

# Research on Strategizing Intercultural Drama Creation through Speech Act Theory in Secondary English Education

Chong Liu, Ting Huang

School of English Studies, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China  
Email: 3368701152@qq.com, 20102018@zyufl.edu.cn

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## Abstract

The promulgation of the ideological and political education curriculum triggered more comprehensive requirements for students' intercultural competence, from acquiring cultural knowledge to making cultural choices. In light of this, this paper constructs an innovative teaching model that simulates a context-based situation of intercultural conflict guided by the speech act theory in response to calls for the use of drama in education in the new English curriculum. The subject was taught to 82 eighth-graders at School F, N City and the results show that the teaching steps of constructing the dramatic context, enriching the dramatic content, re-enacting the dramatic plot, and deepening the dramatic theme align with the student's learning pace, and the students show good acceptance of this teaching model.

## Keywords

Drama in Education, Speech Act Theory, Intercultural Drama Creation, Secondary School Education

## 1. Introduction

In this world where the process of cultural diversification is accelerating at an ever-increasing pace, Chinese President Xi has repeatedly emphasized the significance of exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations as the leading driving force for the advancement of human civilization and the development of global peace, advocating to break the barrier through intercultural communication. Based on China's national conditions, this proposition has triggered the academic hotspot of intercultural competence in the field of education, enabling do-

mestic scholars to conduct research at all levels of educational institutions. Among them, secondary education, or middle schools in particular, should receive the most attention, as students in this period embrace the golden age of cognitive enhancement, in line with psychologist Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

The publishment of the new English curriculum (*Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022*) further proved intercultural competence's importance by polishing the three-dimension cultivation objectives into student's core competency which includes four parts, clearly pointing out the term of cultural awareness and giving several standardized requirements such as "be brave to interact with people from different countries and consciously be sensitive to each parties' feelings" and "to investigate the roles of verbal and non-verbal communication in the context of intercultural interactions" (*Zhang & Wu, 2022: p. 7*). For the former, the curriculum itself refers to a practical approach by suggesting the integration of English drama in English classes. Drama in education (DIE), a comprehensive language practice activity, has been regarded as the bridge for cultural immersion which facilitates intercultural comprehension and communication through performance, negotiation and cooperation (*Shen & Shen, 2023*). Learning from this, various scholars at home and around the world have used DIE in their daily teaching to enhance the intercultural competence of secondary school students. Nonetheless, there is a limited body of research focusing on the effects of verbal and non-verbal communication in conducting DIE. The speech act theory developed by J. Austin and further interpreted and classified by Searle, is a fundamental theory of pragmatism. The locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts within it are highly expected to be able to draw conclusions about almost all cases of communication, thus instructing effectively the whole process of dramatic composition and performance.

In light of this, this paper aims to innovatively construct pedagogical processes for drama taking place in intercultural situations through the guidance of speech act theory, identifying current implementation shortcomings while giving appropriate strategies for future improvement.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Overview of Drama in Education**

#### 1) Definition

The historical development in DIE originated in Europe and then spread to America and other countries. The Rousse and Dewey's pedagogical ideas of activity-centered curriculum facilitate its birth but it's Dorothy Heskett that finally proposed the relatively complete definition of this term.

#### 2) Classification

##### a) Studies abroad

From the 1960s to the 1980s, educators overseas worked to find more flexible and natural ways to incorporate drama into teaching through re-constructing the necessities of its implementation. In 1959, Jerzy Grotowski, a theater director from

Poland, came up with the concept of poor theater, noting that actors and audiences are the only two core components of a play. From his point of view, anything other than these two components, including costumes, music or even the script, could be thrown out, since they are stumbling blocks to achieving zero-distance interaction between audience and actors (Grotowski, 1984, as cited in Xiong, 2018). Richard Schechner's theory, named Environmental Theatre, further obscures the distance and relationship between actors and audience. In his view, when individuals no longer adhere to the cognitive framework that determines character attributes based on geographical location (platform and auditorium), the entire theater will transform into a novel performance environment where dramatic tension can continuously expand. In this setting, the interactions between the actors' interpretations and the audiences' feedback will intersect in a dynamic manner, giving rise to a new concept of drama (Sanchez et al., 2022).

These two illustrations of drama pave the way for further implementation of in-class activities, as classrooms are novel theaters that provide interactive and contextualized situations for communication in the educational domain. In an environment where little preparation is required for drama-based teaching, the episodic and interactive nature of drama emerges gradually through an ongoing exchange between teacher instruction and student engagement, and these aspects become more significant as time progresses. In light of this, British theatre educator Cecily O'Neill redefined DIE as process theatre in her master's thesis. In accordance with the conclusion of teaching methodologies and practices in the relevant area, she, along with students, teachers, and actors, tried various approaches and finally "formulated a systematic theoretical framework for process drama that eschews a fixed script or predetermined outcome, which emphasized the process rather than the final results" (Luo et al., 2024: p. 2).

#### b) Studies at home

The implementation of DIE in China was first carried out in the field of psychology and medical science in the 1980s as a tool for healing psychic trauma. As time went by, its potential strength of integrating several subjects by simulating a great variety of contextualized situations has been witnessed by the domestic scholars, so it has been gradually applied in schools, first in psychodrama to construct a positive study style, then integrated with the fundamental subject including English in the daily teaching procedures.

Building upon the existing body of international research, Gu et al. (2004) conducted comparatively perfect research in domestic college's oral English class, proving DIE's practical functions in China's own circumstances and concluded several teaching forms including exemplary conversation practice, supportive conversation practice, improvisation, and minor-size dramatic performance. A decade later, due to the persistence and perseverance made by Chinese educators, the research scope has never been limited in universities and various innovative conducting forms which match students in different cognitive and language periods have been created, including reader's theater, role-play, hot seating, mantle of

the expert, and teacher in role with the fast improvement of teaching conditions. Moreover, the objective of enhancing a student's specific English skills has been transformed into cultivating core competencies of students, especially their cultural awareness and thinking qualities. For example, Yang (2020) emphasized DIE's significance in ideological and political education, advocating a proper value of imbibing the new (foreign culture) and consolidating the origin (Chinese culture) to shape students' intercultural awareness. Yan and Tuo (2021) build up a theoretical framework which utilizes DIE as a bridge to connect English teaching with humanistic education, trying to achieve student's overall development to cultivate them as a round person.

## 2.2. Overview of the Speech Act Theory

### 1) Definition

The speech act theory is a philosophical theory of language first proposed by Austin in 1955. It has deepened the scholar's cognitive comprehension of language through deconstructing the relationship between speech and action. In its interpretation, the secret of smooth language communication proceeds must be grounded in two key conditions: the speaker's ability to articulate their intention clearly and the listener's capacity to accurately comprehend the speaker's intent. Based on these conditions, the communicative parties can engage in repeated and meaningful exchanges. However, if either the speaker fails to express themselves adequately or the listener misinterprets the speaker's intention for various reasons, the communication process will encounter failure. Enlightened by this, Austin classified three terms to vividly describe the dynamic script of personal interactions, that is locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. In light of Austin's theory, Searle further classified the illocutionary into five branches, including directive, assertive, commissive, expressive, and declarative (Bäckström, 2020).

“Locutionary act refers to the act of uttering words, phrases, and clauses. Illocutionary act refers to the act of expressing the speaker's intention. Perlocutionary act refers to the act performed by or resulting from saying something.” (Dai, 2008: p. 82). Learnt by this, the contextualized circumstances simulated by DIE could be interpreted as a two-way interaction model, wherein both parties involved in communication possess equal standing from a communicative perspective, alternately functioning as both the disseminator and recipient of information, both verbal and non-verbal.

### 2) Classification

Although the domestic research on speech act theory commenced relatively late, it has exhibited rapid development. Drawing upon extensive reading of both domestic and international literature, the author posits that scholars in this field share similar research orientations, which can be broadly categorized into the following two areas:

First is the study of specific discourses within literary works. Utilizing discourse

analysis as the research methodology and grounded in speech act theory, scholars examine particular discourse categories or character roles to enhance readers' comprehension of the work or the portrayal of characters. For example, [Li and Wongwaropakorn \(2024\)](#) conducted an investigation of the rejection dialogues in three Chinese popular TV dramas, finding out how distinctions in politeness levels and contextual factors influenced the manifestation of refusals in Chinese discourse. Moreover, using the behavioral dimension of speech act theory, [Zhang and Tang \(2023\)](#) analyze the dialogue between father Willy and son Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, aiming to reveal the essence and root of the conflict between father Willy and son Biff. It is found that critical communication and denial response in father-son dialogue are the main modes of constructing drama character conflict.

Secondly, pragmatic investigation and analysis of teacher discourse in educational settings. This type of research frequently integrates psychological theories to explore how various modes of discourse expression—such as declarative statements, inquiries, and instructional guidance—can foster students' learning motivation and self-efficacy across different dimensions of teaching. Selecting a cohort of Saudi EFL learners as the testees, [Tegler and Melander \(2024\)](#) used discourse completion tasks to investigate teacher's direct request's effectiveness to student's response.

### 2.3. Summary

From the literacy above, it can be clearly seen that although the current studies in the speech act theory and drama in education have made great contributions to the related areas through multifaceted constructive discourse, there still have several shortcomings.

For one thing, the guiding role of speech act theory in enhancing cross-cultural competence is not clear. Although scholars at home and abroad have recognized that it is extremely important to combine speech acts with the social context in which people are situated and examine the use of language from multiple perspectives such as society and language, there are currently no considerable number of documents that clarify how to put this theory into practice. For another, although both educational drama and speech act theory have a strong correlation with cross-cultural competence, the connection between the two in existing research is not close enough: educational drama lacks effective theoretical guidance in cultivating students' awareness of verbal communication in cross-cultural situations; the implementation of speech act theory in the field of education is mostly limited to the analysis of teachers' discourse, which does not fully meet the requirements of student-centered quality education.

In view of this, guided by the theory of speech acts, this paper summarizes the implementation steps and proposes corresponding strategies for educational drama in cross-cultural contexts through analyzing teaching practice cases at F Middle School in N City. The findings aim to provide a pedagogical framework for subsequent research endeavors.

### 3. Survey on Intercultural Drama Creation in Middle School English Class

#### 3.1. Case Description

**Table 1** obviously elaborates that it is a 45 minutes unit expansion lesson based on Unit 7 in PEP English book Grade 8 that conducted on 82 students in F school by an experienced teacher W. F school in N city is a municipal-level middle school under the direct administration of the Municipal Education Bureau, with a long history in education. The campus culture features diversity and integration, while the teaching atmosphere is inclusive and vibrant, creating an environment conducive to the implementation of DIE. In addition, based on the results of the high school entrance examination, the school's teaching effectiveness ranked in the middle tier among the province's schools. Therefore, the teaching model developed by the school can potentially be applied to average-performing schools across Zhejiang Province. Given that PEP teaching materials serve as a unified curriculum resource for high school entrance exams, the content of this teaching model is also applicable to schools with higher overall English proficiency.

**Table 1.** Basic information.

Dimension	Description
Teaching Duration	45 minutes
Teaching Subject	82 Grade 8 students in F school, N city
Lecturer	Teacher W, 12 years of teaching
Textbook	PEP English book Grade 8, Unit 7
Lesson Type	Unit expansion lesson (a textbook-based drama lesson based on the theme of this unit)

The research subjects were 82 grade 8 students from two natural intact classes who performed approximately similarly in English proficiency based on their final exams in the previous semester, as can be seen in **Table 2**. The eighth-grade students were chosen for their embrace of a relatively low academic pressure and high language output capacity, contributing to the implementation of intercultural drama creation and performance.

**Table 2.** Exam score distribution.

Grade	Class 7 (41ss)	Proportion	Class 8 (41ss)	Proportion
100 - 90	7	17.1%	8	19.5%
90 - 80	11	26.8%	10	24.4%
<60	1	2.4%	2	4.8%
Mean	81.79		81.52	

Before teaching, the experienced teacher Wu collaborated with the author to revise the teaching plan several times in order to make it as practical and forward-thinking as possible. Additionally, the teacher has been introduced the definitions and several application examples (including the video of a model class) of the DIE and speech act theory. Assistance has also been solicited from the school's science and music teachers to investigate the geographical features of Mount Qomolangma and the techniques of dramatic representation, thereby enhancing the vividness and plausibility of classroom instruction and presentation.

### 3.2. Teaching Implementation

#### 1) Construct the Dramatic Context (5 minutes)

Step1: The teacher guides students to trace their memory of the reading passage in this unit back by asking two questions “Why is Mount Qomolangma called the ‘Third Pole?’” and “How did the 1960 Chinese team’s success change international views?”, reviewing several words learnt in the last class such as altitude, oxygen level, and cultural symbols.

Step2: The teacher shares the news in 2020 that Chinese and Nepalese mountaineering teams joined hands to climb Mount Qomolangma, letting students imagine what will happen during mountain climbing and picking several students to answer.

Justification: Usher in the overarching premise of the screenplay; activate students’ pre-existing schemata to enhance their attentional engagement.

#### 2) Enrich the Script Content (10 minutes)

Step1: The teacher plays an audio of the fierce wind at the altitude of 6500m, combined with the altitude map of the mount Qomolangma and several landforms at that altitude.

Step2: The teacher asks students to watch a video about the Sherpa people’s religious beliefs in mountain deities, along with a concise introduction to their religious practices and mountain deity worship rituals.

Step3: The teacher divides the class into four large groups of approximately ten students each, according to the four rows of seats in the classroom. Then each large group will be evenly divided into two small groups, acting the camp of Chinese mountain climbers and Nepalese mountain climbers.

Step4: The teacher distributes the identity cards. The card of the Chinese team illustrates that they possess banners adorned with the character “Zheng,” featuring the signatures of five team members who successfully summited Mount Qomolangma and their assignment is to successfully achieve the top of this mountain. The card of the Nepalese team shows that the team members are Sherpa people and they embrace a flag with the image of Goddess Sagarmatha and religious symbols.

Justification: Incorporate knowledge beyond textbook articles (such as Nepalese religious customs and the unity traditions of the Chinese nation) to enrich the script content, laying a foundation for the creation of diverse plot scenarios; aligns

with the overarching learning objectives of the unit—learning facts about the world.

3) Replenish the Drama Plot (15 minutes)

Step1: The teacher plays the sound of the howling wind again at 6500 m and then presents the situation: As the snowstorm intensified, climbers from China and Nepal discovered a forward camp established by previous adventurers at 6500 m at this critical moment. The Chinese team intended to hoist their flag outside the tent; however, due to the structural constraints of the camp's tent, only one flag could be displayed at the apex. This limitation sparked a heated debate between the parties regarding whose flag should be prominently displayed.

Step2: Each small group writes down their reasons (5 minutes) and then negotiates with the opposite group. The teacher conducts teaching observations at that time, memorizing several verbal and non-verbal information exposed subconsciously.

Step3: 5 minutes later, the teacher pauses the negotiation, presents several sentence patterns and gestures and ranks them according to students using frequency, then asks students to use more than two sentence patterns in negotiation and get preparation for drama performing.

Sentence patterns for reference: "Please take down the flag." (Directive); "We must keep..." (Assertive); "We promise...if..." (Commissive); "Thanks for..." (Expressive); "Now we reach the top of Qomolangma" (Declarative).

Justification: Enhance students' critical thinking skills by constructing scaffolds for intercultural conflicts to cultivate their cultural awareness; enable students to recognize the pivotal role of verbal and non-verbal cues in altering outcomes during intercultural negotiations through experiential learning of autonomous discussions versus structured sentence pattern discussions; foster students' collaborative and expressive competencies.

4) Deepen the Script Theme (15 minutes)

Step1: The teacher invites several students to evaluate other team's performance and conclude the types of sentence patterns and body language the performer used. With enough time, the performers are allowed to explain the reason behind it.

Step2: The best solution team and the best performer will be appraised and elected to put their flag at the English corner of the classroom.

Step3: Based on the blackboard design and drama, the teacher summarizes the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication in intercultural negotiation, ending the whole class with the proverb "differences should not lead to conflict, but to mutual learning".

Justification: Cultivate students' correct value systems through the enhancement of effective cross-cultural communication can achieve mutually beneficial outcomes; facilitate the promotion of students' self-learning capabilities.

### 3.3. Interview Analysis

After the teaching implementation, two students in each class (a total of four stu-

dents) were randomly chosen as the interview respondents in order to assist the author in investigating the effectiveness and potential drawbacks of this class. The recording of relevant video materials and their intended usage were authorized by all respondents. Following a comprehensive compilation and analysis, the author has derived the following key findings:

On the one hand, almost all respondents already sensed the characteristics of this pedagogical methodology. “This class is quite different from the normal class. We have lots of opportunities to express our opinions and this situation is a lot more lifelike compared with the textbook material” (Respondent B). “We have attended other in-class role-play activities in the English class and Chinese class, but it was the first time that we had the ability to decide the process of the script. It lets me feel less nervous because no one knows what will happen next and I can fully immerse myself in dealing with the face-to-face issues” (Respondent C). And when the questions come to investigate their acceptance, more than seventy percent of the students show their welcome. “Generally speaking, it’s a pretty good class because I have acquired a lot and applied a lot. Although at the beginning of the activities my groupmates and me felt a bit confused because the instructions are different compare with daily class, but we adapt to it quickly” (Respondent A). From students’ answers, it could be clearly seen that although it’s the first time for them to get touch in DIE, they have quickly found out the difference of DIE to normal class, the distinction between drama creation and role-paly in specific. Their responses also revealed a great deal of acceptance of this form of teaching, as the drama scripts based on intercultural conflict and negotiation were complex and flexible enough to interest their learning.

On the other hand, such intercultural drama creation can relatively comprehensively promote all aspects of the core competencies of students, thus cultivating them as rounded individuals in English learning. “The whole teaching process assists me to acquire knowledge naturally and smoothly. I learned a lot of new geographical expressions and Nepalese cultural knowledge related to the unit at the beginning of the class, then I discussed with my group mates, made cultural decisions and did presentations. After the class, I still remember most of the knowledge and can continue the discussion with my classmates” (Respondent B). “The dramatic transformation of the results by using several sentence patterns impressed me the most. Before it was used, negotiations between the two parties appeared to be frozen. By using it, we find a way to explain the reasons behind our assignment, triggering us to stretch our thinking to consider a compromise solution. I am really proud of my team not only because we achieved a win-win situation, but learned the qualities of our ancestors inside” (Respondent D). Moreover, all the students agree it’s a creative journey through group cooperation. On the basis of this, all respondents acknowledged the significance of intercultural drama creation in enhancing their thinking capacity, since creative and critical thinking are combined in group discussions and negotiations. Respondent B further indicates intercultural drama creation’s functions in the promotion of language and

learning ability, verifying the systematic and scientific nature of the process including constructing the dramatic context, enriching the script content, replenishing the drama plot, and deepening the script theme. Respondent A illustrates the part of cultural awareness that aligns with the rules of intercultural drama creation of imbibing the new and consolidating the old.

## **4. Conclusion**

### **4.1. Major Findings**

This research, taking Unit 7 of the eighth-grade PEP textbook as a case example, preliminarily establishes and implements a curriculum model for script creation and performance utilizing drama pedagogy under the guidance of speech act theory in cross-cultural conflict scenarios. In this case, drama performance is highly expected to be interpreted as a two-way interaction model, wherein both parties involved in communication possess equal standing from a communicative perspective, alternately encoding the locutionary act, interpreting the illocutionary act (including its five classifications of directive, assertive, commissive, expressive, and declarative), and performing the perlocutionary act. According to this survey and research report, intercultural drama creation, a teaching mode that is in line with the requirements proposed by the new English curriculum and political education, has been well received in middle school English teaching, with several advantages of activating the learning atmosphere, cultivating student's language ability, thinking capacity, learning ability, cultural awareness, and promoting student's self-learning.

### **4.2. Prospects for Future Research**

First and foremost, due to time constraints and related school regulations, this study is primarily applied rather than empirical. The effectiveness of the intercultural drama creation can only be inferred through interviews and classroom observations, which inevitably limits the availability of visualizable conclusions. In addition, both the questionnaire survey and the interview involved relatively small sample sizes, both from a single secondary school. As such, the findings only reflect the participants' perspective and its implementation status in that specific context. For future research, additional cross-sectional studies involving empirical studies should be carried out under more favorable conditions regarding time and other external factors. This could include assessing learning outcomes through examination results, scriptwriting exercises, performance evaluations, and other measurable metrics to better visualize the effectiveness of intercultural drama creation. In addition, future studies are recommended to expand their sample sizes in order to enhance the credibility of the findings while making them applicable to a wider population.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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