cooperative spirit and emotional support within their groups. For example:

"The moment that motivated me the most was when our group gathered for rehearsals, discussed our characters and props, and prepared everything together. Our team was very cooperative, so I didn't feel pressured or discouraged. The group was full of energy, loud, but not stressful; no one avoided responsibility." (Hien_Int)

"The bond of friendship strengthened. When I made mistakes, my friends kindly helped me without getting annoyed. They were patient and thoughtful." (Binh_Int)

These accounts demonstrate that collaboration in the while-phase went beyond simple task-sharing. It became a space for peer learning, emotional encouragement, and collective problem-solving, suggesting that rehearsals acted as a social process where trust and responsibility were reinforced, an experience quite different from conventional Vietnamese literature classes, where collaboration is usually limited to short group discussions. Overall, the while-phase demonstrated how rehearsals were not merely about practice but were a transformative and collaborative process. Students developed deeper connections with not only their characters but also with their peers, enriching both their literary understanding and teamwork experience.

4.3. The Post-Phase

4.3.1. Insights into Literary Learning

The post-phase marked the culmination of students' drama-based projects, where performances were staged, reflections deepened, and emotional and cognitive outcomes became more explicit. The data from diaries and interviews showed that the participants articulated a deepened understanding of the literary works through embodiment, emotional satisfaction, an enhanced collaborative spirit, and deeper engagement in learning English literature, and the development of many skills.

Firstly, all twenty students reported that performing and embodying characters enhanced their comprehension of the literary texts, especially the complexities of character motivation, authorial messages, and socio-cultural context. By putting themselves into the shoes of the characters, the participants were able to delve deeper beneath the surface-level textual analysis. Some typical examples are as follows:

"Bringing those stories to life on stage made them come alive in a whole new way. It was like living the books, feeling every emotion along with the characters." (Diary 4)

"It enriched my understanding of the cultural and historical context in which the play was set." (Diary 18)

"It helps the audience and us understand famous ancient literary works more deeply. This way, we could understand the valuable moral and spiritual lessons the authors intended to convey to future generations." (Diary 15)

"When I acted, I remembered the material better. I used to be confused about the relationship between some characters and some events, but acting made them clearer." (Hien_Int)

These accounts suggest that students were able to form meaningful connections with the literary texts and gain deeper insights into them through drama-based projects. However, the findings also indicate that students engaged with the texts in different ways: while in the while-phase many focused on understanding characters' emotions and motivations, in the post-phase they moved beyond these elements to explore cultural values and authorial messages. This shift shows that the experience of performance encouraged students to progress from grasping character details to developing a broader and more critical interpretation of the plays.

4.3.2. Emotional Fulfillment

Secondly, most participants reported that the performance day was a powerful and memorable experience. Initially feeling nervous, they then became excited and proud of their hard work, their performance, and their friendship. The emotions they experienced made the learning more meaningful and unforgettable. As some participants expressed their emotions as follows:

“This will be the most memorable moment of my student life, even more than all the stressful days of studying and exams.” (Diary 3)

“The most precious reward is this cherished friendship, and I hope this bond lasts forever.” (Diary 7)

“I do hope that everyone in their lifetime can experience what I have been through and what I regard as one of the best moments in my adulthood” (Diary 20)

This emotional satisfaction demonstrates that learning through drama left a lasting impression that extended beyond the classroom. For some students, especially those who described themselves as shy, this transformation into pride and enthusiasm represented a clear trajectory of emotional

growth. Others highlighted the value of celebrating with peers after the performance, framing the experience as a social milestone in their university life. These differences suggest emotional fulfillment was not only about individual achievement but also about collective joy and shared identity, echoing the strong collectivist orientation in Vietnamese student culture.

4.3.3. Strong Collaboration

Thirdly, students described strong bonds among group members in the post-phase as compared to the earlier phases. They emphasized how the final performance brought them closer together and helped them support one another more effectively, as reported in thirteen diaries and reinforced in two interviews.

“Everyone encouraged each other to try” (Diary 12)

“We supported each other through the performance” (Diary 2)

“They encouraged me, saying “It’s okay, just go ahead, and perform” and that helped me become more enthusiastic and willing to throw myself into the role.” (Hien_Int)

“We helped each other a lot on stage; for example, checking whether someone accidentally turned their back to the audience or how to pass the mic smoothly. These small moments really improved our coordination. Since there were many of us, we also helped one another put on costumes like cloaks, and those with fewer tasks pitched in by moving tables and chairs. Thanks to this teamwork, everything felt smooth and manageable.” (Van_Int)

These reflections show that collaboration in the post-phase went beyond the task-sharing seen in the pre-phase. It created a positive and trusting group atmosphere where students worked together with empathy, attentiveness, and shared responsibility. Furthermore, a gender difference in teamwork within this phase

was demonstrated by the task division during the live performance. Specifically, while female participants mainly prepared costumes and applied makeup on their peers, male students took responsibility for stage logistics such as sound effects, moving chairs, and setting up props. This division of labor not only reflects the students' practical strengths but also echoes broader cultural expectations regarding gender roles in teamwork. At the same time, however, both male and female students emphasized mutual respect and contribution, showing that the project fostered collaboration that was inclusive and interdependent despite role differences.

4.3.4. Engagement in Literature

Fourthly, many students expressed that the drama-based projects helped them become more interested and engaged in learning English literature. Instead of feeling bored and disconnected, as often experienced in conventional teaching methods, they felt excited to explore literary texts and were motivated to read beyond the classroom requirements. Three interviewees described how they became more engaged in reading English literature. For example, one student shared, *"This method made me more excited and curious about the text. I even went back to read more about the characters on my own"* (Hien_Int). Another added, *"drama made literature more engaging. I started to explore other literary works myself. I kept reading, got immersed, and moved from one page to the next"* (Binh_Int). In addition to this behavioral engagement, some students also expressed greater attitudinal engagement with English literature via drama. As one diary entry explained,

"Bringing activities such as drama into the subject will help students like me be able to freely create, have the opportunity to

interact and participate in group activities, and not be bored during classes." (Diary 10)

These accounts indicate that the drama-based project was perceived as a way to make literature more enjoyable and engaging among students. Moreover, compared with the while-phase, where engagement was mainly tied to rehearsals and group practice, the post-phase pushed students to extend their learning beyond the classroom by reading additional texts and reflecting on cultural meanings. This suggests that drama not only heightened classroom participation but also fostered longer-term motivation, which is significant in the Vietnamese EFL literature context where learners are often more familiar with text-based analysis than with experiential, self-directed reading.

4.3.5. Skill Development

Finally, participants reported that the drama-based project helped them improve a wide range of skills, encompassing not only academic but also transferable ones. These included language-related skills such as speaking, reading, listening, vocabulary use, and pronunciation; interpersonal skills such as non-verbal communication and teamwork; as well as transferable skills related to scriptwriting and technical work. Many students noticed clear progress in their language abilities. They became more confident in using vocabulary, speaking in front of others, and understanding texts and performance cues.

"I feel more confident because through this drama experience, I've learned a lot of new vocabulary." (Hang_Int)

"I used to be shy when presenting in class, but after practicing a lot and memorizing the script, I felt more confident speaking in front of people. [...] I had to read the original text to understand what the play was really about." (Mung_Int)

“By listening to my classmates perform, I could tell which part of the script we were at, so I knew when to get ready or bring in the props.” (Van_Int)

In terms of interpersonal communication, several students highlighted improvements in body language, facial expressions, and on-stage coordination.

“During rehearsals, we learned how to walk and show facial expressions to match our roles. I improved a lot in these areas.” (Mung_Int)

“I think I improved my communication skills through this. We interacted by making eye contact, making sure not to turn our backs to the audience, and smoothly passing the mic to each other.” (Van_Int)

Teamwork was also a major area of growth. Students mentioned how collaboration strengthened their problem-solving, peer learning, and mutual respect. One participant revealed, “*my group and I discussed how to make the script better. I learned a lot from my friends because they took the work seriously*” (Mung_Int).

Beyond language and group interaction, the project also allowed students to gain practical skills related to staging and production.

“During the live performance, a couple of group members forgot their lines. I, as the narrator, was able to improvise and bridge the gaps.” (Diary 17)

“Everyone contributed in their own way. For example, the boys were good at sound technology, and we girls handled props, costumes, makeup, and acting.” (Mung_Int)

“I learned many other skills besides academic ones such as designing, adjusting sound effects, creating props, etc. These skills can be useful in future jobs.” (Mung_Int)

Collectively, these reflections show that the drama-based project was not only a tool

for improving English proficiency but also a platform for developing a wide range of life skills, many of which students believed they could carry into future academic or professional contexts. Students highlighted growth in language abilities, confidence, and interpersonal communication, while also gaining practical competencies such as scriptwriting, stage management, and technical support. Unlike the while-phase, where skill development centered on rehearsals and line memorization, the post-phase required students to mobilize and integrate these abilities in authentic performance conditions. This shift illustrates how drama prompted learners to apply their knowledge in real-life tasks, an experience that is particularly valuable in the Vietnamese EFL context, where students often have limited opportunities to practice such transferable skills in formal literature courses.

5. Discussion

This study examined how English majors at UEF perceived the benefits of participating in drama-based projects across three phases: the pre-phase, while-phase, and post-phase. The findings demonstrate that students experienced multidimensional growth throughout the process, including emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and linguistic gains. In addition, their perceptions of drama-based learning evolved over time, becoming more reflective and personalized in the later stages.

One of the most prominent perceived benefits across all stages of the drama-based projects was emotional engagement. Despite some initial emotional barriers, such as anxiety about performing or unfamiliarity with this learning mode, students gradually became more open and receptive as the

project progressed, culminating in a strong sense of pride and fulfillment after the final live performance. This emotional progression echoes the findings in Sağlamel and Kayaoğlu's (2013) quasi-experimental study, which indicated a significant decrease in language learning anxiety through creative drama. This cyclical progression also resonates with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, in which concrete experience (performance preparation) is followed by reflection and leads to new forms of engagement. Moreover, this finding resonates with those of Amrullah et al.'s (2023) and Park's (2015), which reported learners' increased motivation and reduced boredom through drama-based learning. Notably, this study extends prior work by illustrating how emotional engagement unfolds and deepens across the phases of drama-based projects, particularly in a context like UEF, where students have limited prior exposure to experiential learning in literature classrooms. In the Vietnamese context, compared to Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa's (2021) study, which highlighted immediate motivational effects of drama role-play in literature classes, our findings extend this understanding by showing how emotional engagement not only emerged but also transformed in intensity and quality across phases.

A second notable theme was the development of peer collaboration, which progressed from surface-level cooperation to deeper teamwork. In the pre-phase, collaboration mainly involved role assignment, script planning, and brief task discussions. While students were beginning to work together, their interactions were generally functional and limited in depth. However, their peer collaboration deepened as students rehearsed together, negotiated changes to the script, resolved conflicts, and

supported each other. By the post-phase, collaboration extended beyond co-creation to include mutual support in logistical tasks such as managing props, costumes, and stage setup. The participants' mutual encouragement, support, and wholehearted collaboration in this stage provided evidence of substantial growth in their collaborative skills. This progression reflects the logic of project-based learning described by Blumenfeld et al. (1991), where students move from planning and designing to implementation and finally to presentation and reflection. Each stage demands different forms of teamwork, from initial task division to sustained interdependence. The participants' mutual encouragement and collaborative learning in enhancing both the process and outcomes of a drama-based project also align with Kokotsaki et al. (2016), who emphasize the importance of positive interdependence and equal participation for successful outcomes in project-based learning. Similarly, Bell (2010) highlights how project-based learning fosters collaboration by promoting active listening, mutual respect, and teamwork, which are the foundational skills for communication and problem-solving. By mapping these collaborative processes onto the pre-, while-, and post-phase framework, the study shows that teamwork in drama-based projects is not static but develops in depth and complexity over time.

The third emergent key theme from the students' reflections was their deepened literary and cultural understanding through performance. These findings align with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory that meaningful learning arises from active participation and experiential engagement. Through performing literary texts, students were not passive recipients of knowledge but actively constructed understanding by embodying characters and situating

literature within real-world contexts. The data also support what Nguyen Phuong Mai Hoa (2021) observed in her study of literature learning in an EFL classroom in Vietnam. When her participants were engaged in drama activities, they reported having internalized and retained the literary content. The findings also align with Pham Thi My Duyen and Nguyen Thanh Long's (2024) results on facilitating dramatization to enhance literary understanding. However, the present study extends prior research by highlighting the growth and expansion of subject matter exploration over a period of time.

Furthermore, several students reported gains related to personal development in language, interpersonal, and teamwork skills. Throughout the project, students gradually developed their language proficiency, particularly in speaking, listening, and reading skills, and vocabulary acquisition. These outcomes align with previous research (Lee and Liu 2021; Schenker 2017; Sirisrimangkorn 2018) and also confirm that writing remained largely unaffected (Alasmari and Alshae'el 2020). This is possibly due to the oral and performative focus of the project, as well as the initial orientation from the teacher and technological assistance in the process of writing scripts.

Additionally, the improvement in using non-verbal cues in communication in this study supports Surkamp's (2014) view that drama promotes the coordination of verbal and non-verbal cues, strengthening both communicative competence and self-confidence. The findings also reinforce Jun's (2010) conclusion that project-based learning environments contribute significantly to the development of teamwork skills, as students must collaborate, delegate responsibilities, and resolve conflicts effectively.

Notably, one subtheme that distinguishes the present study from previous literature is the emphasis on transferable skill development. Beyond language study, students noted gains in flexibility, problem-solving, background design, sound effect adjustment, and time management, which they noted would be helpful for their future professional and academic settings. This demonstrates how drama-based projects can be used to develop 21st-century skills in addition to serving as effective teaching tools for language and literature acquisition.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study explored how English majors at UEF perceived the benefits of participating in a drama-based project in an English literature course across three key phases: pre-phase, while-phase, and post-phase. The findings reveal that students experienced substantial growth in emotional engagement, literary understanding, collaboration, and personal development. These perceived benefits manifested differently across the phases, suggesting a developmental trajectory in which students evolved from tentative participants to reflective, confident learners. In the pre-phase, students overcame initial hesitation through early collaboration and support from peers. During the while-phase, they reported stronger teamwork, deeper character insight, and more active ownership of the creative process. By the post-phase, students experienced fulfillment, interpretive maturity, and pride in their collective achievement. Notably, their engagement with literature progressively deepened, transforming passive reading into a lived, embodied experience. These findings suggest that drama-based learning not only fosters affective and cognitive growth but also reshapes how EFL students

relate to literary texts, making them more motivated, autonomous, and interpretive learners.

These findings yield several pedagogical implications for English literature instruction in EFL contexts. First, incorporating drama-based projects into English literature courses can foster emotional, cognitive, and social engagement, thereby enriching students' overall learning experience. This suggests a need for lecturers to shift from teacher-centered instruction to a more experiential and learner-centered approach to promote collaboration and content knowledge construction. Secondly, as drama-based projects reveal students' academic and personal competencies more holistically, transitioning from paper-based assessments to project-based evaluations in English literature courses may enable lecturers to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of learners' growth over time. Thirdly, curriculum developers may consider adding performance-based or project-based elements into literature curricula in order to foster student engagement, critical thinking, and a variety of skills.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, because the data were drawn from a single private university with a relatively small sample, the transferability of the findings to other EFL contexts may be limited. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data through diaries and interviews, which are subject to personal bias, social desirability effects, and memory distortion. The quality of diary entries also varied across participants, and the absence of direct classroom observations limited opportunities for observational triangulation. These limitations could be partially mitigated by providing students with guidance on

reflective writing and inviting them to validate emerging themes. Furthermore, classroom observations were not included in this study and are recommended for future research to enrich triangulation. Additionally, the present study focused on perceived benefits rather than measuring learning outcomes based on objective rubrics, potentially overlooking other dimensions of student growth. It should be noted that this paper only focused on perceived benefits, which might create an impression of positivity bias. Lastly, the study primarily focused on the successful aspects of drama projects without exploring the challenges faced by the participants in depth.

Future studies could explore the impact of drama-based literature instruction across diverse institutional contexts to determine whether similar patterns of engagement and learning occur. Conducting a comparative study between universities that use traditional instruction and those using drama-based techniques could provide more valuable insights into the pedagogical efficiency of drama. Furthermore, a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-tests of relevant language and performance-related skills, such as speaking fluency, pronunciation, or literary interpretation, could be used to provide a more objective measure of students' learning outcomes to supplement qualitative findings.

Declaration of AI Use

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly and ChatGPT for language editing, clarity improvement, and reference formatting only. No AI tools were used to generate content or conduct analysis. All literature review, interpretations, and writing were carried out by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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