

Drama-Based Instruction in Enhancing Learners' Story Element Recognition

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the effectiveness of drama-based instruction in enhancing Grade 6 pupils' recognition of story elements at Tai Ping Elementary School, Changhua County, Taiwan. A true experimental pretest-posttest control-group design was employed with 42 Grade 6 EFL pupils drawn from two intact classes: Grade 6A (n = 21) served as the experimental group and received drama-based instruction, while Grade 6B (n = 21) served as the control group and received the school's traditional instruction. Both groups studied the same anchor text, *The Water Princess*, across a six-week, six-session instructional period. Story element recognition was measured using researcher-developed parallel 20-item forms assessing characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution. The instrument was validated by three experts and obtained an

overall validity index of 3.91, interpreted as very highly valid. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t tests, paired-samples t tests, and Cohen's d were used at the .01 level of significance. The groups were equivalent at pretest, $t(40) = 0.53$, $p = .598$, $d = 0.16$. At posttest, the experimental group ($M = 18.29$, $SD = 2.00$) significantly outperformed the control group ($M = 15.38$, $SD = 2.31$), $t(40) = 4.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.34$. Both groups improved significantly, but the experimental group achieved a larger mean gain (5.00 versus 1.67), $t(40) = 10.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.15$. The findings indicate that drama-based instruction was more effective than conventional instruction for strengthening story element recognition and produced more uniform gains across pupils. Drama activities may therefore be integrated into elementary EFL literacy instruction to support active, experiential, and collaborative comprehension of narrative structure.

Keywords: *drama-based instruction, story element recognition, reading comprehension, EFL, experiential learning, Grade 6 pupils*

INTRODUCTION

Story element recognition is a foundational literacy skill because comprehension of narrative texts requires more than accurate word reading. Learners must identify who participates in a story, where events occur, how the plot unfolds, what conflict drives the narrative, and how that conflict is resolved. Story-grammar theory describes these elements as part of an internalized schema that helps readers organize events into a coherent causal and temporal structure (Stein & Glenn, 1979). Contemporary reading research likewise emphasizes that comprehension depends on purposeful meaning construction rather than decoding alone (Duke et al., 2021).

For young EFL learners, narrative comprehension can be especially demanding because structural analysis occurs alongside the processing of unfamiliar English vocabulary and syntax. In Taiwan, limited opportunities to use English outside school and anxiety about oral performance can further constrain comprehension and participation (Chan & Wu, 2004; Hsieh, 2011). These conditions strengthen the need for instructional strategies

that allow pupils to access narrative meaning through multiple forms of participation rather than through text-based recall alone.

Taiwan's 12-Year Basic Education Curriculum promotes learner-centered, communicative, and practically applied learning, while the Bilingual 2030 initiative seeks to expand English use across education (Ministry of Education, 2014; National Development Council, 2018). Yet classroom implementation can remain strongly textbook- and grammar-oriented, creating a gap between policy aspirations and communicative practice (Graham & Yeh, 2022). Drama-based instruction is relevant to this gap because it combines language, movement, collaboration, imagination, and reflection around meaningful content.

At Tai Ping Elementary School, Grade 6 pupils had already encountered the anchor text through regular English instruction but showed only moderate recognition of characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution. The source manuscript further described varying English proficiency, limited independent reading in English, and fragmented instructional time across the week. These conditions suggested a need for an approach capable of drawing less-proficient and reluctant readers directly into narrative structure.

The study therefore examined whether drama-based instruction could produce stronger gains in story element recognition than the school's traditional instruction. It compared pretest and posttest performance between an experimental and control group, tested within-group changes, compared gain scores, and estimated effect sizes. The study contributes controlled classroom evidence on the use of drama for narrative comprehension within a Taiwanese elementary EFL context.

Literature Review

Story Element Recognition and Narrative Comprehension

Story element recognition involves identifying and understanding the structural components that make a narrative coherent. Characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution are not isolated labels; they function together as an organizational system that enables a reader to understand why events occur and how they are connected. Stein and Glenn (1979) conceptualized this organization through story grammar, while Spencer and Petersen (2020) emphasized explicit attention to narrative structure as a core principle of effective narrative intervention.

The instructional importance of story structure is supported by empirical synthesis. Pico et al. (2021) reviewed interventions designed to improve narrative language and found positive effects across experimental, quasi-experimental, and single-case research, particularly when story grammar was taught explicitly and authentic children's literature was used. Gillam et al. (2023) similarly reported significant improvements in oral narration, written narration, and reading comprehension among children who received structured narrative instruction.

Ordinary classroom practice does not always provide enough generative practice with narratives. Hall et al. (2021) found that elementary narrative instruction devoted substantial time to story comprehension but very little to oral storytelling, suggesting that pupils may often identify information about stories without repeatedly producing or enacting narrative structure. This gap supports instructional methods that make structural elements operational rather than merely definitional.

Experiential Learning, Social Constructivism, and Drama-Based Instruction

The intervention was grounded in Experiential Learning Theory. Kolb (1984) described learning as the transformation of experience through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb and Kolb (2020) later emphasized that effective experiential learning requires learners to move through these complementary modes rather than simply participate in an activity.

Drama-based instruction aligns closely with this cycle. Role playing and reenactment provide concrete experience; guided discussion promotes reflection; naming and interpreting characters, settings, conflicts, and resolutions supports conceptualization; and later performances allow pupils to apply their understanding in new scenes. Dawson and Lee (2018) characterize drama-based pedagogy as embodied, exploratory practice that can

activate learning across subject areas, while Sanchez et al. (2023) document how drama can be integrated across grades, learners, and curricular contexts.

The social organization of drama also reflects Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is first mediated through interaction before it becomes internalized. Peer performance, teacher prompting, and collaborative interpretation can serve as scaffolds within the zone of proximal development. Daniels (2016) explains that such scaffolding enables learners to perform with support what they cannot yet accomplish independently, making collaborative drama theoretically suitable for story interpretation.

Drama-Based Learning in EFL and Taiwanese Contexts

Drama may be particularly useful in EFL classrooms because it distributes meaning across speech, gesture, movement, physical positioning, and shared performance. This reduces the exclusive dependence on written language and allows learners with different levels of English proficiency to demonstrate understanding through several channels. Drama also creates a fictional frame that can lower the affective cost of error, relevant concern given evidence of foreign-language anxiety among Taiwanese elementary learners (Chan & Wu, 2004).

Taiwanese studies provide direct support for performance-based English instruction. Lo, Wen, and Lin (2021) found that Readers Theater improved EFL seventh-graders' reading comprehension, while Lo, Lu, and Cheng (2021) examined Reader's Theater among high school students and also addressed learning anxiety and learning styles. Zhang et al. (2019) reported benefits from collaborative drama-based EFL learning in familiar contexts, showing that performance-oriented activities can support meaningful English use.

Broader evidence points in the same direction. Luo et al. (2024), in a systematic review of process drama in EFL education, found positive effects across language skills, learner outcomes, and teacher development. Chiu (2021) likewise showed that process drama can enhance learner motivation and engagement, while Alkilani and Zhang (2024) reported significant effects of dramatic storytelling on emergent literacy among EFL kindergarten learners.

Research Gap and Instructional Rationale

Existing research demonstrates that narrative structure is teachable and that drama can support literacy and EFL learning, yet the source thesis identified a more specific gap: relatively few studies isolate story element recognition as the principal outcome of drama-based instruction. Studies often measure broader reading comprehension, speaking, listening, or general engagement, making it difficult to determine whether drama specifically strengthens pupils' recognition of narrative components.

The local gap was more pronounced. No controlled experimental study had been conducted at Tai Ping Elementary School to compare drama-based instruction with the school's conventional approach while holding constant the grade level, anchor text, instructional period, and assessment structure. The study therefore focused on a tightly defined literacy outcome and used two parallel forms of a validated Story Element Recognition Test.

The conceptual logic of the study was that drama-based instruction would make story elements necessary for successful performance. A pupil portraying a character must infer motivation; a group reenacting a conflict must identify the opposing forces; and a class performing a resolution must understand how the narrative problem is settled. This operational demand provides a direct pathway from experiential participation to improved recognition of story structure.

Research Paradigm of the Study

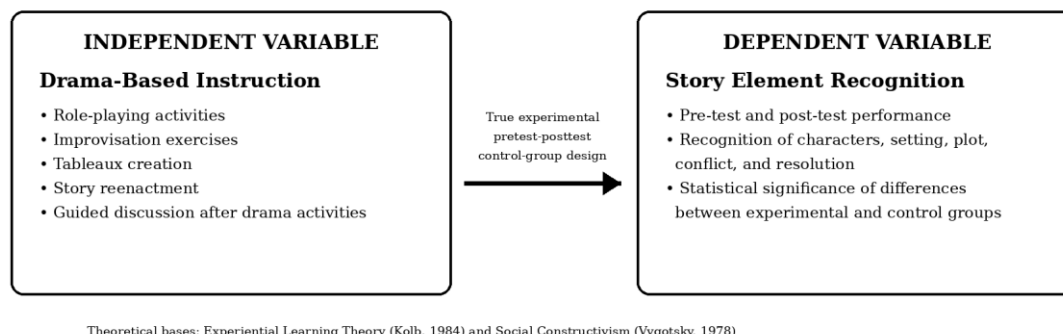


Figure 1. *The Research Paradigm of the Study*

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a true experimental pretest-posttest control-group design to examine the effect of drama-based instruction on Grade 6 pupils' story element recognition. Two parallel groups were measured before and after a six-week instructional period. The experimental group received drama-based instruction and the control group received the school's traditional instruction. Both groups studied the same anchor text, followed the same curricular sequence, and completed parallel forms of the same validated assessment. This design allowed the researcher to compare change within groups and differences between groups while maintaining regular classroom operations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2019).

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Tai Ping Elementary School in Changhua County, Taiwan, during School Year 2025-2026. The school is a public elementary institution operating within Taiwan's 12-Year Basic Education Curriculum. English is taught as a foreign language, and pupils encounter English narratives primarily through formal classroom instruction, making the site appropriate for evaluating an interactive strategy intended to strengthen narrative comprehension.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were 42 Grade 6 pupils drawn from the school's two intact Grade 6 classes, which constituted the full Grade 6 population at the research site. Grade 6A ($n = 21$) served as the experimental group and Grade 6B ($n = 21$) served as the control group. All participants were Taiwanese EFL learners with varying levels of English reading proficiency. Purposive sampling was used because Grade 6 pupils possessed the reading experience and cognitive readiness required to respond meaningfully to the story element assessment.

Research Instrument

A researcher-developed Story Element Recognition Test served as the primary instrument. It was constructed in two parallel 20-item forms based on the anchor text *The Water Princess* by Susan Verde. Both forms assessed characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution and followed parallel tables of specifications. Form A was administered as the pretest and Form B as the posttest to reduce practice and recall effects while preserving comparability between the two testing periods.

Three experts in English-language education evaluated the instrument using 15 validation criteria covering content validity, clarity and language, format and structure, and usability and feasibility. The overall validity index was 3.91, interpreted as Very Highly Valid. Because the two Grade 6 sections constituted the entire grade level, no independent pilot group was available; consequently, equivalence between forms rested on matched construction, content, item formats, and tables of specifications rather than on a computed reliability coefficient.

Table 1. Expert Validity Indices of the Story Element Recognition Test

Area of Evaluation	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
Content Validity	4.00	Very Highly Valid
Clarity and Language	3.89	Very Highly Valid
Format and structure	3.89	Very Highly Valid
Usability and Feasibility	3.87	Very Highly Valid
Overall Validity Index	3.91	Very Highly Valid

Data Gathering Procedure

After school permission and parental or guardian consent had been secured, Form A was administered to both groups as the pretest. The experimental group then completed a structured six-week, six-session drama-based program, while the control group covered the same story elements using the school's traditional teacher-led discussion, read-aloud, and worksheet-based approach. Both conditions used *The Water Princess* and followed the same weekly progression. After the final session, Form B was administered to both groups as the posttest.

Table 2. Six-Week Instructional Structure

Week	Story Focus	Experimental Condition	Control Condition
1	Introduction to story elements	Drama warm-ups and guided exploration	Teacher-led discussion and worksheet
2	Characters	Role playing and character embodiment	Read-aloud and character questions
3	Plot and conflict	Improvisation and physical story sequencing	Teacher explanation and sequencing tasks
4	Setting	Tableaux and sensory setting recreation	Reading, discussion, and setting worksheet
5	Resolution	Story reenactment and role play	Teacher-led discussion and comprehension activity
6	Whole-story integration	Collaborative dramatic retelling	Conventional whole-story retelling/review

Data Analysis

Means, medians, standard deviations, variances, skewness, and kurtosis were computed to describe performance. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to examine normality because each group had fewer than 50 participants (Razali & Wah, 2011). Independent-samples *t* tests compared the groups at pretest, posttest, and on mean gain scores, while paired-samples *t* tests examined pretest-posttest change within each group. Cohen's *d* was used to estimate effect magnitude, and all inferential analyses were interpreted at the .01 level of significance (Field, 2018).

Ethical Consideration

Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school principal, and informed consent was secured from the parents or guardians of all 42 pupils. The purpose and procedures were explained in age-appropriate language, participation was voluntary, and pupils could withdraw without academic penalty. Names were replaced with codes, test records were stored securely, and results were reported only in aggregate. Both groups received the same curricular content, and pupils who were reluctant to perform were allowed to take supporting roles so that participation did not require embarrassment or distress.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pretest and Posttest Performance

At pretest, the two groups showed nearly identical story element recognition. The experimental group obtained $M = 13.29$ ($SD = 2.59$), while the control group obtained $M = 13.71$ ($SD = 2.63$). Their medians were both 14.00, and their score ranges were similar. After the instructional period, both groups improved, but the experimental group reached $M = 18.29$ ($SD = 2.00$), compared with $M = 15.38$ ($SD = 2.31$) for the control group.

Table 3. *Descriptive Performance of the Experimental and Control Groups*

Group	Pretest M	Pretest SD	Posttest M	Posttest SD	Mean Gain	Posttest Range
Experimental	13.29	2.59	18.29	2.00	5.00	15-20
Control	13.71	2.63	15.38	2.31	1.67	10-20

The descriptive results indicate not only higher posttest performance in the experimental group but also greater consistency. Its standard deviation declined from 2.59 to 2.00, and no pupil scored below 15 at posttest, whereas the control group's minimum was 10. This pattern suggests that drama-based instruction supported pupils across the proficiency range rather than improving only the performance of initially stronger readers. The clustering of several experimental scores near the maximum of 20 also suggests a possible ceiling effect for the highest-performing pupils.

Between-Group Differences

The independent-samples t test confirmed that the groups were statistically equivalent before the intervention, $t(40) = 0.53$, $p = .598$, $d = 0.16$. After instruction, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group, $t(40) = 4.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.34$. The posttest effect size was large, indicating that the observed difference was substantial as well as statistically significant.

Table 4. *Between-Group Comparisons*

Comparison	Mean Difference	t	df	p	Cohen's d	Decision at $\alpha = .01$
Pretest	0.43	0.53	40	.598	0.16	Not significant
Posttest	2.91	4.35	40	<.001	1.34	Significant
Mean gain	3.33	10.22	40	<.001	3.15	Significant

The baseline equivalence strengthens the interpretation that the posttest difference was associated with instructional method rather than with pre-existing differences between classes. The result is consistent with controlled narrative instruction research showing that structured approaches can produce stronger comprehension outcomes than business-as-usual instruction (Gillam et al., 2023). It also aligns with Taiwanese EFL evidence showing benefits of Readers Theater and collaborative drama-based learning for reading and language performance (Lo, Wen, & Lin, 2021; Zhang et al., 2019).

Within-Group Improvement

Both instructional approaches produced significant improvement. The control group increased by 1.67 points, $t(20) = 8.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.83$. The experimental group increased by 5.00 points, $t(20) = 19.36$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.23$. Thus, conventional instruction remained educationally useful, but drama-based instruction produced a much larger within-group change over the same period and with the same text.

Table 5. *Within-Group Pretest-Posttest Comparisons*

Group	Pretest M	Posttest M	Mean Gain	t(20)	p	Cohen's d
Control	13.71	15.38	1.67	8.37	<.001	1.83
Experimental	13.29	18.29	5.00	19.36	<.001	4.23

The larger experimental effect accords with the study's theoretical foundations. Experiential Learning Theory predicts deeper learning when experience is followed by reflection and later application (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2020), while Social Constructivism emphasizes the role of guided collaborative activity in moving pupils from supported to independent performance (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2016). Drama operationalized these mechanisms by requiring pupils to embody characters, sequence events, perform conflicts, and enact resolutions rather than merely identify them after teacher explanation.

Magnitude and Practical Meaning of the Gain

The experimental group's mean gain of 5.00 points was approximately three times the control group's gain of 1.67 points. The difference in gain scores was statistically significant, $t(40) = 10.22$, $p < .001$, with a very large effect size of $d = 3.15$. This was the clearest comparative indicator of the intervention's effectiveness because gain scores explicitly represented change during the instructional period.

The magnitude of the observed gain exceeded the effect sizes reported in broader meta-analytic work on narrative-language interventions (Pico et al., 2021). Such a comparison should be interpreted cautiously because intervention populations, measures, and designs differ, but it reinforces the practical importance of the classroom result. Drama-based instruction appears to have provided an especially strong route for transforming story grammar from declarative knowledge into enacted understanding.

Implications for Elementary EFL Literacy Instruction

The findings support the integration of role playing, improvisation, tableaux, reenactment, and guided post-performance discussion into elementary narrative instruction. Drama should not be treated merely as enrichment; it can function as a structured comprehension strategy that connects language, movement, social interaction, and reflection. The broader process-drama literature similarly reports positive EFL learning outcomes and emphasizes the role of drama in learner engagement and language development (Chiu, 2021; Luo et al., 2024).

The results are also relevant to Taiwan's learner-centered and bilingual policy directions. A method that permits pupils to use English through embodied, collaborative activity can help bridge the gap between textbook-based instruction and communicative learning goals. Nevertheless, the study was limited to two intact classes, a single school, one narrative text, and immediate post testing. The strong result therefore supports classroom adoption and further study rather than unrestricted generalization.

CONCLUSION

Drama-based instruction significantly enhanced Grade 6 pupils' recognition of characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution. Although both the experimental and control groups improved over six weeks, the experimental group achieved a substantially higher posttest mean, a larger within-group effect, and a mean gain approximately three times that of the control group. Because the groups were statistically equivalent before instruction, the post-intervention advantage provides strong evidence that the difference was associated with the drama-based instructional condition.

The findings also show that drama-based instruction benefited pupils across differing levels of English proficiency, as reflected in the more uniform posttest performance of the experimental group. The study therefore concludes that drama is an effective and comparatively stronger approach for story element recognition in this Grade 6 Taiwanese EFL setting. Its contribution lies in converting narrative structure from information to be recalled into meaning to be enacted, discussed, and reconstructed collaboratively.

Recommendation

School administrators may support the use of drama-based instruction in elementary English by providing flexible classroom space, simple materials, adequate instructional time, and professional-development opportunities in drama pedagogy. Such support can help teachers implement the approach consistently rather than use dramatic activities only as occasional enrichment.

Curriculum developers and English teachers may integrate role playing, improvisation, tableaux creation, story reenactment, and guided reflection into literacy units that teach narrative structure. Dramatic activities should be paired with explicit discussion of characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution so that experiential participation is converted into transferable comprehension.

Future researchers may replicate the study with larger samples, additional schools, other grade levels, and different narrative texts. Delayed posttests are recommended to examine retention, while future studies may also include measures of engagement, oral fluency, vocabulary, and individual story-element performance. Where feasible, a separate pilot group should be used to estimate the reliability of parallel test forms before full implementation.

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