



Using drama in English language programs for adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds: A thematic literature review and practice principles

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Abstract

Drama has long been recognised as a powerful pedagogical modality in language education, yet its application within adult English language programs for migrants and refugees remains underexamined, particularly within Australian settlement education and the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in particular. This thematic literature review synthesises research from 2000 to 2025 on the use of drama, encompassing process drama, applied theatre, role play, and embodied performance practices, as a set of creative approaches to teaching English to adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Drawing on Australian and international publications, the review maps the landscape of existing scholarship, identifying key themes including the role of drama in fostering communicative competence, building learner confidence, navigating identity and belonging, and creating safe spaces for emotional expression. A theoretical discussion grounded in embodied cognition illuminates why drama's kinaesthetic, relational, and affective dimensions may be particularly significant for learners whose language acquisition is shaped by experiences of displacement, trauma, and cultural transition. From the findings, a set of principles for practice is proposed, offering educators a framework for integrating drama into adult TESOL settings in ways that are culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and linguistically purposeful. The review concludes by identifying gaps in the current evidence base and suggesting directions for future research.

Keywords: *Drama pedagogy; adult migrant English education; refugee learners; process drama; embodied cognition; TESOL; applied theatre; thematic literature review.*

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Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a growing scholarly and practitioner interest in creative and arts-based pedagogies for language education (Aung, 2025; Malgoubri, 2026). From process drama and applied theatre to improvisation and embodied performance, drama has increasingly been recognised as a modality that can enliven language classrooms, foster communicative competence, and engage the whole person in the complex work of learning to speak, listen, read, and write in a new language (Belliveau & Kim, 2013; Schewe, 2013). Empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of drama-based approaches in developing second language oral fluency (Galante & Thomson, 2017), reducing language anxiety (Piazzoli, 2011), and building intercultural awareness (Piazzoli, 2010). These findings have contributed to the emergence of what Schewe (2013, p. 7) characterises as a “performative teaching and learning culture” in which the insights and methods of the performing arts are brought to bear on the challenges of language education.

Yet for all this momentum, the specific intersection of drama with adult English language teaching for migrants and refugees remains underexamined, particularly within adult settlement language programs and most acutely within the Australian AMEP context, where empirical scholarship on drama-based pedagogy is sparse. This is a notable gap. Globally, and in Australia in particular, adult migrants and refugees constitute a large and diverse population of English language learners whose educational needs are shaped by experiences of displacement, interrupted schooling, trauma, and the multifaceted challenges of cultural transition (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019). For these learners, the language classroom is not simply a space for acquiring competence; it is a site where identities are negotiated, social connections are forged, and new possibilities for belonging are explored. Drama, with its emphasis on interaction, improvisation, and the embodied inhabiting of imagined situations, would seem to hold genuine promise for this population. As Piazzoli and Kir Cullen (2021) have argued, performative language pedagogy with refugees and asylum seekers opens rich possibilities for agency and voice, even as it raises important ethical questions about representation and storytelling. Programs such as the Sydney Theatre Company’s *Connected: Adult Language Learning Through Drama* offer compelling evidence of drama’s potential in practice (Piazzoli, 2018), yet the scholarly evidence base remains fragmented, and there is a need for a synthesis that draws together what is currently known.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the terminology that frames this review. Building on Schewe’s (2013) framing of performative teaching and learning, Piazzoli’s (2018) account of process drama as a teacher-structured improvisational form, and Cahnmann-Taylor and McGovern’s (2021) practitioner synthesis, the term *drama* is used here not to denote the production of theatrical performances for an audience, but rather to encompass a range of process-oriented, participatory practices in which learners engage imaginatively and physically with language through dramatic action. Here, process-oriented derives from Schewe’s (2013) distinction between drama as process and product, while learners engage imaginatively and

physically with language synthesises Piazzoli's (2018) embodied dramatic action with Cahnmann-Taylor and McGovern's (2021) cognitive, affective, and bodily dimensions, adapted to the adult migrant and refugee context. These categories are operationalised as follows. This includes process drama, in which participants enter fictional worlds through teacher-structured episodes of role taking and improvisation (Piazzoli, 2018); applied theatre, where theatrical techniques are used for educational and community development purposes; role play, a longstanding feature of communicative language teaching; and broader forms of embodied performance involving gesture, movement, and voice work. What unites these practices is a shared emphasis on learning through doing, on the social and collaborative nature of meaning making, and on the integration of cognitive, affective, and bodily dimensions of experience (Cahnmann-Taylor & McGovern, 2021). The distinction between drama as process and drama as product is fundamental to the field (Schewe, 2013), and it is the former that is the primary focus of this review.

This article presents a thematic literature review of research published between 2000 and 2025 on the use of drama in teaching English to adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds. It is guided by two interrelated research questions:

RQ1: What does the existing literature reveal about how drama has been used as a pedagogical modality in English language programs for adult migrants and refugees?

RQ2: What theoretical and practical insights emerge from this body of work regarding the affordances and challenges of drama-based approaches with this learner population?

The review draws on both Australian and international scholarship, recognising that while Australia's settlement English programs provide a distinctive policy context, the pedagogical questions at stake have resonance well beyond any single national setting. The article first provides background on immigration, refugee settlement, and English language provision in Australia, then reviews the broader landscape of drama in TESOL. A theoretical foundations section establishes the analytical frame, including embodied cognition, that informs the review. A methodology section outlines the search strategy and analytical approach. The findings present the thematic synthesis around five themes. A discussion section draws further on embodied cognition to interpret the findings, followed by six principles for practice. I conclude by reflecting on limitations and proposing directions for future inquiry.

Context

Migration, refugees, and English language provision in Australia

Australia is a nation shaped by migration. Since the postwar immigration program began in the late 1940s, successive settlement waves have transformed the country's demographic, cultural, and

linguistic landscape. Around 30 percent of the population was born overseas, with migrants and humanitarian entrants arriving from increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2026). For many adults who arrive with limited English, language learning is a precondition for settlement, social participation, employment, and access to services (Tour et al., 2023). English mediates everyday interactions with institutions, workplaces, schools, and communities.

Australia's primary settlement response is the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), one of the world's most longstanding settlement education programs. Established in 1948, the AMEP provides free English tuition to eligible migrants and humanitarian entrants and currently supports about 70,000 learners each year across a national network of delivery sites (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). Legislative reforms in 2021 removed the 510-hour cap, extended eligibility to vocational level English, and lifted restrictive time limits on enrolment, reflecting recognition that adult language learning is protracted and nonlinear (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). However, the AMEP has also undergone structural change, including shifts from centralised curricula informed by systemic functional linguistics toward more market driven delivery, prompting debate about pedagogical quality, teacher qualifications, and the program's capacity to meet diverse learner needs (Corbel, 2024).

AMEP cohorts are profoundly diverse, culturally and educationally. Learners arrive from more than fifty countries, bringing a wide range of first languages, scripts, religious traditions, and prior schooling histories (Choi & Slaughter, 2025; Tour et al., 2023). Some are highly educated professionals whose qualifications are not yet recognised; others are humanitarian entrants whose formal schooling has been minimal, fragmented, or interrupted by conflict, persecution, or displacement (Miller et al., 2005). Within a single classroom, an educator may work simultaneously with emergent literates, learners with first language literacy but limited English, and multilingual learners whose challenge is the pragmatic register of Australian English. This heterogeneity is compounded by the affective and material conditions of resettlement, including housing precarity, employment pressure, family separation, and the demands of navigating government, health, and digital systems in an unfamiliar language (Tour et al., 2022). Within such a setting, pedagogies that work primarily through abstract grammatical or text-based instruction risk excluding the learners most in need of communicative confidence; the embodied, relational practices of drama may have particular pedagogical purchase because they meet learners where their existing communicative resources lie.

The AMEP's learning objectives make this point sharper. Its curriculum framework, anchored within the Australian Core Skills Framework, foregrounds three interlocking goals: communicative competence in everyday English; functional literacy and numeracy for workplaces and services; and active settlement, including engagement with civic life and the digital systems that mediate it (Department of Home Affairs, 2021; Tour & Creely, 2025; Tour et al., 2022). Drama-based pedagogies map onto these objectives directly. The communicative urgency of

dramatic situations rehearses the pragmatic moves required for clinic appointments, school enrolment, and job interviews; the collaborative inhabiting of fictional worlds models the social participation settlement requires; and the embodied repertoires drama mobilises offer accessible entry points for learners whose print literacy is still developing (Piazzoli, 2018; Stinson & Piazzoli, 2013). Drama thus deepens the AMEP's communicative orientation rather than displacing it. For refugees in particular, displacement, trauma, uncertainty, and loss can compound the demands of language learning and resettlement, especially where pedagogy does not recognise these realities (Miller et al., 2005).

Digitalisation adds further pressure. Tour et al. (2023) showed that adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds navigate demanding digital literacy practices linked to settlement, including expectations to engage with platforms such as myGov, online banking, and service portals in English while still learning the language. Tour et al. (2021) found that teachers in adult EAL settings sometimes framed learners' digital capabilities in deficit terms, overlooking agency and existing resources; subsequent work argues for strengths-based approaches that build on learners' diverse repertoires (Tour et al., 2022; Tour et al., 2025).

Within this context, creative, learner centred pedagogies become significant. When interrupted education, trauma, cultural dislocation, linguistic complexity, and digital demands converge, transmission-oriented approaches risk disengagement. Creely et al. (2025) argue for inclusive strategies that support empowerment alongside language proficiency. Choi and Slaughter (2025) similarly found that the affordances of digital tools in adult EAL classrooms varied sharply across learners with limited or interrupted formal education, requiring carefully differentiated pedagogies. Pedagogies that foreground embodied engagement, collaborative meaning making, and creative expression can affirm experiential knowledge while developing communicative competence and social connection. Drama based approaches represent one pathway, particularly for learners whose needs extend beyond linguistic form.

Drama in TESOL

Drama has long been used in language education. Role play and simulation featured in communicative language teaching from the 1970s as the field moved away from grammar translation and audiolingual methods toward meaningful interaction (Schewe, 2013). Early uses often treated drama as a technique for practising predetermined structures. A later shift recognised drama as a pedagogy in its own right, grounded in the performing arts and generating learning through embodied, aesthetic, and relational experience. Schewe (2013) termed this broader orientation performative language teaching, encompassing process drama, applied theatre, improvisation, and related forms. Piazzoli (2018) emphasised that performative approaches engage learners cognitively, affectively, and physically, and rely on teacher artistry as facilitator.

In Australia, applied theatre has shaped drama in adult TESOL. Balfour et al. (2015) reported an Australian Research Council project with refugee communities in southeast Queensland, delivered between 2009 and 2012 with humanitarian entrants in regional and outer-suburban Queensland, run in parallel to formal AMEP provision rather than embedded within it. Approximately 70 adult participants engaged in weekly applied theatre workshops led by teaching artists alongside language and settlement educators. The project was funded through ARC Linkage arrangements with state and community partners, showing that process drama supported contextualised oral English development and strengthened confidence and belonging. The program used folktales, metaphor, and symbolic distancing rather than autobiographical disclosure, reducing risks of retraumatisation and resisting what Jeffers (2008) described as narratives of victimhood. The *Connected: Adult Language Learning through Drama* (CALLD) program extended this work by bringing teaching artists into AMEP and community settings in 2017 and 2018, delivered by the Sydney Theatre Company in partnership with adult education providers across multiple Sydney sites including AMEP cohorts, in approximately 10-hour blocks funded through philanthropic, corporate, and state sources, using traditional tales as dramatic pretexts for language rich interaction, collaborative storytelling, and embodied meaning making (Bundy et al., 2015). These initiatives illustrate how drama can sit within or alongside formal English provision, creating spaces where language learning, wellbeing, and settlement participation intersect.

Internationally, the Sorgente Project (Piazzoli & Dalziel, 2024) delivered drama workshops with migrant and refugee learners in Ireland and Italy. The project ran across multiple cycles between 2017 and 2023 with cohorts of asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants in cooperation with university partners and settlement services, with weekly process drama sessions of two to three hours. Dalziel and Piazzoli (2019) showed that role reversal, where learners adopted expert community worker roles, fostered purposeful language use, emotional investment, and shifted classroom power relations. In the United Kingdom, Creative English (Smith, 2014) has offered drama workshops to thousands of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, delivered through community hubs across England in partnership with FaithAction, using improvisation and storytelling to build communicative confidence and social connection. In North America, McGovern's (2023) ethnography documented how devised theatre and performative storytelling positioned learners as competent intercultural actors. Across contexts, participants commonly report increased self-confidence, reduced speaking anxiety, stronger peer relationships, and a deepened sense of identity and belonging.

Theoretical foundations

Drama based TESOL draws on convergent traditions. From communicative language teaching, it inherits the premise that language develops through authentic, purposeful interaction (Galante & Thomson, 2017). Sociocultural theory, especially Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, helps explain how scaffolded dramatic interaction enables learning beyond what individuals can

do alone; within the fictional world, learners rehearse language functions, negotiate meaning, and co construct understanding with peers and facilitator support (Stinson & Winston, 2011). Critical pedagogy frames drama as praxis through which learners produce knowledge, interrogate power, and exercise voice to challenge marginalising settlement discourses (Ntelioglou, 2011; Piazzoli & Kir Cullen, 2021). Together, these perspectives suggest that drama, enacted with ethical attentiveness and artistic facilitation, can address the multidimensional needs of adult migrant and refugee learners in ways that conventional instruction alone may not.

Beyond these antecedents, this review is itself analysed through the lens of embodied cognition, introduced here so that it functions as the paper's analytical perspective rather than a frame summoned only at the discussion stage. Embodied cognition holds that cognition is not an abstract, disembodied process but is fundamentally grounded in bodily experience, sensory engagement, and interaction with the social and material environment (Atkinson, 2010; Shapiro, 2019). In the domain of language, linguistic knowledge is not stored merely as abstract symbols but is constituted through sensorimotor experience: words and meanings are grounded in the perceptual, motor, and affective traces of the encounters through which they were acquired (Kiefer & Trumpp, 2012; Macedonia & Knösche, 2011). Atkinson (2010) proposed a sociocognitive approach to second language acquisition grounded in extended, embodied cognition, arguing that mind, body, and world work together in learning. Trofimovich and Gatlinton (2022) similarly call for greater attention to the embodied and situated nature of second language processing, noting that conventional instructional approaches privilege cognitive and linguistic dimensions while underutilising the kinaesthetic, affective, and relational channels through which much real-world language learning occurs. This framework frames the synthesis below: across the five themes that emerge from the corpus, I attend not only to what drama-based approaches do for migrant and refugee learners but to how they engage the body, affect, and social environment as constitutive of language development.

Methodology

In this article, I adopted a thematic literature review as its methodological approach. Unlike a fully systematic review, which employs standardised protocols for the exhaustive retrieval and statistical synthesis of evidence (Snyder, 2019), a thematic review is oriented toward mapping, interpreting, and synthesising a body of literature around conceptually meaningful patterns. As Snyder (2019) notes, such an approach is well suited to interdisciplinary research fields that draw on diverse methodological traditions and encompass both empirical and conceptual work. The intersection of drama, TESOL, and adult migrant and refugee education is precisely such a field, spanning the performing arts, applied linguistics, education studies, and settlement policy.

The search strategy was designed to cast a wide net across both Australian and international scholarship. Five digital and online databases were consulted: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC

(Education Resources Information Center), A+ Education, and ProQuest Education. These were selected for their complementary coverage of education, applied linguistics, and the performing arts. Searches were conducted using Boolean combinations of terms organised around three conceptual domains, as shown in Table 1. Terms within each domain were combined using OR operators, and the three domains were then combined using AND operators to yield results at their intersection.

Table 1. Search terms by conceptual domain.

Domain	Search terms
Pedagogical modality	drama OR “process drama” OR “applied theatre” OR “role play” OR “dramatic arts” OR “performative pedagogy” OR “embodied performance”
Educational context	TESOL OR ESL OR EAL OR “English language teaching” OR “English language learning” OR “second language” OR “additional language”
Learner population	migrant* OR refugee* OR “asylum seeker*” OR “new arrival*” OR “adult learner*” OR “adult English”

Supplementary hand searching of reference lists from key publications, including Belliveau and Kim’s (2013) research synthesis, Piazzoli’s (2018) monograph, Piazzoli’s (2012b) earlier chapter on film and drama aesthetics for additional language teaching, and Cahnmann-Taylor and McGovern’s (2021) practitioner resource, was undertaken to identify additional relevant works.

The inclusion criteria specified that publications must (a) address drama or a related performative practice as a pedagogical modality in English language teaching, (b) involve adult learners (aged 18 and over) from migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker backgrounds, (c) be written in English, and (d) have been published between 2000 and 2025. The time frame captures the period during which drama-based approaches in language education have gained sustained scholarly attention. Eligible publication types included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and significant practitioner or institutional reports. Excluded were publications focused exclusively on children, studies addressing drama in foreign language education without reference to migrant or refugee populations, and conference abstracts or unpublished theses. A small number of studies that involved adolescent learners or combined adolescent and adult cohorts were retained where they made an indispensable conceptual or theoretical contribution to the analytic questions of this review (notably Yaman Ntelioglou et al., 2014, and Frimberger, 2016, 2017). In each case the rationale for inclusion is signalled explicitly in the findings, and conclusions drawn from these

studies are restricted to the conceptual claims they advance rather than treated as direct empirical evidence about adult AMEP cohorts.

The initial search yielded 247 results across the five databases. After removing duplicates, screening titles and abstracts for relevance, and applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 43 publications were retained for full-text review. A final corpus of 34 publications was established (Table 2), comprising 22 peer-reviewed journal articles, 8 book chapters, and 4 practitioner or institutional reports.

Table 2. Final corpus by publication type.

Publication type	Number	Percentage
Peer-reviewed journal articles	22	65%
Book chapters	8	23%
Books and practitioner/institutional reports	4	12%
Total	34	100%

Of these, 11 were Australian in origin, 14 were European (principally from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Italy), 6 were North American, and 3 originated from other regions (Table 3). The modest size of the corpus confirms the contention made in the introduction that this remains an underexamined area of scholarship.

Table 3. Final corpus by geographic origin.

Geographic origin	Number	Percentage
Australia	11	32%
Europe (UK, Ireland, Italy, other)	14	41%
North America	6	18%
Other regions	3	9%
Total	34	100%

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), guided the analytical process. Following their six-phase framework, I engaged in an iterative process of reading, coding, and theme generation across the 34 published texts, with the unit of analysis defined as the meaning-bearing segment of text (typically a clause, sentence, or short paragraph) articulating a finding, claim, theoretical move, or pedagogical implication. Initial open coding focused on three guiding questions derived from the review's research questions: how is drama described as functioning pedagogically with adult migrant and refugee learners (RQ1); what affordances and challenges of drama-based approaches are documented or theorised (RQ2); and through what theoretical and analytical frames is the work conducted? The third question was included because the theoretical and analytical frames adopted in each study shape both what drama is claimed to do (RQ1) and how its affordances and challenges are interpreted (RQ2); coding for these frames made the conceptual basis of each claim visible and strengthened the synthesis serving both questions. Codes were generated inductively and grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed and refined through repeated engagement with the data set. Themes were differentiated through three criteria: each theme had to address a conceptually distinct dimension of drama-based learning, be supported by independent evidence across at least four publications, and contribute distinctively to one or both research questions. Where candidate themes overlapped substantially, they were merged; where a single theme contained internally distinct dimensions, they were separated. The five themes operate at complementary levels: communicative competence and oral fluency (Theme 1) addresses linguistic affordances; identity, belonging, and voice (Theme 2) addresses relational and identity dimensions; safe spaces, trust, and emotional expression (Theme 3) addresses affective conditions; embodiment and multimodal meaning making (Theme 4) addresses semiotic and corporeal dimensions; and barriers and tensions (Theme 5) addresses structural, professional, and ethical constraints. In keeping with Nowell et al.'s (2017) emphasis on transparency and rigour in thematic analysis, I maintained a detailed record of coding decisions, theme development, and analytical reasoning throughout.

Table 4. Illustrative summary of key studies in the reviewed corpus.

Study	Context	Participants	Drama approach	Methods
Galante & Thomson (2017)	EFL, Brazil	Adult university students	Drama-based instruction	Quasi-experimental
Piazzoli (2011)	L2 Italian, Italy	Adult learners	Process drama	Qualitative case study

Dalziel & Piazzoli (2019)	L2 Italian, asylum seekers, Italy	Adult asylum seekers	Process drama (role reversal)	Qualitative case study
Balfour et al. (2015)	ESL, Queensland, Australia	Adult refugees	Applied theatre, folktale	Practitioner research
Bundy et al. (2015) [Embracing the unknown]	ESL, Australia	Adult newly arrived refugees	Community theatre, traditional tales	Practitioner research
McGovern (2023)	ESOL, USA	Adult learners	Devised theatre	Ethnography
Tavares & Benediktsson (2024)	Icelandic L2, Iceland	Ukrainian adult refugees	Drama plays / multiliteracies	Qualitative
Magos & Politi (2008)	L2 Greek, Greece	Adult migrants	Role play	Qualitative
Maistrello & Dalziel (2020)	L2 Italian, Italy	Adult migrants	Process drama	Mixed methods
Balyasnikova et al. (2018)	EAL, Vancouver, Canada	Older adult immigrants	Ethnodrama	Practitioner research
Rothwell (2011)	Beginner L2, Australia	Beginner adult learners	Process drama, kinaesthetic	Classroom-based qualitative
Smith (2014) [Creative English]	EAL, UK	Adult refugees, asylum seekers, migrants	Drama-based programme (Creative English)	Practice-based research

Note. Table 4 presents a representative subset of the 34 reviewed publications, sampled across geographic origins, publication types, and the five themes generated through analysis. The full corpus list is available from the author.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The restriction to English-language publications may have excluded relevant work in other languages, particularly from European traditions of drama pedagogy. The relatively small corpus means that findings should be interpreted as indicative

rather than exhaustive. As a sole-authored review, the analysis was not subject to intercoder reliability checks, though a detailed audit trail mitigated this limitation. The heterogeneity of research designs within the corpus also means that the depth of evidence is variable across publications.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the 34 publications in this review generated five interconnected themes that together illuminate the contributions and complexities of drama as pedagogy for teaching English to adult migrants and refugees. These themes are not discrete categories; rather, they overlap and interact in ways that reflect the holistic nature of drama-based practice. Specifically, the embodied and multimodal dimensions of drama (Theme 4) function as a material substrate for the affective conditions of safety and trust (Theme 3); these conditions in turn create the relational space within which identity work and the negotiation of belonging (Theme 2) become possible; and it is within these embodied, affective, and identity-rich exchanges that the communicative competence and oral fluency gains documented across the corpus (Theme 1) emerge. The barriers and tensions captured in Theme 5 cut across all four affirmative themes. Reading the themes interactively rather than additively is therefore essential. The synthesis that follows examines each theme in turn, drawing on the full body of reviewed literature to identify patterns, convergences, and points of productive tension.

Theme 1: Communicative competence and oral fluency

The most consistently evidenced affordance of drama across the corpus is its capacity to generate authentic, contextualised language use that develops communicative competence beyond the reach of conventional instruction. Galante and Thomson (2017) provided the strongest empirical evidence in this regard, demonstrating through a quasi-experimental study with Brazilian university students that drama-based instruction led to statistically significant improvements in oral fluency, comprehensibility, and accentedness compared to a control group receiving traditional communicative language teaching. In a subsequent study, Galante (2018) extended these findings, showing that drama also reduced speaking anxiety among EFL learners, suggesting that communicative gains were partly facilitated by the affective conditions that drama creates. These quantitative findings are corroborated by qualitative evidence from multiple contexts. In Greece, Magos and Politi (2008) found that role play techniques generated communicative opportunities that enabled adult migrants to practise pragmatic functions, including greeting, requesting, and negotiating, within scenarios that mirrored real settlement situations. Balyasnikova et al. (2018) similarly documented how ethnodrama workshops with older immigrant adults in

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside prompted sustained, contextualised oral interaction, with participants drawing on their lived experiences to improvise in English.

Several studies emphasise that drama generates what Piazzoli (2012a) described as a distinctive quality of engagement, one in which learners are motivated to communicate not because they are completing a task but because the fictional context creates genuine communicative urgency. Stinson and Piazzoli (2013) elaborated this principle, arguing that the dramatic context provides what sociocultural theory terms a zone of proximal development, within which learners stretch their communicative repertoires with the support of peers and facilitator. Dodson (2002) proposed that drama's educational potential for ESL resides in its capacity to create purposeful communicative situations where language is used to achieve social goals rather than to demonstrate grammatical knowledge. For adult migrants and refugees, this distinction is particularly significant: drama enables the rehearsal of communicative functions that have immediate relevance to the demands of settlement, employment, and civic participation.

Theme 2: Identity, belonging, and voice

A second major theme concerns the ways in which drama creates space for learners to explore, negotiate, and perform emergent identities within new linguistic and cultural landscapes. Ntelioglou (2011) examined a mandatory drama-ESL class in a Canadian secondary school, finding that drama pedagogy, grounded in a multiliteracies framework, enabled multilingual learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires and cultural knowledge in ways that standard ESL instruction did not permit. Yaman Ntelioglou et al. (2014) developed this line of inquiry further, demonstrating that a multilingual and multimodal approach to literacy teaching allowed learners to represent their identities with greater complexity and agency. Although the participants were younger, the conceptual contribution to identity work in language education has been widely taken up in adult settings, particularly the demonstration that drama opens space for identity texts in which learners author representations of self that affirm rather than diminish their cultural and linguistic resources. In the Australian adult context, Slaughter et al. (2020) demonstrated through collaborative research with adult EAL learners that identity texts, including language portraits and visual poetry, function as a powerful pedagogical bridge between linguistic and biographical work. Their analysis converges with the drama literature in suggesting that adult migrant and refugee learners benefit from pedagogies that treat identity as a central rather than peripheral dimension of language learning.

In contexts of forced migration, questions of identity and belonging assume particular urgency. Dalziel and Piazzoli (2019) documented how process drama with adult asylum seekers in Italy afforded a pivotal form of identity work: through the dramatic device of role reversal, learners stepped into the role of community workers welcoming a newly arrived migrant, played by the teacher. This understanding enabled participants to draw on their settlement expertise and to

experience themselves as knowledgeable agents rather than dependent newcomers. McGovern (2023) reported analogous dynamics in an adult ESOL program in the United States, where devised theatre positioned learners as intercultural actors capable of narrating their experiences and contributing to dialogue across cultural difference.

McGovern (2017) had earlier conceptualised this affordance theoretically, arguing that drama in the second language classroom creates a liminal space in which learners can try on new identities and rehearse new ways of being in the target language without the risk of permanent social consequence. The Sorgente Project, documented extensively by Piazzoli and Dalziel (2024), further demonstrated that performative language pedagogy with refugees and migrants fostered what the researchers termed a “motivation to belong,” generated through the collaborative, embodied, and aesthetically rich nature of the dramatic encounter. Tavares and Benediktsson (2024) provided a more recent perspective, examining Ukrainian refugees learning Icelandic through drama plays, and finding that the multiliteracies approach enabled learners to make meaning across languages and modalities while developing a sense of connection to their new linguistic environment.

Theme 3: Safe spaces, trust, and emotional expression

The literature consistently identifies drama as a modality uniquely capable of creating conditions of safety, trust, and affective engagement that support learners who carry the psychological weight of displacement and trauma. Piazzoli (2011) introduced the concept of “affective space” to describe the protected environment that process drama creates, within which learners are able to take linguistic and emotional risks that would be untenable in conventional classroom settings. Her research demonstrated that the fictional frame of the drama operates as a form of “creative distancing,” enabling participants to engage with emotionally significant content, including experiences of loss, exclusion, and cultural dislocation, without the vulnerability of direct autobiographical disclosure. Jeffers (2008) offered a critical counterpoint, warning that participatory theatre with asylum seekers risks perpetuating “narratives of victimhood” when it invites learners to perform their trauma for an audience. Piazzoli and Kir Cullen (2021) engaged directly with this ethical tension, framing storytelling as a “double-edged sword” that can either empower or stigmatise, depending on the facilitator’s ethical attentiveness and use of dramatic distancing devices. Their analysis argued that facilitators must cultivate an “ethical imagination,” grounding their practice in careful attention to power, consent, and the protection of participants’ dignity.

Frimberger (2016) contributed an important perspective from the United Kingdom, advocating for a wellbeing-focused language pedagogy that uses arts-based, multilingual learning spaces to support young people from refugee backgrounds. Although Frimberger’s empirical participants were adolescents, her conceptualisation of wellbeing-focused arts pedagogy has clear theoretical

reach into adult settlement contexts, where comparable arguments are made by Woodrow (2015) and Smith (2014). Her work demonstrated that creative approaches, including drama, enabled learners to express and process complex emotions that language classes oriented solely toward functional competence failed to accommodate. Frimberger (2017) extended this analysis to consider the ethics of performative approaches in intercultural education more broadly, arguing that drama practitioners working with displaced communities must attend not only to what is produced in the creative encounter but to the relational conditions under which it is produced.

Woodrow (2015) made a parallel case from the Australian context, drawing on the applied theatre resettlement project in Queensland to argue that drama builds resilience among refugee participants not by rehearsing trauma but by enabling new relational experiences, including trust, playfulness, and collaborative achievement, that counter the social isolation and powerlessness that characterise much of the refugee experience. Maistrello and Dalziel (2020) provided supporting evidence from the Italian context, finding that process drama significantly reduced language anxiety among adult migrants, with participants reporting that the fictional frame made it possible to speak without the paralysing self-consciousness that inhibited their communication in conventional classes. Rillera Kempster (2023) brought a complementary Australian perspective, demonstrating through a digital poetry project with adult English learners with limited education and literacy that creative arts pedagogies, even when delivered through digital tools, generated emotionally safe spaces in which learners could write themselves into being and exercise voice in their emerging English.

Theme 4: Embodiment and multimodal meaning making

A fourth theme foregrounds the role of the body and of multimodal communicative resources in drama-based language learning. Piazzoli's (2018) monograph represents the most sustained theoretical treatment of this dimension, arguing that process drama generates language learning through embodied action, in which gesture, movement, spatial positioning, gaze, and vocal quality function as integral semiotic resources rather than supplementary channels. Rothwell (2011) provided empirical grounding for this claim, examining how process drama in a beginner language classroom enabled learners to construct intercultural understanding through physical engagement, with participants using their bodies to negotiate meaning in the target language before they had the lexical resources to do so verbally. Schewe (2013) positioned this embodied dimension within a broader argument for a "performative teaching and learning culture," proposing that the performing arts offer language education a fundamentally different epistemology, one in which knowing is enacted through the body rather than transmitted through text.

Bundy et al. (2015) drew explicitly on Vygotskian sociocultural theory to argue that process drama creates a uniquely generative site for embodied second language learning, one in which gesture and physical action mediate the internalisation of new linguistic forms. Piazzoli (2022) further

developed this framework, proposing that the “elements of drama,” including tension, role, time, space, and symbol, function as intercultural resources that enable learners to negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural difference through embodied and aesthetic means. Belliveau and Kim’s (2013) research synthesis confirmed the breadth of this finding, identifying embodiment and multimodal engagement as recurring features across the drama in second language learning literature, while noting that their theorisation remained underdeveloped relative to other dimensions of the field.

Yaman Ntelioglou et al. (2014) similarly observed that multimodal approaches, combining drama, visual art, and digital media, enabled multilingual learners to deploy their full communicative repertoires, including gesture, image, and movement, in ways that disrupted the privileging of verbal text in conventional language assessment. Balfour et al. (2015) documented how applied theatre workshops with refugee communities in Australia utilised physical warmups, tableaux, and movement exercises as entry points into language learning, recognising that for learners with interrupted formal education, embodied modes of communication may be more immediately accessible than print-based literacy.

Theme 5: Barriers and tensions

Despite the compelling evidence documented in the preceding themes, the corpus also reveals significant barriers and tensions that constrain the uptake and sustainability of drama-based pedagogy in adult TESOL contexts. The most pervasive barrier is institutional: adult English language programs in Australia and internationally are increasingly governed by competency-based frameworks and standardised assessment regimes that privilege measurable linguistic outcomes over the relational, affective, and creative dimensions of learning that drama addresses (Balfour et al., 2015; Stinson & Winston, 2011). Dunn and Stinson (2011) identified teacher confidence as a critical factor, arguing that the effective use of drama as pedagogy for additional language learning depends upon a distinctive form of “teacher artistry” that is rarely cultivated in preservice or in-service professional development for TESOL educators. Without this artistry, drama risks being reduced to superficial role play exercises that strip away the aesthetic and relational qualities that give it its pedagogical power.

Piazzoli (2017) examined the nature of “intercultural dramatic tension” and the demands it places on facilitators, concluding that the effective management of tension within process drama requires a sophisticated understanding of both dramatic form and intercultural dynamics, a combination that is difficult to develop without sustained, practice-based professional learning. Cahnmann-Taylor and McGovern (2021) addressed this gap directly, offering practical guidance for second language teachers seeking to integrate drama and improvisation, yet their very existence as a published resource underscores the extent to which such knowledge remains marginal within the TESOL profession. Cultural sensitivities represent a further layer of complexity. Piazzoli and Kir

Cullen (2021) cautioned that drama activities involving touch, eye contact, or the representation of culturally sensitive themes may conflict with the values and expectations of learners from particular cultural backgrounds, requiring facilitators to negotiate these boundaries with care.

Stinson and Piazzoli (2013) noted that assessment practices in language education are poorly aligned with the kinds of learning that drama generates, as competency frameworks tend to assess discrete language skills rather than the holistic communicative competence, intercultural understanding, and personal development that drama fosters. This misalignment means that the outcomes of drama-based pedagogy are often invisible within the systems that determine program funding, curriculum design, and institutional legitimacy. Frimberger (2016) made a broader structural argument, contending that the marginalisation of creative, wellbeing-focused pedagogies within refugee education reflects a wider policy orientation that constructs language learning as a functional instrument of economic integration rather than a site of human development and social belonging.

Taken together, these five themes reveal a field in which the evidence for drama's contributions to language learning, identity, wellbeing, and embodied meaning making is substantial and growing, yet in which structural, professional, and ethical challenges continue to limit its reach.

Discussion

The findings of this review converge on a central proposition: that drama-based pedagogy offers adult migrant and refugee English language learners a qualitatively different kind of learning experience, one that engages communicative, affective, embodied, and relational dimensions of language acquisition simultaneously. The evidence demonstrates that drama generates authentic communicative opportunities that develop oral fluency and pragmatic competence (Galante & Thomson, 2017; Magos & Politi, 2008), creates conditions for identity exploration and belonging (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019; McGovern, 2023), builds trust and emotional safety for trauma-affected learners (Piazzoli, 2011; Woodrow, 2015), mobilises embodied and multimodal resources for meaning making (Piazzoli, 2018; Rothwell, 2011), and does so despite persistent institutional and professional barriers (Dunn & Stinson, 2011; Frimberger, 2016). What is striking is not merely that drama produces beneficial outcomes in each domain but that it does so holistically. Learners speak more freely because they feel safe; they feel safe because the embodied, collaborative nature of the drama builds trust; and that trust, in turn, enables the kind of risk-taking that generates communicative growth. This integrated quality demands a theoretical framework capable of accounting for the interconnection of body, emotion, cognition, and social context in language learning.

Embodied cognition, introduced in the theoretical foundations section, provides such a framework, and its application to the synthesis can now be made explicit. Process drama, improvisation, and

applied theatre are inherently embodied practices: they require learners to use gesture, movement, spatial positioning, gaze, vocal modulation, and physical interaction as integral communicative resources (Piazzoli, 2018; Schewe, 2013). In doing so, they activate precisely the sensorimotor and affective systems that embodied cognition identifies as foundational to language acquisition. When a learner physically steps into a role, navigates a fictional space, and responds to the embodied presence of others, they are not merely practising language; they are constructing linguistic knowledge through the kind of rich, multimodal, situated experience that generates deep and durable learning (Belliveau & Kim, 2013; Macedonia & Knösche, 2011). For adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds, this embodied dimension carries additional significance. Their language learning is inseparable from the embodied realities of displacement, resettlement, and the forging of new social connections. An embodied cognition framework recognises that these physical and affective experiences are not extraneous to language learning but constitutive of it.

This theoretical lens also illuminates connections between the review's findings and existing scholarship on affect, trauma-informed pedagogy, and multimodal literacy. Affect in second language acquisition is increasingly recognised not as a peripheral influence on learning but as a central cognitive mechanism shaping attention, memory, and motivation (Swain, 2013). Drama's capacity to generate what Piazzoli (2011) calls "affective space" aligns with an embodied cognition account in which affect and cognition are not separate systems but deeply integrated processes. Work on trauma-informed pedagogy in refugee education (Balfour et al., 2015; Piazzoli & Kir Cullen, 2021) likewise emphasises that trauma is held in the body and that healing and learning require approaches attending to the somatic dimensions of experience, for which drama's use of creative distancing, metaphor, and aesthetic form is well suited. Multimodal literacy scholarship (Ntelioglou, 2011; Yaman Ntelioglou et al., 2014) similarly aligns with embodied cognition in recognising that meaning making is distributed across multiple semiotic modes rather than confined to the linguistic. Taken together, these connections suggest that drama-based pedagogy enacts a fundamentally different epistemology of learning, one in which the body, affect, and social context are constitutive of, rather than supplementary to, communicative competence.

Principles for Practice

The findings of this review point toward a set of six evidence-informed principles (Figure 1) that can guide the design and facilitation of drama-based pedagogy in adult migrant and refugee English language education. These principles were generated through a second cycle of thematic synthesis, paralleling the procedure described in the methodology. After the five descriptive themes were established, I returned to the corpus and re-coded each publication for explicit and implicit recommendations for practice, grouping these into clusters of recurring practitioner moves and ethical commitments. Six clusters survived refinement: process orientation, trauma-informed and culturally responsive design, integration with explicit language work, teacher development,

multimodality, and learner agency. Where a principle is grounded primarily in the reviewed literature, principal sources are cited; where it reflects the author's own pedagogical synthesis across multiple sources rather than a direct claim from any single publication, this is signalled in the text. These principles are not prescriptive protocols but orienting commitments, drawn from the collective insights of the reviewed literature, that practitioners can adapt to the particularities of their own contexts.

Principle 1. Practitioners should prioritise process over product, foregrounding exploration, interaction, and collaborative meaning making rather than rehearsed performance or polished theatrical outcomes. The literature consistently demonstrates that the pedagogical power of drama resides in the doing rather than the showing (Dunn & Stinson, 2011; Piazzoli, 2018). In practice, this means designing activities such as process drama, improvisation, and role play that invite learners to negotiate meaning in the moment.

Principle 2. Drama spaces must be culturally responsive and trauma-informed, acknowledging learners' experiences without demanding disclosure. As Piazzoli and Kir Cullen (2021) and Jeffers (2008) have cautioned, activities that invite autobiographical storytelling about pre-arrival experiences risk retraumatising participants or reducing them to narratives of victimhood. Facilitators should instead use metaphor, folktale, and fictional frames as distancing devices.

Principle 3. Drama should be integrated with explicit language instruction to ensure that creative activities serve clear linguistic purposes. This principle is the author's synthesis across recurring observations in the literature (Cahnmann-Taylor & McGovern, 2021; Galante & Thomson, 2017; Stinson & Piazzoli, 2013) rather than a single claim drawn from one publication. This means identifying target language functions, vocabulary, or structures and embedding them within dramatic contexts. A process drama exploring a visit to a medical clinic, for example, can be designed to practise making appointments, describing symptoms, and asking clarifying questions, with the teacher pausing the drama at key moments to draw attention to useful phrases and structures.

Principles for Practice

DRAMA-BASED PEDAGOGY IN ADULT MIGRANT & REFUGEE ENGLISH EDUCATION

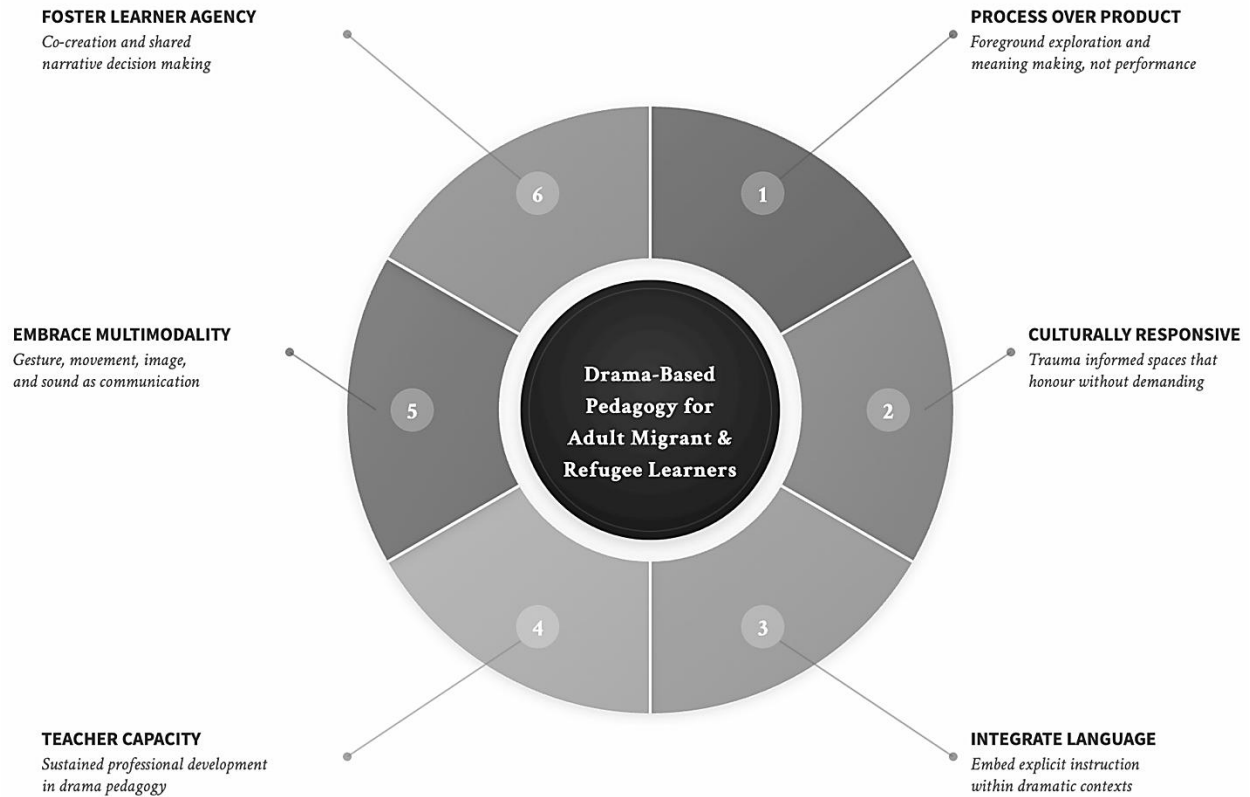


Figure 1. Six principles for drama-based pedagogy in adult migrant and refugee English language education.

Principle 4. Building teacher capacity through sustained professional development in drama-based pedagogy is essential. The review confirms that effective drama facilitation requires a distinctive form of teacher artistry (Dunn & Stinson, 2011) that is rarely cultivated in TESOL teacher education. Professional learning programs should offer teachers opportunities to experience drama as participants before facilitating it themselves, developing confidence with techniques such as teacher-in-role, tableau, and improvisation through practice rather than theory alone.

Principle 5. Educators should embrace multimodality, welcoming gesture, movement, image, and sound as legitimate and productive modes of communication alongside verbal expression. This

principle draws together findings on embodiment and multimodal meaning making from across the corpus (Piazzoli, 2018; Rothwell, 2011; Schewe, 2013; Yaman Ntelioglou et al., 2014) and is articulated here as the author's own pedagogical formulation of their cumulative implications. For learners with emerging English proficiency, embodied modes can serve as entry points into meaning making. A tableau activity, in which small groups use their bodies to create a frozen image representing a concept such as "community" or "belonging," enables learners to communicate complex ideas physically before articulating them verbally.

Principle 6. Drama activities should foster learner agency and co-creation. Rather than positioning the teacher as sole author of the dramatic world, effective practice invites learners to contribute ideas, shape narratives, and make decisions within the fiction. When learners collectively decide the direction of an improvisation or choose the ending of a story, they exercise the kind of communicative agency that the literature identifies as central to both language development and the restoration of personal authority that displacement can erode (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019; McGovern, 2023). Together, these principles offer a foundation for practice that is responsive to the holistic needs of adult migrant and refugee learners and grounded in the evidence assembled in this review.

Conclusion

This review has examined 34 publications spanning two decades of scholarship on drama-based pedagogy in English language education for adults from migrant and refugee backgrounds. The literature collectively reveals that drama offers a distinctive and powerful approach to language learning in this context, one that simultaneously develops communicative competence, cultivates belonging and identity, creates emotionally safe spaces for expression, mobilises embodied and multimodal resources for meaning making, and fosters learner agency. Yet the review also reveals that drama remains significantly underutilised in adult English language programs, constrained by institutional pressures toward standardised, competency-based instruction and by limited investment in the professional development that effective drama facilitation requires.

Several limitations of this review should be acknowledged. As noted in the methodology, the corpus is modest in size and dominated by small-scale qualitative studies, often involving single classrooms or programs, and there is a notable absence of longitudinal research examining the sustained impact of drama-based approaches over time, as well as a scarcity of comparative studies that measure drama against other pedagogical interventions under controlled conditions.

These limitations point toward productive directions for future research. Larger-scale, mixed-methods studies are needed to strengthen the evidence base and to examine the conditions under which drama-informed pedagogy is most effective. Australian-specific investigations within the Adult Migrant English Program would be particularly valuable, given the program's scale and its

evolving policy framework. Research that centres the perspectives and voices of learners themselves, rather than relying solely on teacher or researcher accounts, would deepen understanding of how drama is experienced from the inside. Interdisciplinary collaboration between TESOL and drama or theatre studies would also enrich both fields.

Ultimately, drama is a profoundly human modality of learning. It invites the whole person, body, voice, emotion, imagination, and lived experience, into the language classroom. For adults navigating the complexities of resettlement, learning a new language is never merely a linguistic task; it is an act of remaking a life. Drama, at its best, embraces that fullness.

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