Engage, Perform, Speak: The Impact of Drama and Digital Activities on Myanmar EFL Students

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Abstracts

This study investigates how drama-based instruction (DBI) combined with digital learning tools affects English oral communication ability among Myanmar secondary EFL students. Despite DBI demonstrating well-documented pedagogical benefits globally, few researchers have examined its integration with digital technologies in the Myanmar educational context. A quasi-experimental design engaged 23 EFL students (Grade 5-9) in a 20-hour intervention combining systematic dramatic activities – including drama games, readers' theater, role-playing, character improvisation, and hot seating – with targeted digital learning tools (Padlet for collaborative discussions and peer feedback; Wordwall for interactive quizzes and vocabulary activities). Pre- and post-tests assessed students' English oral communication ability across five components: fluency, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage, pronunciation, and conversational strategies. Paired sample t-test analysis revealed statistically significant improvements across all assessed communication components ($p < .01$). The integration of drama techniques with strategically selected digital platforms created an effective learning environment for developing essential oral communication ability among Myanmar EFL students. Future research should examine long-term retention effects and investigate scalability across diverse educational settings with varying technological tools.

Keywords: Drama-Based Instruction, Digital Learning Activities, Oral Communication, EFL Students

Introduction

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, proficiency in English communication has emerged as a critical educational objective for Myanmar students, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts where traditional teaching methods

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have produced uneven outcomes. English proficiency enables global communication, expands access to higher education, and enhances career prospects. In Myanmar, the Burmese language is mainly used as a medium of instruction starting from primary school (Kirkpatrick, 2017), and English is taught as a foreign language. The recent Myanmar National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) reforms aim to incorporate 21st-century skills and higher-order thinking into the English curriculum, equipping students to participate effectively in a globalized learning society (Ministry of Education, 2016; Ministry of Education Myanmar, 2020).

However, despite the curriculum including reading, vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, and writing, significant challenges persist in the Myanmar ELT landscape that hinder the achievement of communicative goals. An overemphasis on test preparation and rote memorization continues to impede the development of practical language skills (Lwin, 2021; Tun, 2020). Additionally, limited teaching resources and traditional teaching methodologies further hinder progress, particularly in developing oral communication ability in secondary-level English classrooms (Tun, 2020). Consequently, students often lack the confidence to communicate effectively in English due to insufficient exposure and practice, both inside and outside the classroom. While private language schools in urban centers attempt to address these gaps, students in remote regions, such as parts of Shan State, remain disadvantaged due to ineffective pedagogy, minimal exposure, and scarce opportunities for speaking practice (Mar, 2020; Na, Kanokkamalade, & Khanetnog, 2020; Pannasami, Kanokkamalade, & Pintrymoon, 2020; Thane, 2023). Therefore, a more effective pedagogical approach is needed to prioritize speaking skills and incorporate relevant activities that prepare students for real-world communication.

Existing research demonstrates that drama-based instruction (DBI), creates dynamic, context-rich learning environments, thereby enhancing language acquisition and deepening comprehension (Dawson & Lee, 2018; Lee & Liu, 2022; Nguyen, 2023). Specifically, with the Myanmar educational context, a study by Mar, San, and Tang (2023) advocates for implementing drama-based practices to enhance students' listening and speaking skills. In parallel with these pedagogical developments, digital technology has become an integral part of education, including in Myanmar. Social networking, instant messaging, websites, collaborative writing tools, online videos, e-books, and voice recordings are valuable digital sources for teachers to integrate when designing language learning activities (Shadiev & Yang, 2020; Son, 2018). Technology integration fosters a more immersive learning environment,

enabling students to enhance their fluency and accuracy while engaging with authentic language use and problem-solving tasks (Richards, 2015).

Although existing research supports the efficacy of DBI and digital tools independently, limited research has examined their synergistic application in the Myanmar EFL context, particularly for developing oral communication skills among secondary students facing systemic pedagogical constraints. This approach may offer a unique solution to Myanmar's EFL challenges by combining embodied learning (DBI) with scalable, technology-mediated practice opportunities.

Thus, grounded in constructivist principles by prioritizing active learning through meaningful social interaction, this study addresses this gap by examining the following research question: To what extent does DBI in conjunction with digital learning activities enhance oral communication ability among Myanmar secondary EFL students?

Research Objective

To investigate the effectiveness of DBI in conjunction with digital learning activities in enhancing students' oral communication ability of Myanmar EFL students.

Research Framework

The framework of this study, illustrated in Figure 1, integrates drama-based instruction (DBI) with digital learning activities, synthesizing principles of DBI and Goh and Burns (2012) teaching-speaking cycle with digital learning activities. This pedagogical approach combines digital technology with DBI to enhance English oral communication ability. The learning activities employ various drama techniques to foster active participation, contextual learning, collaboration, and reflective practice, thereby creating an interactive environment that bridges classroom learning with real-world communication scenarios (Bessadet, 2022; Cawthon, Dawson, & Ihorn, 2011; Dawson & Lee, 2018; Galante & Thomson, 2017; Liyanawatta et al., 2022; Vaishnavi & Ajit, 2023).

Drama-based Instruction (DBI)	Digital Learning Activities	The Teaching-speaking Cycle
A teaching approach that integrates drama techniques as learning activities, focusing on fostering an interactive environment, connecting the content learned to real-world situations, and encouraging students to engage in active participation, collaboration, and reflection on their learning experiences.	Using digital technology to support English language acquisition through multimedia resources like images, audios, videos, and platforms such as Padlet, Wordwall, and Telegram group chat. Promoting active, engaging, and accessible learning without requiring students to create accounts.	(Goh and Burns, 2012:153) 1. Focus learners' attention on speaking 2. Provide input and/ or guide planning 3. Conduct speaking tasks 4. Focus on language/ skills/ strategies 5. Repeat speaking tasks 6. Direct learners' reflection on learning 7. Facilitate feedback on learning

DBI with digital learning activities

DBI with digital learning activities incorporates digital technology (multimedia resources and digital platforms) with DBI to facilitate learning. These learning activities typically involve different types of drama used in language classrooms to enhance English language acquisition, particularly in English oral communication ability through active participation, contextual learning, collaboration, and reflection.

English oral communication ability

English oral communication ability refers to the ability to interactively engage in spoken conversation and meaningfully convey information to the listeners within a given context. This ability encompasses skills such as fluency, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and conversational strategies.
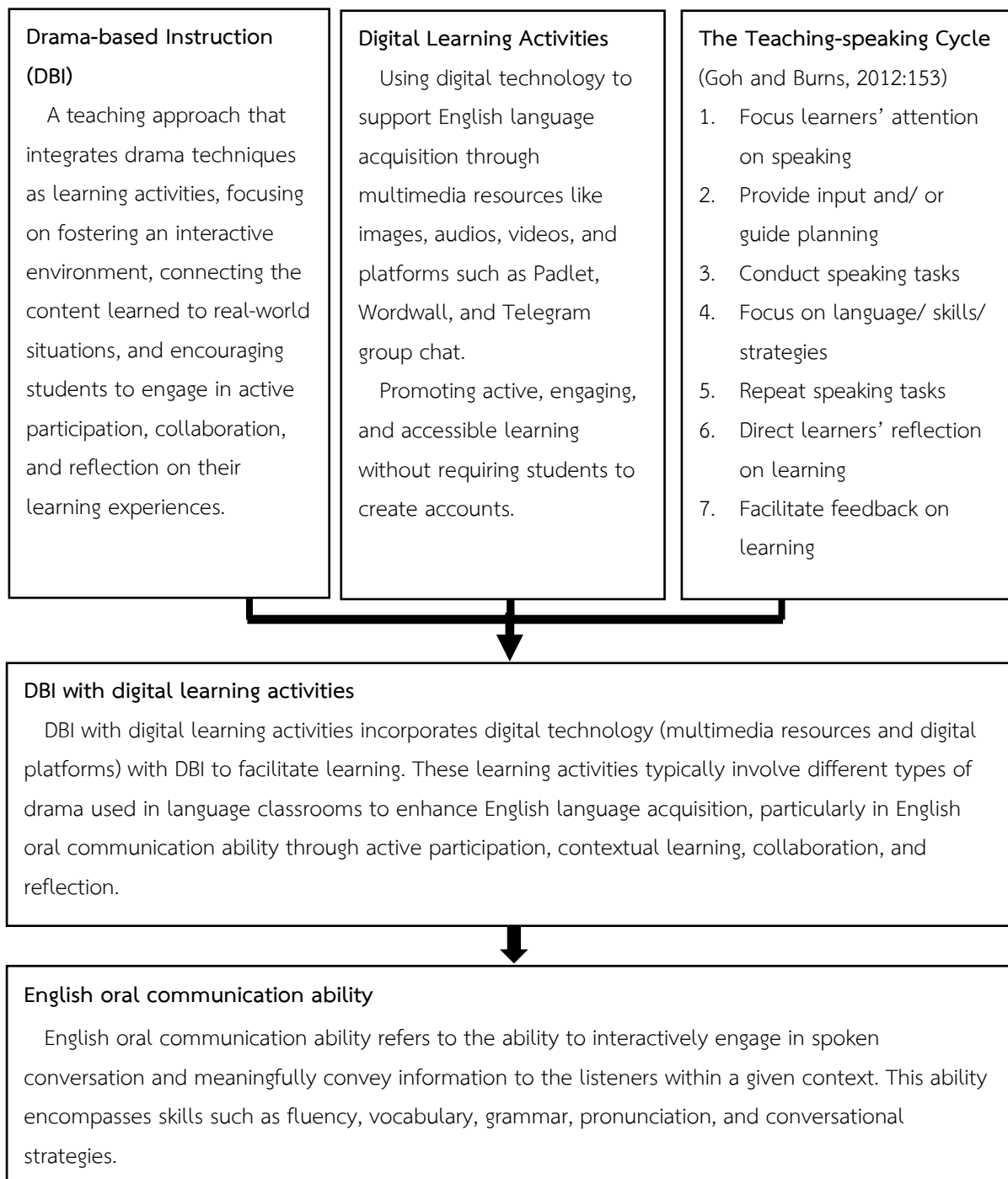
Figure 1. Research Framework DBI with Digital Learning Activities

The theoretical foundation of DBI is rooted in Vygotsky's constructivism and Freire's critical theories of learning (Dawson & Lee, 2018; Goldbogen, 2020). Vygotsky's social constructivism posits that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction among students and teachers (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This aligns with collaborative learning principles, wherein students actively engage with content through collaborative learning.

Drama techniques encompass a range of structured and improvisational activities aimed at enhancing language proficiency (Dawson & Lee, 2018; Dundar, 2013). These include: a) drama games as interactive exercises used as icebreakers or energizers to introduce topics and promote engagement; b) readers' theatre featuring the expressive reading of scripts to improve fluency; c) hot seating involving an interactive activity where students assume a character and answer questions to deepen character understanding; d) role-play using embodying characters in given situations to practice language in various contexts; and e) improvisation encouraging spontaneous creation of scenes or dialogues to encourage quick thinking and fluency. These methods collectively create an interactive learning environment with practical language skills and knowledge.

In this study, the following techniques were employed: drama games, skits, readers' theater, hot seating, improvisation, role-play, and simulations, all tailored to the lessons to maximize students' participation, engagement, and collaboration. Additionally, students were guided to provide constructive peer feedback and engage in reflective discussion following each performance. To further support learning, multimedia resources—including virtual images, audio, and videos were incorporated, alongside digital platforms such as Padlet, Wordwall, and Telegram group chat.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a single-group quasi-experimental design with a pre-test and post-test to assess students' English oral communication ability over a 20-hour instructional period. The design was selected due to administrative policies within the language school context in Myanmar, which require equal treatment of all students, thereby limiting random assignment to different instructional conditions. Despite these limitations, the quasi-experimental approach with pre- and post-test comparisons provides valuable insights into intervention effectiveness while maintaining ecological validity in an authentic classroom environment.

2. Participants and Context

Participants (16 females/ 7 males, age 13–16) were 23 pre-intermediate EFL students from a Shan State language school; 40% came from Burmese-speaking households, and 60% from linguistic minority groups. A convenience sampling method was employed to select

participants from one of the pre-intermediate level General English classes available at a language school in Myanmar.

The language school provides supplementary English courses to a diverse student population, from young learners to adults, with the goal of enhancing their English skills. The school offers year-round General English classes at various proficiency levels, determined by a placement test administered prior to enrollment. This educational context provided an authentic language learning environment that enhances the external validity of the research findings. While this research focuses on improving students' English oral communication ability through 20 hours of instruction, reading and writing activities were incorporated outside of the research instruction time, aligning with the regular class schedule to ensure students continued to receive comprehensive language instruction.

3. Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was an English oral communication ability test, designed to evaluate the effects of DBI combined with digital learning activities on students' English oral communication ability. Two parallel tests (pre-test and post-test), each lasting approximately 10 minutes, were administered. The test consisted of two parts: a) a picture description task, which provided a standardized visual prompt to ensure equitable responses; b) a transactional conversation task, which simulated real-world scenarios (e.g., ordering food) to assess authentic communication skills. These tests were chosen because they reflect the core speaking skills aligned with this study's focus on oral communication ability and assess students through direct performance-based tasks in authentic contexts. All materials were carefully designed based on students' interests and backgrounds to mitigate bias and ensure engagement.

The tests were scored using an analytic rubric that assessed five criteria: fluency, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and conversational strategies, each scored on a 1-4 scale (1 = need improvement to 4 = excellent). Inter-rater reliability analysis using Intraclass Correlation Coefficient confirmed excellent consistency (ICC = 0.95), ensuring measurement reliability and high consistency between two raters.

4. Instructional Instrument

The instructional instrument follows instructional procedures synthesizing from principles of DBI and the teaching-speaking cycle by Goh and Burns (2012) with digital learning activities to enhance students' English oral communication ability. The integration of theoretical perspectives, Vygotsky's social constructivism and Freire's critical theories of learning, on which DBI is rooted, supports co-constructed learning where students collaboratively build understanding through dramatic exploration, scaffolded by digital platforms, and dialogic meaning making, where communication becomes a tool for authentic expression rather than mere linguistic practice. The instructional approach of this study is primarily categorized into five steps:

1. Activating prior knowledge: Drama games and warm-up activities (e.g., Wordwall quizzes/flashcards) introduced topics.

2. Content exploration and language development: Padlet delivered multimedia resources; activities like hot seating, improvisation, and role-play provided contextualized practice.

3. Speaking activity: Students applied language in real-time scenarios (e.g., readers' theater activities or 3-minute V-logging role plays.)

4. Self-assessment: Reflection via oral discussions or anonymous Padlet feedback.

5. Feedback: Teacher and peer feedback targeted both strengths and areas for improvement.

During in-class sessions, the teacher facilitated DBI with digital learning activities to engage students in the lessons and taught the students actively. Moreover, out-of-class online sessions were scheduled once a week, and they involved group work, completing assignments, or having online student-teacher conferences, where students can ask questions, seek clarification, or receive feedback.

5. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in 3 phases: prior to, during, and after the implementation of the research study.

During the pre-intervention phase, students joined course orientation to familiarize themselves with digital tools and class structure. Then, a pre-test was administered to assess their English oral communication ability. The test lasted approximately 10 minutes for each pair.

The intervention was implemented over a total of 20 instructional hours, comprising 4 in-class sessions and 1 out-of-class online session weekly.

At the post-intervention phase, a post-test was administered in a manner similar to the pre-test, maintaining the same conditions and test structure.

6. Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the English oral communication ability tests were analyzed using SPSS program (Ver. 29). A paired-sample *t*-test was employed to determine if there were statistically significant differences in pre- and post-tests. The researcher calculated mean scores, standard deviations, and effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) for both pretest and post-test scores to measure the effectiveness of the intervention.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school principal prior to the implementation of the research. Parents and students were informed about the research study, its objectives, and their right to withdraw from participation at any time without consequences. This communication included a request for parental consent for their children's participation and permission for the use of personal electronic devices for classroom activities. The researcher also ensured the availability of backup devices for students. The selected digital platforms, Padlet and Wordwall, facilitated anonymous participation without the need for personal account creation. Students were also offered the option to utilize avatars instead of personal photos on these platforms. The confidentiality of students' personal information and the data collected during the research process was maintained.

Research Results

The objective of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of DBI with digital learning activities on enhancing students' English oral communication ability. The data analysis reveals significant improvements across multiple improvements.

1. A Holistic Improvement of English Oral Communication Ability

A paired-samples *t*-test was employed to analyze the mean scores and standard deviations and determine whether the difference between pretest and post-test scores was statistically significant, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 A holistic comparison of pretest and post-test scores for English oral communication
ability

Test (total score = 20)	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig. p value	Effect size (d)
Pretest (n=23)	11.87	1.58	3.24	12.89*	22	.000	2.69
Post-test (n=23)	15.11	2.04					

*$p < .01$

As illustrated in Table 1, the pre-test mean score was 11.87 (*S.D.* = 1.58), while the post-test mean score was 15.11 (*S.D.* = 2.04). The mean difference between pre-and post-test was 3.24, representing 27% improvement in performance. The *t*-value (*t* = 12.89) revealed a significant difference in students' English oral communication ability after the intervention, with statistical significance at $p < .01$. These results indicate that DBI with digital learning activities not only produced statistically reliable improvements but also generated real-world enhancements in students' oral communication ability.

In addition, the effect size was calculated using Cohen's *d* to determine the magnitude of the intervention's effects on students' English oral communication ability. The effect size was 2.69. According to the guidelines of Cohen (2013), an effect size of 0.2 is considered small, 0.5 is medium, and 0.8 is large. These results suggest that the intervention had a meaningful impact on students' English oral communication ability.

2. Improvement in All Components of English Oral Communication Ability

The results in Table 2 and 3 indicated that all five components—fluency, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and conversational strategies demonstrated statistically significant improvements ($p < .001$), with effect sizes ranging from large (*d* = 0.9) to very large (*d* = 1.8).

Table 2 A comparison of pretest and post-test scores in pronunciation and conversational
strategies

Components of English oral communication ability	Pretest (n=23)		Post-test (n=23)		Mean difference	t	df	Sig. p value	Effect size (d)
	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$	S.D.					
Pronunciation	2.84	.35	3.28	.45	.43	4.31*	22	.001	0.9
Conversational Strategies	1.71	.45	2.63	.48	.91	8.89*	22	.001	1.8

*p < .01

Table 2 demonstrates data on the most substantial improvement observed in conversational strategies, where the scores increased from 1.71 (*S.D.* = 0.45) to 2.63 (*S.D.* = 0.48), representing a mean difference of 0.91. On the other hand, pronunciation scores rose from 2.84 (*S.D.* = 0.35) to 3.28 (*S.D.* = 0.45), with a mean difference of 0.43. While conversational strategies demonstrated the largest gain at 53%, pronunciation showed the smallest absolute gain, with 15% increased. This finding aligns with previous studies by Dawson and Lee (2018) and Galante and Thomson (2017), who identified drama-based approaches as particularly effective for developing communication skills.

Table 3 A comparison of pretest and post-test scores in fluency, vocabulary, and grammar

Components of English oral communication ability	Pretest (n=23)		Post-test (n=23)		Mean difference	*t*	*df*	Sig. *p* value	Effect size (*d*)
	$\bar{x}$	*S.D.*	$\bar{x}$	*S.D.*					
Fluency	2.41	.56	3.15	.66	.74	6.09*	22	.001	1.3
Vocabulary	2.63	.43	3.13	.55	.50	4.79*	22	.001	1.0
Grammar	2.28	.39	2.91	.44	.63	6.61*	22	.001	1.4

*$p < .01$

Table 3 shows data on the mean scores of students' fluency, which rose from 2.41 (*S.D.* = 0.56) to 3.15 (*S.D.* = 0.66). After engaging in the activity, fluency also improved considerably, with mean difference at 0.74, indicating that students felt more comfortable and confident when speaking English. For vocabulary, students' mean scores increased from 2.63 (*S.D.* = 0.43) to 3.13 (*S.D.* = 0.55), and from 2.28 (*S.D.* = 0.39) to 2.91 (*S.D.* = 0.44) for grammar. Grammar and vocabulary components demonstrated moderate improvements, with mean differences were at 0.63 and 0.50, respectively. These gains imply that scaffolding provided through digital learning activities in conjunction with the contextual language use encouraged by DBI effectively fostered the development of grammatical accuracy and lexical appropriateness.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that the English oral communication ability of students was significantly improved after the intervention. Specifically, the statistical data showed significant differences between the pre-test and post-test mean scores in all components of English oral

communication ability. Overall, integrating DBI with digital learning activities produced a substantial increase in holistic oral communication ability, supporting the context-rich and reflective activities that foster comprehensive language development.

1. A Holistic Improvement of English Oral Communication Ability

The improvement in post-test scores demonstrates the effectiveness of the intervention, aligning with similar studies (Barakat, 2023; Bessadet, 2022; Galante & Thomson, 2017; Lee & Liu, 2022; Vaishnavi & Ajit, 2023). Before the intervention, students demonstrated limited ability to communicate in English. After the implementation, they demonstrated notable progress in their oral communication proficiency and confidence when engaging with peers in English during classroom activities. This corresponds with observations by Bessadet (2022), who reported DBI as a method that fosters holistic language development, student engagement, and practical application in real-life situations. Similarly, Hinmalai and Kongson (2024) found that Thai senior elementary school students improved their English-speaking skills through active participation in creative, collaborative, and technology-supported activities in a stimulating environment that encouraged authentic communication.

This intervention aligns with socio-constructivist principles, where students collaborate and actively participate through activities that utilize drama techniques with digital scaffolding, resulting in significant gains across multiple oral communication components. Furthermore, students engaged with real-world contexts, working together to create similar scenarios through conversation and collective action. This suggests that the social aspects of learning were crucial to students' perceived improvement in English communication ability. The interactive nature of DBI and digital platforms employed throughout the instructional steps provided students with meaningful opportunities to practice language use in contextually relevant situations.

2. Improvement in All Components of English Oral Communication Ability

DBI with digital learning activities not only enhanced overall communication but also improved specific components essential to effective oral communication. First, conversational strategies showed the most substantial improvement (mean difference = 0.91), where students were initially hesitant during the first week. Activities such as improvisation and hot-seating exercises simulated spontaneous interactions, allowing students to negotiate meaning and collaborate with peers—core elements of DBI that create authentic communication contexts (Dawson & Lee, 2018). The dramatic improvement in this component suggests that structured

social interaction through drama activities effectively develops students' ability to maintain and navigate conversations.

Second, the finding showed that pronunciation gained the smallest improvement (mean difference = 0.43). However, the pronunciation pre-test mean score was at 2.84, while the conversational strategies pre-test mean score was at 1.71. This suggests that students' pronunciation was somewhat acceptable at the beginning compared to the conversational strategies, which required more intensive training with an effective approach. Audio-visual modeling facilitated via digital tools enabled students to mimic correct pronunciation patterns and, nevertheless, contributed to advancement. Similarly, Hiranrakpattana and Sukavatee (2024) highlighted that listening to pronunciation models and repeating the words repeatedly improves pronunciation accuracy.

Furthermore, students demonstrated considerable gains in fluency (d = 1.3), which aligns with DBI's emphasis on spontaneity (Galante & Thomson, 2017). Interactive digital tools (Zakopoulos et al., 2023) with consistent opportunities for oral communication practice effectively enhanced students' ability to communicate smoothly. Interactive quizzes generated by Wordwall, drama games, and role-play activities scaffolded students to practice spontaneous speech in real-world contexts. Similarly, Mudofir et al. (2024) noted role-play's impact on fluency, pronunciation, and confidence.

Another important factor contributing to the development of oral communication ability was its emphasis on reflection. Students were regularly encouraged to reflect on their performance and linguistic development. Matyakhan, Chusanachoti and Santos (2024) emphasized the role of self-reflection along with peer assessment in fluency development. This aligns with the reflective opportunities offered within DBI and creates a sustainable learning cycle that traditional approaches often neglect.

DBI with digital learning activities helps address the lack of authentic interaction in traditional Myanmar EFL classrooms. By promoting meaningful practice and structured reflection, it fosters motivation, active participation, and improvement in oral communication ability. This aligns with Vaishnavi and Ajit (2023), who found that drama-based approaches significantly improve confidence, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and overall communication. It reflects a paradigm shift in ELT toward holistic, student-centered methodologies adaptable to diverse contexts.

Limitations

1. The participants in this study may not represent the entire population of Myanmar EFL students, and their improvement may be attributed to the novelty of the approach or an equally effective intervention. Given the single-group experimental design with a convenience sample (n = 23), the robustness of the findings is limited and prevents the establishment of causal relationships.

2. The intervention duration was limited by the class cycle of the language school. This duration may have been insufficient to evaluate the long-term retention and improvement of students' oral communication ability, while it was sufficient to demonstrate significant improvements.

3. The integration of digital tools requiring online access presents constraints for students to use those tools outside of class hours due to the current internet connectivity challenges faced in Myanmar, potentially limiting the full benefits of digital learning activities.

Recommendations

1. Future research should employ more rigorous experimental designs with control groups and examine the effectiveness of this approach across diverse socioeconomic contexts and proficiency levels.

2. Future research could extend the instructional duration over a longer period, providing valuable insights into long-term retention, a more comprehensive assessment, and the development of oral communication ability acquired through the treatment.

3. The selection of digital platforms should depend on the chosen context, the availability of devices, and the flexibility of students. This could help students learn and engage meaningfully in the activities without any obstacles.

4. Future investigations should incorporate qualitative methods to assess student and teacher feedback regarding the approach. This could provide in-depth perspectives to refine instructional approaches and better address the diverse needs of students across various education contexts.

Policy Implications

This study demonstrates that DBI with digital learning activities extends learning opportunities beyond conventional classrooms. Digital tools enhance reproducibility and accessibility, aligning with national assessment guidelines for basic education (NAG) by Ministry of Education Myanmar (2020), which advocate technology-enabled collaborative learning. The Myanmar Ministry of Education could strategically leverage these findings by mandating the inclusion of DBI principles, practical application workshops, and appropriate digital platforms within pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. Teachers require explicit DBI guidelines to guide them on how digital platforms can be effectively employed in EFL classrooms. Teachers' proficiency in drama techniques and their familiarity with digital activities directly influence students' development of oral communication. They need systematic professional development combining technological skills with DBI pedagogical strategies. This preparation will enhance basic digital literacy to encompass how technology enhances specific language learning aspects within DBI frameworks.

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