

## **THE EFFECT OF DRAMA EDUCATION ON THE LEVEL OF EMPATHETIC SKILLS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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**Abstract.** The research was conducted to investigate the effect of drama education on the empathetic skills of university students. A total of 73 undergraduate students, 36 in the experimental group and 37 in the control group, from Gazi University participated in this study. Data were obtained through the use of the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B developed by Dökmen. The Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B was administered to both groups of students as a pre-test. Then, drama education was provided once a week for 14 weeks for the experimental group. No procedure was applied to the control group during the same period. The same scale was applied again to the experimental and control groups as a post test one week after the drama education was completed. The data were analyzed by using a covariance analysis (ANCOVA). The results showed that drama education had a statistically significant effect on the empathetic skills of students in the experimental group.

*Keywords:* empathetic skills, drama education, university students

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Establishing empathetic relationships in interpersonal communication is quite important for a healthy interaction. Empathetic understanding has the

characteristics of bringing people close to each other and facilitating communication. People feel that they are important and understood when someone empathizes with them. And being cared and understood by other people causes one to feel well. For people whose empathetic skills and inclinations are high, the probability of being liked by their environment increases.

Empathy, a basic condition to be fulfilled in interpersonal relationships, has various definitions such as „understanding the feelings of the other person“, „understanding the feelings and thoughts of the other person“ or „feeling the way the other person feels“ today. Although these definitions seem alike, there are some basic differences among them. Basically, in the definition „empathy is understanding the other“, the cognitive aspect of empathy is emphasized; whereas, the definition „empathy is feeling like the other“ emphasizes the emotional aspect of empathy (Dökmen, 1994). According to Rogers (1983), who based his theory on empathetic understanding, empathy is the process of putting oneself in the place of the other and looking at the events from that person's perspective, understanding the emotions and thoughts of the other person correctly and communicating this to that person.

Empathy is a skill which can be developed through education. When individuals receive systematic education on the subject, their empathetic skills increase. The literature proves that empathetic skills can be developed through methods such as psychological consultancy within a group (Dilekman, 1999), psychodrama (Dökmen, 1988; Kaner, 1991; Özdağ, 1999) and communication skills education (Öz, 1992; Serdoğan, 1998).

Drama is one of the tools that can be employed to improve the empathetic skills of individuals. Drama is a field that uses the power of play in education. Drama is the animation, and communicating the meaning, of a life, an event, an idea, an education unit, an abstract concept or a behavior, by participants in groupwork by making use of the drama techniques such as improvisation and role-playing in playful processes (San, 1996). Owing to its playful characteristics and its appropriateness for creative acts and creativity processes, drama has recently become a field on which studies have been conducted frequently (Fleming, 1994; San, 1995).

Drama has certain effects on people. It encourages individuals and enables them to develop experiences as all group members have the right to participate. The individuals involved in drama studies are provided with an environment of continuous discovering, evaluation, creation and asking questions towards finding solutions, and all these contribute to the individual positively. Drama supports to improve the creativity existing within individuals, rouses imagination and helps multi-directional development by mak-

ing them acquire skills related to developmental properties. Drama ensures that people see themselves and their environment in depth and at universal dimensions rather than superficially (Aral, Kandır and Can, 2000; Başkaya, 2000; Gönen et al., 1998).

Drama studies give the participants a chance of investigating social roles and social problems. The animation of different social problems causes an individual to understand the society and the relationships in it better. Such interactions help explicating ways of solutions to problems, and thus, the participants gain experience from problem solving oriented studies (Önder, 1999). The individuals participating in drama studies learn the situations, events and relationships in the process of drama by discovering. The participants use their real life knowledge and experience to create an imaginary world in drama, and they learn to investigate events and relationships while defining the situations and the roles they envisage there (O'Neil & Lambert, 1991). Furthermore, people can learn more about themselves through drama and discover their abilities (Güneysu, 1999; Öztürk, 1999).

The participants put themselves in the place of others during drama studies. In this way, individuals learn about themselves and their environment in a better way. By way of the activities carried out during drama studies, they improve their skills such as understanding the feelings and thoughts of others correctly and expressing that they do so; and this influences the development of their empathetic skills positively. According to Isenberg and Jalongo (1993), individuals take others' perspective when they roleplay in drama; hence, the improvement of their perspective taking skills is supported. Aral, Baran, Bulut and Çimen (2000), on the other hand, assert that drama enables individuals to put themselves in the place of others and helps develop versatile thinking.

It is notable that there is little research studying the impact of drama on the development of empathetic skills. As a matter of fact, in a study conducted to determine the effect of drama on empathetic skills, it was found that engaging in the drama experience did not cause a significant change in the empathetic skill scores of individuals. The result was explained by asserting that the fourteen-week education programme which involved the art education method and aimed at discovering the creativity within, as is the case in drama, had been insufficient to develop empathy (Okvuran, 1993). Can, Dere and Turan (1998) also found in their research on the impact of drama education on gaining empathetic skills that there was not a constructive increase in the empathetic skills of those who received drama education compared to those who did not. The researchers established that the result

may have stemmed from the fact that the studies were not adequately practice-oriented.

Yet, the constructive influence of drama on the empathetic skills of individuals could not be put forward in these studies. This may be due to the contents of the drama applications or the structure of the sampling group. For this reason, in this study, a different group of sampling has been involved and more intense practices of drama work oriented towards increasing empathetic skills have been used to determine whether drama education has an impact on increasing an individual's empathetic skills or not. In the research, the hypothesis that „the empathetic skills of individuals who get drama education will develop more than those who do not participate in a similar activity“ was accepted.

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

This research is an experimental study conducted to determine the influence of drama education on the empathetic skill level of university students. The 2x2 split-plot factorial design has been employed in the study. According to this design with a pre-test, post-test and a control group, the research has an independent and a dependent variable. The independent variable is the drama education and the dependent variable is the level of empathetic skills of university students.

### *Subjects*

The students of Gazi University, Faculty of Education, make up the experiment and control groups of the research. Initially, the experiment group consisted of 46 students attending the third grade of Pre-school Teaching Department and taking Drama for Pre-school Education lessons (four class hours a week), and the control group consisted of an equal number of students attending the third grade of Teaching Social Sciences Department and were not taking, and had never taken, drama lessons. However, as some of the students filled in the data gathering tools incompletely, the study was finalized with a total of 73 students, 36 of whom (33 females, 3 males) were in the experiment group and 37 of whom (31 females and 6 males) were in the control group.

### *Instruments*

The Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B (ESS-Form B), developed by Dökmen (1990), have been used to determine the empathetic skill levels of students. The empathetic Skills Scale is a Likert type scale which includes six problems and twelve types of empathetic reactions to these problems. The subjects are asked to select four of the reactions for each problem. The highest score that can be received from the scale is 219 and the lowest score is 64. The total points received from the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B show an individual's empathetic skill level: the higher the grade is, the higher the level of empathetic skills. The Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B has been applied on 60 freshman students of Ankara University, Faculty of Education and 24 psychologists working in different institutions, with the aim of testing its reliability and validity. For reliability, the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B has been applied on sixty subjects with an interval of a fortnight and the „r“ value has been found to be 0.83; i.e.,  $r = 0.83$  ( $P < .001$ ). In the validity study, it has been anticipated that there is a meaningful difference between the students and the psychologists in favour of the latter ( $t = 8.15$ ,  $P < .001$ ). In another validity study, it has been found that there is a relation between the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B and Role Playing Test (RPT) at the level of  $r = 0.78$  ( $P < .001$ ).

### *Experimental Application*

After determining the experiment and control groups, the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B was applied to both groups. The students in the experiment group were divided into two as their number was large. The Drama for Pre-school Education lesson involved drama experiences for the duration of 14 weeks with theoretical drama knowledge in the last two weeks, one hour of the lessons in each week. The same drama programme was applied to both experiment groups for 14 weeks, once a week. In the control group, on the other hand, no procedure was carried out. At the end of the 14 weeks, the students in the experiment group and the control group filled in the Empathetic Skills Scale – Form B again.

### *Analysis of the Data*

In order to determine whether the initial readiness levels of the experiment and control groups were equal or not, their average pre-test scores were compared by means of t-test. In this research, because the pre-test scores were significantly different, covariance analysis (ANCOVA) was applied to determine the effect of the provided drama education on empathetic skills

level of students. Covariance analysis is carried out to ensure that the factor whose effect is being tested or the variable(s) which has/have a relation with the dependent variable other than the factor is statistically checked. In this context, ANCOVA has two advantages over ANOVA. The first of these is that ANCOVA provides a great statistical power as it reduces the variance of error; and the second is that it decreases experimental bias in the cases when there is a difference between groups at the beginning of the experiment (Büyüköztürk, 2002)

## Results

The research analyzed whether there was a difference between the experiment and the control groups in terms of their average scores received from the Empathetic Skills Scale before the application or not by using the t-test. Table 1 shows the results regarding this analysis.

**Table 1.** The Results of t-test on Pre-test Scores of the Students of Empathetic Skills Scale of the Experiment and the Control Groups

GROUP	$\bar{X}$	SS	t	p
Experiment	170.11	22.85		
Control	136.43	17.03	7.126	.001

According to Table 1, there was a statistically significant difference between the average empathetic skills pre-test scores of the experiment and control groups,  $t = 7.126$ ,  $p < .001$ . These findings indicated that the empathetic skills levels of the experiment and the control groups were different at the beginning. When the averages are examined, the empathetic skills level of the students taking place in the experiment group is significantly higher than that of the control group.

As the average empathetic skills scores of the experiment and the control groups at the beginning were different, covariance analysis (ANCOVA) was conducted to test the effectiveness of the experimental design that the researchers have applied. Before introducing the results of this analysis, the average empathetic skills post-test scores of the experiment and the control groups are presented in Table 2.

The average score of the experiment group received from the Empathetic Scale Skills post-test initially was 184.72 and that of the control group was 148.46. The corrected empathetic skills score averages of the experiment group and the control group were 177.23 and 155.76 respectively. The corrected average empathetic skills score of the experiment group participating in the research is higher than that of the control group.

The results of the covariance analysis applied on the post-test score averages that were corrected according to the empathetic skills pre-test score averages are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2.** The Averages and the Corrected Averages of the Empathetic Skills Scale Post-test Scores of the Students in the Experiment and the Control Groups

GROUP	$\bar{X}$	Corrected Average
Experiment	184.72	177.23
Control	148.46	155.76

**Table 3.** The Results of the Covariance Analysis

Source of Variance	KT	Sd	KO	F	p	$\eta^2$
Pre-test (Reg)	5534.608	1	5534.608	15.70	.001	.18
Group	4889.575	1	4889.575	13.87	.001	.16
Error	24675.80	70	352.511			
Total	54204.440	72				

According to the results of the covariance analysis, there was a statistically significant difference between the experiment group's and the control group's post-test score averages that were corrected according to the empathetic skills pre-test score averages [ $F = 13.871$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .16$ ]. In other words, the empathetic skills scores of the students vary according to whether they get drama education or not. When the Eta-squared values are investigated, drama education explains for the 16%

variation in the post-test scores, independent of the pre-test scores, obtained from the Empathetic Skills Scale.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this research showed that getting drama education resulted in an increase in the empathetic skills of the university students. The Drama for Pre-school Education lesson taken by the experiment group was four class hours a week and it frequently involved activities oriented towards improving empathetic skills. For example, the lessons involved pair-work; and the students were asked to explain themselves to their peers and the peers gave feedback. Or else, the pairs were assigned roles such as mother-child or child-teacher and asked to talk on a subject; and then the procedure was repeated by changing the roles. This contributed to their development of empathetic skills. Moreover, during one academic semester, drama applications were conducted and only in the last two weeks, in one hour each week, theoretical information about drama was discussed. The authors believe that the empathetic skills scores of the individuals who participated in drama activities increased as a result of the planning and the application of the Drama for Pre-school Education lesson in this way.

The findings of this research do not support the previous research findings examining the impact of drama on the empathetic skills of individuals. In her research that was conducted to determine the effect of drama on empathetic skills, Okvuran (1993) established that drama education did not have an impact on empathetic skills. The researcher explained this result stating that a drama education programme of fourteen weeks would not be sufficient for the improvement of empathy and that the basic objective of drama was to discover the creativity within. In another research, the influence of drama on acquiring empathetic skills was investigated, and as a result, it was determined that there was not a positively directed increase in the empathetic skills level of those who received drama education compared to those who did not. (Can et al, 1998). However, literature contains theoretical knowledge regarding the assertion that drama experience has an influence on the improvement of empathetic skills. According to Aral, Baran, Bulut and Çimen (2000), drama experiences enable individuals to put themselves in the place of others and think in a versatile manner. Thus, the empathetic skills level of individuals will increase. According to Köksal Akyol (2003a-2003b), on the other hand, acquiring experience from various events and



situations by taking on different roles and thus improving empathetic skills are among expected gains.

An unexpected result of the research was the increase in the empathetic skill levels of the participants in the control group despite the fact that no procedure was applied to them. The application of the Empathetic Skills Scale might have inspired the individuals to improve themselves on this subject. They might have read books on this topic on their own. In addition, the students in the control group took Classroom Management course, which involved topics regarding communication, during the same period when the data was collected. Having taken this course might have affected the improvement of the empathetic skills of the students in the control group.

## **Recommendations**

This research was conducted with the objective of determining the effect of drama education on empathetic skills. The results of the study revealed that the drama activities improved the empathetic skills of individuals.

Some recommendations can be made taking into consideration the findings and the applied drama programme:

It is a known fact that empathetic skills are important for interpersonal relationships. For this reason, studies to improve the empathetic skills of individuals can be conducted. As a result of this study, as it was determined that drama had a positive influence on empathetic skills, drama studies with the aim of improving individuals' empathetic skills can be planned and applied.

As a consequence of drama studies, the personal development of individuals is supported. Further study can be carried out to improve such qualities as creativity and self-perception of individuals.

Other education methods in addition to drama can be used to develop empathetic skills.

The influence of drama education on empathetic skills level can be researched on different groups than university students.

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