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Improving students’ writing through creative drama

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Abstract

Individuals face social, moral and ethical issues in their daily lives. Drama is the expression of these issues through body, words, gestures and writing. Drama not only helps individuals increase their communication skills but also help them develop their self-perception and creative thinking skills. This study investigates the effects of creative drama activities on fifth-grade students’ creative writing skills. Through the mixed study design, the data of the study was collected in three different classrooms of a primary school located in the capital city of Turkey, Ankara. The school principle, teachers and students were willing to participate in the study. Students in the study classroom and the control classrooms were asked to write a story at the beginning and at the end of the study. However, the students in the study classroom participated in reading, creative writing and creative drama activities for a total of eight times and each of these activities lasted for approximately 40 minutes. During these activities, the students read a story book, discussed the elements of the story such as theme, characters, events, time, and the location of the events take place. After that the students were asked to participate in creative drama activities based on their daily readings. At the end of the study, students’ written stories from all three classrooms were read and scored based on a story writing rubric and interviews were conducted with study classroom students regarding their experiences throughout the study. Recommendations and suggestions for educators were provided.

Keywords: Drama, creative writing, reading, primary school students, teacher education;

1. Introduction

Creative drama activities, based on children literature, allow students both the enjoyment of reading an author’s story book and to internalize the messages of the story. Through reading story books for several times for comprehension, checking their understanding through questions regarding the story elements, and dramatizing the messages of these literature resources are important learning experiences for students (Neelands, 1998).

Through use of creative drama students can actively participate in the learning process and they can discover their skills and creativity as well. By using children’s literature that encourages students to read and analyse the elements of the stories, students can improve their creativity and can better reflect themselves to their peers and adults around them (Ünsal, 2005).

Primary school years are not only important for an individual to learn how to write but also to improve her writing skills and attitudes toward writing. In other words, teaching writing should go beyond teaching how to write words and sentences correctly and should give the message that writing is and should be an
effective way of communication. While teaching any subject, teachers need to remember that using multiple methods and allowing students to use their multiple senses make learning become more permanent (Mc Caslin, 1990). Therefore, in classrooms besides reading and listening skills, students should also encouraged to improve their speaking, writing, observing, doing self-expression and creative thinking skills. Since drama is a method of understanding and explaining, it should be used frequently in language arts blocks. It is assumed that creative drama activities, based on children’s literature, can be an effective method to increase students’ creative writing skills (Piazza, 2003).

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of applying creative drama activities, reading and analyzing story books on fifth-grade students’ creative writing skills. Research questions of this study were:

1. Do fifth-grade students differ in terms of their creative writing skills based on their creative drama activities?
2. How students find creative drama activities?
3. Which of the activities students thought they involved in and which of them were favoured by the students?
4. How students want to organize creative drama activities?

3. Methods

The research method of this study was the mixed methods research design so both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to describe and summarize data. The data was obtained from students’ written stories, observations and interviews with students from study classroom. Students’ creative writing performances were assessed through a rubric, developed by the researchers, by two experiences instructors who were not involved in the study.

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 74 fifth-grade students coming from three classrooms of a primary school located in the capital city of Turkey, Ankara. One of the classrooms was randomly selected as the study classroom (26 students: 15 girls and 11 boys). In one of the control classrooms, with additional reading practices, there are 26 students with equal number of girls and boys. In the second control classroom there were 22 students with 11 girls and 11 boys.

3.2. Procedures

In order to investigate students’ creative writing performances, at the beginning of the study, all students were asked to complete a story. The students were provided with a worksheet where the beginning of the story was already provided. Students were told to read the entry sentence and complete the story in anyways they wish. The students were informed that their participation to the study will not affect their grades and they can leave the study at any time they want. The total of twenty-minutes-long time was provided for students to compose their stories.

Students in the study classroom listened to stories and poems; wrote poems; made brain storming activities; and worked on creative writing exercises. They also listened to music and asked to share their imaginations based on that. Students were asked to discuss their ideas in small groups and involve in drama activities. The researchers asked several questions to encourage students to think creatively and after all these activities students performed drama with their peers. In one of the control classrooms, the students listened to
stories and answered questions about them. In the second control classroom, the researcher did not conduct any interventions but only collected pre-and-post written stories.

3.3. Data analyses

All students’ pre-and-post written stories were read and scored by two instructors who were experienced in teaching drama and grading writing. They followed the rubric, with ten sub categories, developed by the researchers. The ten categories of the rubric were content, details, plot and setting, organization, characters, word choice, grammar, focus, originality and a good ending. The interrater reliability between these two readers was also calculated through t-test. The difference among students’ story writing scores for three classrooms was calculated via one-way ANOVA.

4. Findings

Since students’ story writing performances were assessed by two independent readers, the authors first calculated the inter-rater agreement. The result of t-test showed that students’ both pre-and-post written story scores were not significantly different from each other for two raters, see table 1.

![Table 1. Inter-rater agreement between two raters](image)

After finding that two raters’ scores were not significantly different from each other, the researchers found out the differences in terms of students’ story writing performances.

![Table 2. Students’ story writing performances in three classrooms](image)

Analyses of one-way ANOVA yielded that students’ post story writing scores were not significantly different from each other for three classrooms (p>0.05). However, while students’ scores were getting lower in the control group with no interventions, the students’ post writing scores got higher in two remaining classrooms. Also, students in the study classroom received the highest scores but their scores were not significantly different.

During the interviews with study classroom students, they stated that their activities were very beautiful (18 students); fun (8 students); entertaining (5 students); nice (3 students); loved and very good (2 students for each response); exciting, enjoyable, educational and like a game (1 student for each response). Students’
responses on their favourite activities were also changed from student to student. The most favourite activity was role playing (10 students), following that drama (3 students); imagery and completing a story (2 students for each response); theatre, imagining, spontaneous, writing poems, working with whole class, acting, and listening to music (1 student for each response).

Throughout the study, the researchers observed the students and were pleased to see that the students were eager to participate in drama activities. At the end of the study, the researchers asked students whether they have any recommendations for practitioners and teachers to keep in mind while preparing drama activities with young learners. List of students recommendations were: reading and role playing with different stories; finding an appealing title; improving the number of characters; working on story completing practices; expanding the time given for drama; making sure that everyone is having a role and organizing more studies like the one they participated.

5. Limitations

Like any other research, this study has several limitations. Some of these are the number of participants were not high enough to make a generalization. Besides this, the school’s socio-economical background was very low and because of that we were not able to work students in a drama workshop place. We also did not have enough materials in terms of costumes and setting. Due to students’ curriculum was heavy, each time we had to complete our study in one course block, so the time was not enough for students to really comprehend the story and be creative for drama activities. None of the students had previous experiences with drama and we thought that the length of the study was not long enough for students to really get in to the art of drama. Furthermore, while students were writing their post-stories they were also getting ready for a national celebration day and they just want to be done with writing to go playground for the ceremony.

6. Results and recommendations

Studying drama with young learners should be planned for a longer period of time because being creative take a long time for them (Adhgüzel ve Öztürk, 2008; Okvuran, 2000). While having a long period of time for drama activities, educators also need to remember that there should not be a long break between drama activities. Teachers should go beyond the known stories and should allow students to interact with unfinished stories to think creatively. In this study, we chose to work with fifth-graders however further research should be conducted with different grade-level and with different socio-economical background. We looked at effects of creative drama activities on students’ writing performances but the effects of drama should be investigated in other subjects such as maths, science, and social studies as well.

References


