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Somatic-First vs. Text-First Approaches: A Quasi-Experimental Study on Playwriting Pedagogy in Secondary Education

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Abstract

Background: Playwriting is a core module in Hong Kong's secondary drama education curriculum; however, its effective implementation is often hindered by traditional text-first pedagogical paradigms. These conventional approaches restrict novice students' ability to conceptualize live dramatic tension, often resulting in plays with stiff dialogue and limited stage feasibility. This study evaluated the instructional efficacy of a four-lesson somatic-first playwriting module—the somatic-generative and dual-loop reflective framework (SoDu) aligned with the LETCA rubric (Literary-language, Effective Lines, Tension, Creativity, and Stage Applicability)—compared to a conventional text-first approach. Stageability was operationalized as the extent to which written text can be effectively translated into embodied stage actions. Methods: A quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test evaluation was conducted with two Secondary 3 classes. The experimental class (n = 19) engaged with the somatic-first SoDu-LETCA unit, whereas the reference class received text-first instruction. An independent panel conducted a blinded outcome assessment of plays across 10 indicators of the LETCA rubric. Baseline literacy disparities were statistically controlled using ANCOVA. Results: The reference class held a lead in the overall literary-language domain (p = 0.048) due to direct lexical borrowing in word choice ($p = 0.011, \eta_p^2 = 0.134$). However, the SoDu-LETCA unit achieved statistically significant superiority across four major domains: effective lines ($p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.286$), tension ($p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.246$), creativity ($p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.313$), and stage applicability ($p < 0.001$). Crucially, no participant in the somatic-first group showed a decline in stage applicability scores, whereas declines were observed in the text-first comparison group. Conclusions: These findings offer preliminary evidence that engaging students in somatic and spatial exploration prior to textual drafting may support the development of stageable playwriting in secondary contexts. Given the small sample size and non-randomized quasi-experimental design, future research with larger cohorts is recommended to verify the generalizability of embodied drama pedagogies.

Keywords: playwriting pedagogy; drama education; embodied learning; somatic pedagogy; creative writing; secondary education

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Challenge of Teaching Novice Playwriting

Since Hong Kong integrated drama into the secondary curriculum (Education Bureau, 2002, pp. 11–14), playwriting has become a core module (Law, 2018). Local schools face structural implementation challenges (Suryani et al., 2025b), including limited specialized

training (Tam, 2025). Unlike extracurricular clubs serving self-selected enthusiasts (Lai, 2016), formal drama classes serve mainstream students lacking prior playwriting experience (Shu, 2024). These novice students often struggle to transform verbal ideas into compelling dramatic actions due to the high abstraction and theatrical literacy required.

1.2. Text-First Pedagogy, Cognitive Demands, and Stageability

Constrained by these conditions, schools predominantly adopt a text-first approach (Khasu & Henning, 2024), analyzing play excerpts for scene planning, tension, characterization, and dialogue (Suryani et al., 2025a). Empirical evidence shows that students struggle with applying these complex rules, producing plays with homogenous character voices and excessive scene divisions unsuitable for stage performance (Tomishima, 2025).

As a result, text-first creations often lack "stageability." In this study, stageability is operationalized as the extent to which written text can be effectively translated by performers, directors, or student groups into embodied stage actions, spatial relationships, and dramatic pacing. When playwriting is approached strictly as an intellectual exercise, flat dialogue and limited spatial awareness hinder practical stage realization (Han et al., 2024).

In this study, the reference class followed the text-first pedagogy: Lesson 1 focused on reading and analyzing play excerpts to identify plot structures and tension; Lesson 2 utilized short improvisations to deconstruct characterization in existing works; Lesson 3 examined dialogue and textual conventions to guide students in outlining their original scenes; and Lesson 4 taught the formatting of stage directions, culminating in the individual textual drafting of the final script.

1.3. Somatic-First Playwriting: Theoretical Foundations

To address these challenges, this study introduces a somatic-first framework grounded in Lecoq, Chekhov, and Spolin's somatic theories (View & Hanley, 2020). Grounded in the somatic-generative and dual-loop reflective framework (SoDu) aligned with the LETCA rubric (detailed in Table 1)—encompassing literary-language (L), effective lines (E), tension (T), creativity (C), and stage applicability (A) (Biggs & Tang, 2011, pp. 95–133; Wong, 2011, pp. 66–109)—this framework connects physical performance directly with creative playwriting (Mizusawa, 2019), initiating writing through embodied movement (Saumaa, 2026).

Table 1. LETCA rubric—domains and assessment indicators.

Domain	Assessment Indicators
Literary Language (L)	1. Word choice: Words are well-chosen, accurate, fit the character's personality, and are free from typos or spelling errors. 2. Play structure: The play includes a beginning that takes up no more than 20% of the play, a substantial middle building towards the climax comprising over 70%, and a resolution within the final 10%.
Effective Lines (E)	3. Exposition: Lines naturally reveal the fundamental context, including Who (names/relationships), Where (locations), and When (timeframes). 4. Revealing character's objectives: Lines reveal character personalities, traits, and objectives driving the actions. 5. Distinct role: Characters are distinct and serve different functions, each fulfilling a unique role reflected through lines and actions. 6. Key lines: Central lines delivered by different characters effectively highlight and underscore the prevailing theme.%.
Tension (T)	7. Conflict development: A central conflict exists between a protagonist and an antagonist with clear disagreements of interest, developing and rising until a climax is reached.%.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Domain	Assessment Indicators
Creativity (C)	8. Life sensitivity: The theme demonstrates sensitivity to human nature; drawing material from keen observations of everyday life. 9. Flexibility: The play encompasses diverse character types and differing viewpoints, displaying plot originality.%.
Stage Applicability (A)	10. Stage applicability: The play considers spatial usage and suitable scene changes, making it practical for stage production.%.

To bypass cognitive overload, the somatic-generative component strategically integrates three master theatrical methodologies, mapping each directly onto one of the three fundamental pillars of dramatic playwriting: Plot & Tension (Lecoq), Characterization (Chekhov), and Set & Space (Spolin):

- Plot & dramatic tension—body-before-text approach (Lecoq): Lecoq (2009) asserts human expression is inherently physical, proposing language is born from the body's necessity (pp. 45–46). Dramatic tension does not originate from words but from interactions between the body and environmental constraints (Lecoq, 2009, pp. 16–18, 41–43). Language emerges when physical/emotional tension peaks, acting as an extension of bodily expression (Betti, 2015, Section 1.1; Lecoq, 2009, pp. 16–18, 45–46). This body-before-text concept offers a transformative framework (Lecoq, 2009, pp. 95–97) where physical engagement serves as the primary engine of expression (Lecoq, 2009, pp. 21–23), allowing students to generate dramatic tension through movement before writing (Cuthbert, 2016; Tunstall, 2012; Lecoq, 2009, pp. 98–99, 161–163).
- Characterization & Voice—Psycho-physical approach (Chekhov): Chekhov (2014) presents an outside-in psycho-physical methodology, using the body as a gateway to personality (pp. 2–14) and inner essence (pp. 63–70) (Cristini, 2015; Kon & Markov, 2024). Utilizing psychological gestures to condense core desires into deliberate movements (Chekhov, 2014, pp. 63–75), this technique bypasses purely intellectual analysis (Chamberlain, 2003, pp. 22–25; Chekhov, 2014, pp. 2–3). Embodying expressive gestures unlocks spontaneous emotions and vocal rhythms (Chekhov, 2014, pp. 13–15; Cornford, 2013), resolving the issue of homogenized character voices echoing author speech habits (Egri, 1972, pp. 33–36, 38–42). Physically adopting gestures during improvisation alters vocal rhythms, sentence structures, and pacing (Chekhov, 2014, pp. 76–80), generating distinct character voices imbued with clear objectives and subtext-rich dialogue (Chekhov, 2014, pp. 81–88).
- Set & Spatial Dynamics—Point of concentration (Spolin): Spolin (1999) introduces the Point of Concentration (PoC), treating space as an active, generative force (McLaughlin, 2022; Spolin, 1999, pp. 21–28; Itani, 2023; Loughridge & Parsons, 2025). Task-based objectives connect the body with its surroundings (Spolin, 1999, pp. 56–60) to explore how movement and constraints generate dramatic tension (Spolin, 1999, pp. 61–65, 110–114). Bypassing intellectual planning, PoC enables intuitive discovery through direct spatial problem-solving (Spolin, 1999, pp. 16–18, 43–46; Gal, 2020). Navigating spatial proximity and dominance creates narrative conflict (Spolin, 1999, pp. 81–84; Vicovan, 2022) and multi-sensory materials (Spolin, 1999, pp. 310–313; Popescu, 2014), reframing playwriting as spatial exploration (Spolin, 1999, pp. 314–325).

To structure physical improvisations into cohesive scripts, the framework incorporates Argyris and Schön's (1978) dual-loop learning theory, moving students beyond single-loop surface mechanics (Visser & Van der Togt, 2015; Birgili et al., 2021). Dual-loop learning operates in two phases: loop one involves real-time adjustments during live improvisation

based on peer and teacher feedback (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Grundstein, 2022), while loop two engages video-assisted reflection post-improvisation to critique character choices and dramatic structure before textual transcription (Hrastinski, 2019; Hwang et al., 2019; Morikawa & Ishida, 2026).

This triadic brain–body–space framework (Prendergast et al., 2016) posits that movement acts as a cognitive catalyst (Glenberg & Gallese, 2012; Goldin-Meadow, 2005, pp. 34–37; Kirsh, 2010; Lecoq, 2009, pp. 29–33), driving active verbal strategies and Effective Lines (Spolin, 1999, pp. 81–84, 314–317; Witerska, 2025, p. 66). Supported by live peer feedback loops (Wisniewski et al., 2020) and video reflection loops (Tripp & Rich, 2012), the 4-lesson SoDu-LETCA unit guides students through constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011, pp. 191–224): Lesson 1 embodies real-life scenarios; Lesson 2 explores somatic roles and spatial tension; Lesson 3 structures narrative flow (20/70/10 rule); and Lesson 4 derives subtextual dialogue and key lines.

1.4. Dual Loop Learning Theory

To ensure spontaneous physical improvisation transforms into structured plays, this study incorporates Argyris and Schön's (1978) dual-loop learning theory. Dual-loop theory provides a framework for helping students move beyond superficial problem-solving to critically examine the deeper assumptions behind creative decisions (Visser & Van der Togt, 2015).

Conventional playwriting classrooms often rely on single-loop learning, focusing on issues like grammar, word choice, or scene structure (Argyris & Schön, 1978). This rarely encourages students to question underlying concepts like motivations or narrative coherence, leaving plays lacking depth and tension (Birgili et al., 2021).

Dual-loop learning operates through two interconnected phases. First, during live improvisation, students adjust actions spontaneously in response to feedback from teachers and peers. For example, they might modify gestures, spatial positioning, or verbal delivery based on changing interactions. This phase develops sensitivity to dramatic possibilities while improving their ability to connect actions with narrative goals (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Grundstein, 2022). In the second phase, students analyze their work post-improvisation. By reviewing video recordings and participating in discussions, they gain a reflective perspective on their scenes. This analysis enables them to evaluate creative choices and identify opportunities to enhance subtext, character interactions, or dramatic structure, transforming raw improvisations into coherent, emotionally engaging plays (Hrastinski, 2019).

Dual-loop learning theory prompts students to re-evaluate assumptions driving their decisions. It challenges them to explore why a scene fails and consider whether significant changes—revising character objectives, structural conflicts, or relationships—could resolve it. This shifts focus from temporary fixes to a comprehensive development process balancing discovery with critical thinking (Hwang et al., 2019).

Combining exploration and critical revision ensures creativity is both flexible and systematic. Somatic improvisations, as outlined in Section 1.2, provide the foundation for discovery, while dual-loop learning refines and structures those ideas into cohesive dramatic works. Through this iterative process, playwriting becomes an active exercise in inquiry and thoughtful development, producing plays integrating spontaneity with dramatic coherence (Morikawa & Ishida, 2026).

1.5. Somatic-Generative and Dual-Loop Reflective Playwriting Framework

Synthesizing theories from Lecoq, Chekhov, and Spolin to address the needs of inexperienced secondary school novices, this study proposes the somatic-generative and dual-loop reflective playwriting framework (SoDu framework). The framework posits that playwriting is not a static mental exercise, but a triadic brain–body–space interaction

(Prendergast et al., 2016) utilizing dual-loop reflective mechanisms to generate ideas and refine dramatic tension (Argyris & Schön, 1978). The framework rests on three core pillars.

- Somatic creativity: Group improvisations serve as stage trials, allowing students to physically verify if mental concepts are viable for performance (Lecoq, 2009, pp. 29–33; Spolin, 1999, pp. 16–18). Concurrently, physical movement and spatial exploration act as cognitive catalysts (Glenberg & Gallese, 2012; Goldin-Meadow, 2005, pp. 34–37). Starting with only a rough concept, new ideas continuously emerge through physical interactions and spatial maneuvers (Spolin, 1999, pp. 56–60; Kirsh, 2010).
- Psychosomatic mapping and active lines: Combining Lecoq's (2009, pp. 16–18) movement-before-language theory, Chekhov's (2014, pp. 63–75) psychological gesture, and Spolin's (1999, pp. 21–24) PoC, students engage in live improvisation face-to-face in physical space. While desk writing leads to flat narrative exposition, live interactions mean simply reciting facts fails to move a partner or resolve spatial tension (Spolin, 1999, pp. 81–84). To achieve character objectives against a real partner, students must deploy active verbal strategies—such as bargaining, demanding, or pleading. Spoken words become active tools to physically influence others, elevating dialogue into Effective Lines charged with somatic energy, motivation, and subtext (Spolin, 1999, pp. 314–317; Witerska, 2025, p. 66).
- Dual-loop reflective feedback: The SoDu framework provides a two-tier reflective scaffold for inexperienced students (Argyris & Schön, 1978). First, the live peer feedback loop allows observing groups to deliver real-time feedback during improvisation, fostering peer learning and brainstorming (Wisniewski et al., 2020). Second, the video-assisted reflection loop uses recorded improvisations for post-class review, enabling self-reflection and deeper critique (Tripp & Rich, 2012). Visual re-examination helps students uncover overlooked details, incorporate new character traits, and master advanced dramatic tension.

1.6. Constructive Alignment and the LETCA Rubric

To ensure pedagogical coherence, this study operationalizes Biggs and Tang's (2011, pp. 95–133) principle of constructive alignment by structurally synchronizing the somatic playwriting module as the teaching and learning activity with the LETCA rubric as the primary assessment task. Rather than treating assessment as a post-hoc evaluative instrument, this aligned architecture embeds the rubric directly within the learning process as an assessment-for-learning scaffold (pp. 191–224). Exposing students to explicit qualitative criteria prior to embodied exploration bridges abstract somatic performance with concrete textual targets, ensuring physical improvisations remain purposefully directed toward intended learning outcomes (pp. 95–100).

Adopted in this study as an assessment-for-learning scaffold, the LETCA rubric (Wong, 2011), synthesized by drama education scholars to integrate creativity, verbal expression, and dramatic performance provides explicit criteria for high-quality playwriting, bridging abstract somatic exploration with concrete textual targets. Spanning 5 core domains and 10 indicators—literary-language (L), effective lines (E), tension (T), creativity (C), and stage applicability (A) (Table 1)—the rubric serves as the explicit pedagogical target guiding student revision throughout the unit.

1.7. The SoDu-LETCA Playwriting Learning Unit

Based on the SoDu framework and guided by the LETCA rubric, this study designed the SoDu-LETCA playwriting learning unit (hereafter, the SoDu-LETCA unit, see Figure 1). This compressed, 4-lesson pedagogical intervention operationalizes the triadic interaction of brain–body–space within the constraints of a non-elective formal curriculum.

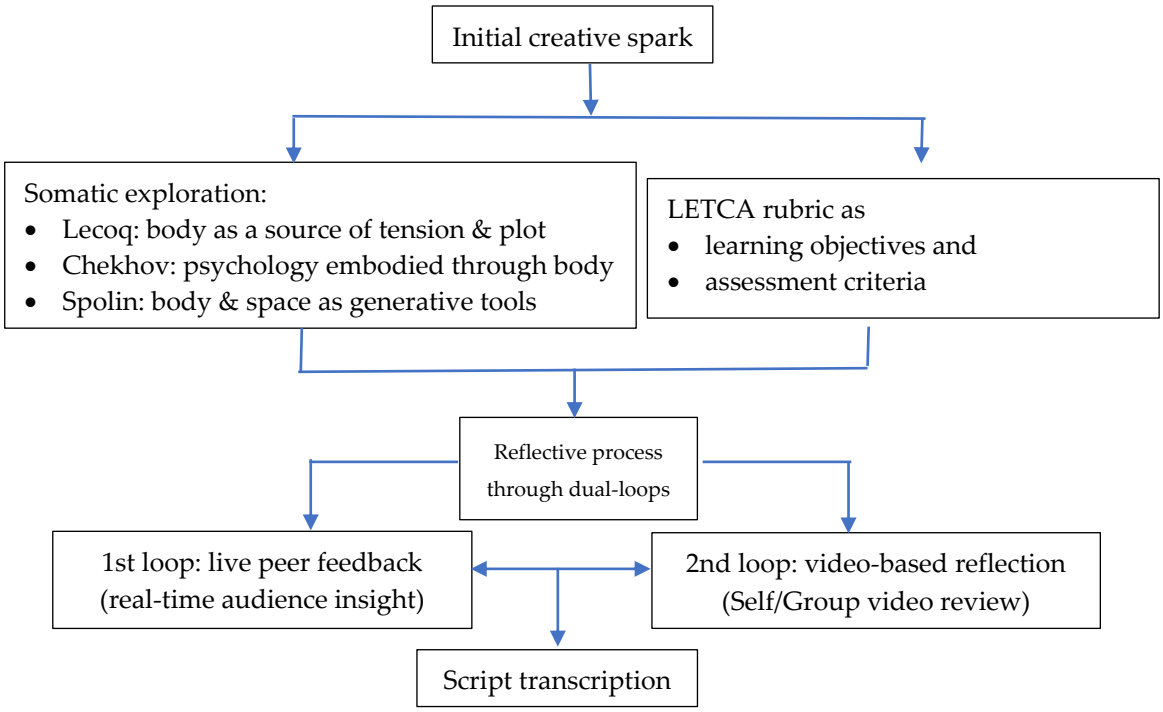


Figure 1. The pedagogical design of the SoDu-LETCA unit.

The unit explicitly guides novice students through a structured oscillation between physical generation and reflective revision to meet the five LETCA criteria (Table 2):

Table 2. SoDu-LETCA unit structure and core learning activities.

Lesson	Core Learning Activities
Lesson 1: Embodying real-life scenarios	LETCA focus: Link real-life experiences through the body. • Students identify familiar interpersonal conflicts, physically exploring them using physical storytelling (gestures, space, rhythm). • Students utilize psychological gestures (Chekhov) to craft distinct roles (starter, confused, adder, fixer) through posture and gesture, embodying characters from the outside-in. • Grounded in Lecoq's body-before-text philosophy, activities use physical movement as the primary tool to explore emotional nuances.
Lesson 2: Somatic roles & physical conflict dynamics	LETCA focus: Transform conflicts into somatic-driven narratives. • Students embody conflicts and assign distinct roles (protagonist, antagonist, adder, fixer) to structure improvisations. • Peer critiques emphasize body–mind awareness and communication. • Students explore how physical tension drives conflict escalation and plot generation (Lecoq). • PoC is applied using spatial positioning and proximity to drive dynamic tension and relational boundaries (Spolin).
Lesson 3: Structuring the somatic flow of conflict	LETCA focus: Students apply the 20/70/10 rule, allocating 20% of narratives to establishing context, 70% to escalating tension through physical storytelling, and 10% to resolution. • Physical movements and stage positioning are inspired by authentic emotions to align body-centered storytelling with clear narrative progression (Chekhov). • Critiques focus on collaborative dynamics and use physicality as a storytelling tool to improve narrative structure (Lecoq). • Students experiment with stage positioning and movements; physical interactions serve as generative tools driving tension, climax, and resolution originality rather than through intellectual planning (Spolin).

Table 2. *Cont.*

Lesson	Core Learning Activities
Lesson 4: Somatic expression through key lines	LETCA focus: Guide students to develop key lines that blend theme-driven dialogue with deliberate physical gestures and tone. • Devised performances integrate thematic clarity, somatic embodiment, and creative staging. • Students leverage the psycho-physical approach so that their deliberate physical gestures naturally unlock distinctive vocal rhythms and subtext-rich dialogue, preventing homogenized character voices (Chekhov). • Activities ensure that spatial presence, movement, and sensory elements actively align with narrative's themes (Spolin).

Note: Throughout all four lessons, the unit employs a continuous dual-loop reflective feedback process. (1) First loop (during lesson): students receive immediate, real-time feedback from peers and teachers during live physical improvisation. (2) Second loop (after lesson): students engage in video-based reflection by watching performance recordings to evaluate their creative choices and refine play writing.

1.8. Research Objectives and Questions

The study empirically evaluates the effectiveness of the somatic-first SoDu-LETCA unit compared to a traditional text-first approach within a non-elective mainstream secondary classroom. Specifically, it investigates how the embodied, iterative nature of the SoDu-LETCA unit mitigates cognitive load and enhances the overall student-authored play quality.

To address these objectives, the study poses the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: To what extent does the somatic-first SoDu-LETCA unit improve novice student play quality across the five LETCA domains compared to a traditional text-first approach?
- RQ2: What underlying pedagogical mechanisms drive the SoDu-LETCA unit, and how do they support students' play writing process?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design: A Quasi-Experimental Framework

This study employs a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design to evaluate the comparative efficacy of the SoDu-LETCA unit (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 213–252). Rather than conducting a decontextualized laboratory experiment, this evaluation constitutes a practical design cycle within an ongoing curriculum trajectory, specifically assessing whether a compact, 4-lesson somatic-first module can overcome structural time constraints and pedagogical limitations of local secondary schools (Karsten & van Zyl, 2022).

The study involved two intact Secondary 3 (S3) classes in a Hong Kong school, pre-assigned without student choice, yet both possessed a uniform baseline of theatrical literacy. Following listwise deletion for missing data, the experimental class received the somatic-first SoDu-LETCA intervention, while the reference class concurrently received standard text-first pedagogy.

Institutional baseline evaluations indicated a selection imbalance: the reference class possessed higher overall academic achievement and stronger generic language literacy. To control for baseline disparities and prevent memory recall bias, data collection followed a strict timeline: pre-test baseline scores were collected during a dedicated class session preceding Lesson 1, whereas post-test evaluations were administered in a subsequent class session following Lesson 4. A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was selected as the primary inferential statistical method. By entering pre-test scores as a baseline covariate,

ANCOVA mathematically adjusts post-test means, neutralizing initial baseline disparities and isolating the net treatment effect attributable to the SoDu-LETCA unit.

Potential teacher-effect confounding variables were systematically controlled:

- Instructor equivalence: Instruction was delivered by two distinct teachers possessing comparable years of professional drama teaching experience.
- Qualification standardization: Both teachers held identical international professional credentials—the Associate of Trinity College London Diploma in Drama Teaching.
- Protocol adherence: Both classes strictly adhered to uniform thematic writing prompts, identical time allocations, and harmonized classroom environments.

2.2. Pedagogical Interventions

The experimental class engaged in the four-lesson somatic-first SoDu-LETCA unit (Table 2). This shifted playwriting from a text-first approach emphasizing text analysis to a somatic-first approach integrating physical activities into the creative process. Engaging in physical action and reflection before writing, somatic-first practices enable students to expand their creative range, fostering deeper character, plot, line, and spatial dynamic development.

The reference class followed the standard text-first playwriting curriculum. Lessons emphasized studying play excerpts, focusing on text analysis. Activities included guided discussions and short improvisations exploring dramatic elements like character development, plot progression, and dialogue. These exercises prioritized understanding existing works over generating original creations.

2.3. Measurement Instrument: The LETCA Rubric

To measure student playwriting quality, this study utilized the LETCA rubric (Wong, 2011; Table 1). Validated through over a decade of continuous application in the Hong Kong Creative Drama Festival, the rubric offers high ecological and construct validity tailored to local secondary drama education, ensuring robust evaluation across the 10 target indicators.

2.4. Scoring Mechanics and Evaluation Protocol

To capture granular performance variances, each indicator was graded on a 7-tier scale (1.0 to 4.0) with half-point intervals. Four primary integer tiers (emerging, developing, proficient, advanced) anchored the scale, allowing intermediate operational flexibility.

To facilitate standardized inferential testing (ANCOVA) and inter-domain comparisons, raw rubric scores were linearly converted to a standardized percentage scale (0–100%), as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. LETCA rubric score percentage mapping.

Raw Rubric Score	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0
Converted %	0.00%	16.67%	33.33%	50.00%	66.67%	83.33%	100.00%

Note. Converted percentages were calculated using the linear formula Converted Score (%) = $\frac{Raw\ score - 1.0}{3.0} \times 100$.

An external panel of three independent raters selected from the Hong Kong Creative Drama Festival expert assessor pool conducted the evaluation. All were senior drama educators unaffiliated with the target school and blind to the study's hypotheses.

Prior to evaluation, student plays were digitized, anonymized, and randomized. Raters underwent calibration using four benchmark plays (two pre-test and two post-test) to align the LETCA rubric across all 10 indicators. Drawn from excluded absentee students whose incomplete datasets were excluded from the primary sample (Section 2.1), these benchmarks spanned a representative performance spectrum across the 4-tier scale.

Raters evaluated plays under a blinded outcome assessment protocol (masked to student identity, class and timepoint). Inter-rater reliability demonstrated high consistency across all 490 evaluations, as evidenced by a two-way random-effects, absolute-agreement single-measures intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC = 0.88, 95% CI [0.84, 0.91], $p < 0.001$). Minor discrepancies ($\leq$2 tiers) occurred in 96.3% ($n = 472$) of assessments and were resolved via arithmetic mean, while major discrepancies (>2 tiers, 3.7%, $n = 18$) were successfully resolved through formal moderation.

2.5. Data Collection and Statistical Procedures

Data collection followed a sequential pre-test/post-test timeline, concluding with qualitative interviews and focus groups. To prevent recall bias, topically distinct prompts were administered under identical parameters:

- Pre-Test Prompt: An event that surprised me.
- Post-Test Prompt: An event that inspired me.

In both sessions, students composed a complete short play within a standardized 80-min window. Prompt guidelines suggested ensembles of 3 to 5 characters and approximately 35 to 40 dialogue lines (~1500 words).

One-way ANCOVA tests were performed across the five aggregate LETCA domain scores and individual indicator scores. Post-test scores served as the dependent variable, pedagogical intervention as the fixed factor, and pre-test scores as the baseline covariate to mathematically adjust for initial baseline differences. Prior to running ANCOVA, standard statistical assumptions were evaluated. The linear relationship between pre-test covariates and post-test outcomes was confirmed via scatterplots, and the homogeneity of regression slopes was verified by confirming non-significant interaction terms between treatment groups and baseline covariates ($p > 0.05$) across all indicators. To control for inflated Type I error rate resulting from testing multiple indicators, outcomes were pre-designated: effective lines, tension, creativity, and stage applicability served as primary outcomes, while literary-language components served as secondary outcomes. p-values across multiple comparisons were adjusted using the Benjamini–Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) procedure with a significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$. Partial eta squared (η_p^2) was calculated to determine effect sizes for significant outcomes. Descriptive statistics, adjusted means, ANCOVA results, and effect sizes are summarized accordingly.

2.6. Qualitative Data Collection

To examine the pedagogies driving play quality gains and explore students' psychological experiences (RQ2), semi-structured teacher interviews and student focus groups were conducted immediately following the intervention.

Qualitative teacher data were gathered post-intervention through two 60 min semi-structured interviews. Utilizing a video-assisted stimulated recall protocol, teachers viewed recorded lesson excerpts from both conditions to act as comparative expert observers. Discussions evaluated instructional efficiency, cognitive load offloading, and student task engagement across workflows.

Participating teachers were designated by class condition:

- T_E: Experimental class teacher (somatic-first approach);
- T_R: Reference class teacher (text-first approach).

Qualitative student data were gathered through two 90 min semi structured focus groups ($n = 4$ experimental class; $n = 4$ reference class). Discussions used video-stimulated recall clips from lessons to prompt reflection on learning motivation, task engagement, cognitive load, and writing anxiety.

Participants were selected via stratified purposeful sampling across four pre-to-post performance trajectories (Table 4). Student codes combine class condition and performance trajectory tier without punctuation for clean identification.

Table 4. Stratified purposeful sampling for student focus groups (n = 8).

Class Condition	Student ID	Performance Trajectory
Experimental Class (n = 4)	S_{EHi}	High improver (substantial performance gains)
	S_{EMo}	Moderate improver (standard expected gains)
	S_{EMi}	Minimal improver (limited performance gains)
	S_{EHt}	High baseline (high initial achievement maintained)
Reference Class (n = 4)	S_{RHi}	High improver (substantial performance gains)
	S_{RMo}	Moderate improver (standard expected gains)
	S_{RMi}	Minimal improver (limited performance gains)
	S_{RHt}	High baseline (high initial achievement maintained)

Note. Student IDs denote condition (E = Experimental; R = Reference) and trajectory (Hi = High improver; Mo = Moderate improver; Mi = Minimal improver; Ht = High baseline maintainer).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Sample Consistency and Screening

Following baseline screening and listwise deletion (Section 2.1), the final sample of n = 49 valid cases was established for hypothesis testing. One-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) across all rubric domains and indicators mathematically neutralize baseline literacy imbalances, successfully isolating the net treatment effect of the SoDu-LETCA unit (Results are shown in Table 5).

Table 5. Summary of one-way ANCOVA results across LETCA rubric domains and indicators (n = 49).

Domain/Indicator	Pre-Test M % (SD) (Exp/ Ref)	Unadj. Post M % (SD) (Exp/ Ref)	Adj. Post M % (Exp/ Ref)	$F(1,46)$	p	η_p^2	g
LITERARY-LANGUAGE (L)	73.70 (13.11)/ 58.40 (16.28)	69.81 (12.94)/ 66.85 (12.95)	63.32/ 70.96	4.120	0.048	0.082	−0.59
1. Word Choice	63.16 (12.17)/ 37.78 (12.70)	58.42 (9.77)/ 70.56 (14.18)	57.06/ 71.43	7.103	0.011	0.134	−0.77
2. Play Structure	40.35 (14.08)/ 30.00 (15.19)	69.82 (9.60)/ 66.89 (14.66)	66.78/ 68.81	0.890	0.350	0.019	−0.27
EFFECTIVE LINES (E)	65.42 (15.08)/ 61.20 (12.96)	84.00 (10.35)/ 75.01 (11.04)	82.15/ 76.40	18.418	<0.001	0.286	+1.24
3. Exposition	67.22 (12.81)/ 69.30 (14.36)	83.33 (11.53)/80.88 (11.54)	83.15/ 81.16	6.112	0.017	0.038	+0.71
4. Revealing Characters	66.67 (14.13)/ 68.50 (12.63)	86.00 (10.87)/78.33 (11.89)	85.82/ 78.45	14.520	<0.001	0.240	+1.11
5. Distinct Roles	61.40 (13.46)/ 65.00 (15.53)	83.33 (10.44)/64.16 (12.57)	83.85/ 63.83	28.450	<0.001	0.382	+1.54
6. Key Lines/Theme	59.64 (14.05)/ 50.00 (12.21)	83.33 (12.36)/ 76.67 (10.98)	81.94/ 76.01	6.480	0.014	0.123	+0.73
TENSION DOMAIN (T) 7. Conflict Development	65.79 (11.78)/ 56.67 (16.27)	87.89 (14.04)/ 70.89 (13.92)	85.65/ 72.30	18.720	<0.001	0.289	+1.25

Table 5. *Cont.*

Domain/Indicator	Pre-Test M % (SD) (Exp/ Ref)	Unadj. Post M % (SD) (Exp/ Ref)	Adj. Post M % (Exp/ Ref)	$F(1,46)$	p	η_p^2	g
CREATIVITY DOMAIN (C)	64.62 (12.02)/ 67.48 (14.23)	76.08 (9.66)/ 68.41 (12.22)	76.86/ 67.92	20.960	<0.001	0.313	+1.32
8. Life Sensitivity	71.05 (12.61)/ 70.77 (14.98)	78.77 (10.97)/ 76.44 (12.59)	78.72/ 76.47	4.279	0.044	0.081	+0.60
9. Flexibility	61.40 (13.85)/ 66.67 (12.83)	74.39 (14.06)/ 66.00 (13.77)	75.37/ 65.38	16.709	<0.001	0.267	+1.18
STAGE APPLICABILITY (A) 10. Stage Applicability	72.20 (15.54)/ 75.10 (16.03)	86.50 (12.31)/ 78.10 (14.44)	87.10/ 77.70	13.920	<0.001	0.232	+1.08

Note. n = 49 (Exp n = 19; Ref n = 30). Unadjusted means (Ms) and standard deviations (SDs) are reported for baseline (pre-test) and raw post-test values. Adjusted post-test means (adj post M) reflect estimated marginal means adjusted for pre-test baseline covariates using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). F = F-statistic; p = p-value; η_p^2 = partial eta squared; g = Hedges' g effect size.

3.2. Domain-by-Domain Empirical and Theoretical Analysis

3.2.1. Literary-Language Domain (L)

The literary-language domain evaluated word choices and structural proportions. Aggregate ANCOVA revealed a statistically significant difference favoring the reference class, $F(1,46) = 4.12$, $p = 0.048$. This outcome stems largely from a baseline ceiling effect: the experimental class entered with an elevated pre-test mean (M = 73.70%) versus the reference class (M = 58.40%). Consequently, the experimental class maintained upper-tier stability, while the reference class made significant gains from a lower baseline.

- Word choice: The reference class demonstrated a statistically significant advantage, $F(1,46) = 7.103$, $p = 0.011$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.134$, g = −0.77, achieving an adjusted post-test lead of 14.37 percentage points (71.43% vs. 57.06%). Qualitative insights attribute this to differing pedagogical focal points. Teacher T_R observed that the somatic-first approach encouraged prioritizing emotional truth and character expression, leaving fewer cognitive resources for linguistic precision. Experimental students, such as S_{EHi} and S_{EMo}, corroborated this trade-off, noting improvisation forged a stronger connection to character objectives but lacked structured mechanics. Conversely, the text-first environment systematically trained students in crafting accurate dialogue. Teacher T_E noted this analytical emphasis, validated by reference students like S_{RHi} and S_{RHt}, who highlighted that play deconstruction provided explicit tools for context-appropriate word selection. The systematic focus on language refinement explains the reference class's strong quantitative results.
- Play structure: No significant difference emerged, $F(1,46) = 0.89$, $p = 0.350$, with adjusted post-test means of 66.78% for the experimental class and 68.81% for the reference class. Although teacher T_E assumed deconstruction would advantage the text-first class, practical embodiment proved equally effective. Teacher T_R noted the somatic-first approach enabled students to intuitively explore pacing. Experimental students like S_{EHt} and S_{EMi} felt embodying characters clarified a scene's organic flow. Conversely, despite analytical training, reference students such as S_{RMi} and S_{RMo} struggled to translate theoretical structural concepts into original writing.

Synthesizing the literary-language domain, the text-first pedagogy's analytical focus offers a distinct advantage in refining words, while the somatic-first framework is equally effective at instilling a macro play structure by translating abstract pacing into intuitive

physical progression. This reveals a natural lexical-somatic trade-off: physical improvisation successfully supports structural flow but requires supplementary textual scaffolding for optimal word choice.

3.2.2. Effective Lines Domain (E)

The effective lines domain evaluated dialogue across four indicators. The experimental class demonstrated statistical superiority, $F(1, 46) = 18.42$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.286$, $g = +1.24$, securing an adjusted lead of 5.75 percentage points (82.15% vs. 76.40%). This advantage was apparent in revealing characters, distinct roles, and key lines. While exposition also yielded a significant difference ($p = 0.017$), the practical gap was minimal (1.99 percentage points).

- Exposition: A statistically significant difference was observed, $F(1, 46) = 6.11$, $p = 0.017$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.038$, $g = +0.71$, with adjusted post-test means of 83.15% for the experimental class versus 81.16% for the reference class. Teacher T_R highlighted that the somatic-first approach allowed students to actively explore settings and relationships, fostering the intuitive integration of contextual elements. Experimental students, including S_{EHi} and S_{EMi}, reflected that physical improvisation improved their ability to visualize dynamic scenarios, enriching exposition experientially. Conversely, teacher T_E noted that the text-first approach emphasized meticulous articulation techniques but yielded less creative flexibility. Reference students like S_{RHi} and S_{RMo} acknowledged that play analysis provided clarity but lacked the experiential group's creative edge.
- Revealing characters: The experimental class achieved a significant lead, $F(1, 46) = 14.52$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.240$, with an adjusted mean of 85.82% versus 78.45% (+7.37 percentage points). Teacher T_R observed that somatic embodiment enabled deep engagement with motivations, granting insights into how personality drives dialogue. Experimental students such as S_{EMo} and S_{EHi} explained that active exploration uncovered subtle traits translating naturally into character driven lines. In contrast, teacher T_E noted that the text-first method relied on theoretical deconstruction. Reference students like S_{RHt} and S_{RMi} echoed this, feeling that text-based analysis clarified theory but lacked practical experience for achieving writing depth.
- Distinct roles: This indicator yielded the most pronounced breakthrough, $F(1, 46) = 28.45$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.382$, $g = +1.54$, with the experimental class outperforming the reference class by an adjusted lead of 20.02 percentage points (83.85% vs. 63.83%). Teacher T_R stated that physicalizing characters allowed students to explore unique motivations, providing a practical understanding of narrative roles. Experimental students S_{EMi} and S_{EHt} reported that Chekhov's psychological gestures helped them express different personalities, making each character's role distinctly clearer. Conversely, teacher T_E commented that the text-first approach improved conceptual understanding but lacked active practice. Reference students such as S_{RMo} and S_{RMi} corroborated this, noting they could intellectually identify functions, but creating vivid, unique roles without experiential grounding was highly challenging.
- Key lines revealing theme: The experimental class showed significant superiority, $F(1, 46) = 6.48$, $p = 0.014$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.123$, achieving an adjusted mean of 81.94% versus 76.01%. Teacher T_R noted that embodying themes enabled students to explore opposing viewpoints and seamlessly weave these thematic elements into dialogue. Experimental students like S_{EHi} and S_{EMo} shared that improvising helped discover how themes emerge naturally through character actions. Teacher T_E explained that the text-first class focused on analyzing thematic articulation in existing plays, limiting creative application. Reference students S_{RHt} and S_{RHi} indicated play analysis provided theory but lacked the experiential depth to translate insights into original dialogue.

Synthesizing this domain, the somatic-first framework gave the experimental class significant advantages. Physical embodiment and improvisation refined character development and thematic integration. While the text-first approach yielded analytical clarity, the somatic method's creative flexibility better prepared students to craft nuanced dialogue.

3.2.3. Tension Domain (T)

The tension domain evaluated conflict development. The experimental class demonstrated marked superiority, $F(1, 46) = 18.720$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.289$, $g = +1.25$, securing a net-adjusted lead of 9.17 percentage points (86.68% vs. 72.30%).

Teacher T_E highlighted that embodying conflict physically provides a versatile foundation for rising tension. Experimental students, such as S_{EHt} and S_{EMo}, noted that Lecoq exercises taught them to look beyond lines, utilizing physical space to continuously escalate conflict. Conversely, teacher T_R noted that the text-first pedagogy's analytical focus lacked experiential generation. Reference students like S_{RMi} and S_{RHt} echoed that studying pre-existing plays was intellectually clear but hard to apply creatively.

Synthesizing the tension outcomes, active physical exploration fundamentally transforms how secondary students construct conflict. While text-first approaches identify tension conceptually, somatic-first methodology empowers students to generate and escalate original conflict by grounding dynamics in visceral practice.

3.2.4. Creativity Domain (C)

The creativity domain measured life sensitivity and flexibility. The experimental class demonstrated superior growth, $F(1, 46) = 20.96$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.313$, $g = +1.32$, achieving a net-adjusted domain lead of 8.94 percentage points (76.86% vs. 67.92%). The experimental class excelled particularly in flexibility and original perspectives.

- Life sensitivity: A statistically significant difference was observed, $F(1, 46) = 4.28$, $p = 0.044$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.081$, with adjusted post-test means of 78.72% for the experimental class and 76.47% for the reference class. Teacher T_E noted that the somatic-first approach provided opportunities to physically recreate real life scenarios, encouraging deeper observation of human interactions. Experimental students like S_{EMi} and S_{EHi} reflected that improvisation heightened sensitivity to life details and motivations. Teacher T_R observed the text-first approach offered theoretical tools but lacked experiential learning. Reference students such as S_{RMo} and S_{RMi} felt play analysis clarified human nature representation professionally, but did not provide the experiential grounding for deeply nuanced, original content.
- Flexibility: The experimental class achieved a performance reversal, $F(1, 46) = 16.71$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.267$, securing an adjusted lead of 9.99 percentage points (75.37% vs. 65.38%). Teacher T_R stated that the somatic-first framework fostered creativity by encouraging students to physicalize perspectives and archetypes. Experimental students, including S_{EHt} and S_{EMi}, noted embodied exploration enhanced their ability to diversify character relationships. In contrast, teacher T_E pointed out that the text-first approach yielded fewer opportunities for novel character creation. Reference students like S_{RHi} and S_{RHt} agreed, noting analytical training did not adequately prepare them to translate flexibility concepts into original outputs.

Synthesizing this domain, embodied exploration provided a crucial experiential basis for generating varied characters and storylines. While text-first taught identification of creative elements, somatic-first offered meaningful improvement in life sensitivity and a breakthrough in flexibility.

3.2.5. Stage Applicability Domain (A)

ANCOVA confirmed a statistically significant main effect favoring the somatic-first pedagogy, $F_{1,46} = 13.92$, $p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.232, g = +1.08$, with an adjusted post-test mean of 87.10% for the experimental class versus 77.70% for the reference class.

Physicalizing space is critical to grasp production mechanics. Teacher T_R noted that the somatic-first approach allowed active experimentation with stage movements. Experimental students, such as S_{EHi} and S_{EMo}, shared that Spolin exercises prompted them to incorporate props, ensuring the play provided actors with the opportunities to concentrate and utilize space. Conversely, teacher T_E explained that the text-first approach focused on feasibility and provided fewer exploration opportunities, which reference students like S_{RHi} and S_{RMo} felt hindered practical stage application design.

Crucially, the somatic-first framework demonstrated a protective effect against performance decline. In this study, skill regression is operationally defined as any quantitative decrease in a student's post-test score compared to their baseline pre-test score. Following the intervention, no participant in the somatic-first experimental group (0 out of 19) showed a decline in stage applicability scores. In contrast, declines were observed in the text-first reference group, with 33.3% of students (10 out of 30) experiencing skill regression, dropping by an average of 16.67 percentage points.

To synthesize the stage applicability domain, relying solely on desk-bound analysis leaves students ill equipped to manage the physical realities of theatre. The somatic-first framework effectively bridges this gap by transforming abstract spatial concepts into tangible, embodied practices, thereby giving experimental students a significantly stronger and more practical understanding of stage production dynamics.

3.3. Pedagogical Mechanisms Driving Playwriting Performance

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups addresses RQ2, explaining the pedagogical mechanisms allowing the experimental class to excel during the seated post-test. These insights reveal how prior training uniquely influenced students facing unseen prompts.

- Mental visualization: Teacher T_R initially assumed the unit would resemble standard classroom improvisation, but video reflections revealed a stark contrast: the three somatic masters' exercises successfully shifted students' focus from mere dialogue to physical and spatial expression. Consequently, while the text-first approach required consciously recalling abstract rules, the somatic-first pedagogy trained students to anchor ideas physically before writing, aligning with embodied cognition theories positing that physical movement and spatial exploration serve as vital cognitive catalysts (Glenberg & Gallese, 2012; Goldin-Meadow, 2005). Although the post-test was desk-bound, experimental students internalized these visualizations, using somatic memory to support cognitive processing (Kirsh, 2010). Students such as S_{EHi} and S_{EMo} reported easily recalling their prior physical movements, which naturally organized scenes and simplified structuring new prompts.
- Authorship agency: Pedagogical objectives fundamentally impacted discipline connection. Analyzing existing plays positioned reference students like S_{RMo} and S_{RHi} as passive consumers. Conversely, experimental lessons were focused on original creation via dynamic brain–body–space interaction (Prendergast et al., 2016). Teacher T_E expressed a pleasant surprise, noting that the SoDu approach fundamentally transformed students' perspectives on drama; by extensively integrating physical and spatial elements during writing, students naturally carried this embodied awareness into their stage performances. This active generation built creative momentum and authorship, transforming playwriting into an intrinsically motivating experience (Itani, 2023) that empowered students with creative confidence.

4. Conclusions

This quasi-experimental study evaluated the somatic-first SoDu-LETCA unit against text-first pedagogy in a secondary school environment. Controlling for baseline imbalances via ANCOVA, quantitative findings demonstrate that experimental intervention achieved statistically significant superiority across four LETCA rubric domains: effective lines, tension, creativity, and stage applicability.

These quantitative gains were strongly corroborated by qualitative feedback, revealing that the unit's efficacy rests on grounding abstract playwriting in somatic-generative practices. Specifically, integrating the theories of three somatic masters bridged the critical gap between conceptualization and execution: Lecoq's body-before-text philosophy enabled students to intuitively generate tension and plot; Chekhov's psychological gestures prevented homogenized character voices, directly enhancing the creation of distinct roles and effective lines; and Spolin's PoC transformed space into an active generative tool, drastically improving stage applicability. By physically anchoring ideas, students utilized somatic memory to organize playwriting tasks, transforming it into an intrinsically motivating experience driven by authorship agency.

Deconstructing the instructional architecture reveals the following interconnected pedagogical determinants that catalyzed achievement and insulated and prevented creative stagnation:

- Triadic somatic-generative foundations: Leveraging Lecoq, Chekhov, and Spolin's exercises can shift the pedagogical focus from mere dialogue to physical and spatial expression, aligning with embodied cognition theories.
- Formative assessment for learning: Introducing the LETCA rubric early established a diagnostic framework for self-regulation and peer review. Students used its 10 indicators to guide comprehensive play revision (Fukuda et al., 2020).
- Strategic curriculum condensation: A concentrated 4-lesson unit enabled systematic playwriting instruction while successfully freeing up time for other areas of drama education.
- Exemplar-driven creation: Short play exemplars illustrated boundaries, offering structural blueprints for lower-baseline students (Kasimkhodjayeva, 2024; Paxton, 2022).
- Video-assisted dual-loop reflection: Real-time peer feedback (1st Loop) offered immediate insight, while video review (2nd Loop) allowed students to visually analyze character traits and refine dramatic tension before transcription (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Tripp & Rich, 2012).

Ultimately, no participant in the somatic-first group showed a decline in stage applicability scores, whereas a 33.3% regression rate was observed in the text-first comparison group. Triangulated data demonstrates that the somatic-first model successfully converts abstract dramatic concepts into functional, stage-ready blueprints while simultaneously fostering authorship agency and creative confidence.

5. Future Work

5.1. Methodological and Instructional Limitations

While somatic-first pedagogy effectively scaffolds learning and mitigates creative regression, five primary limitations remain:

- Sample size and attrition: Although listwise deletion preserved analytical integrity ($n = 49$), small sample sizes remain vulnerable to attrition and statistical power constraints.
- Lexical-somatic trade-off: The reference class maintained a lead in word choice ($F(1, 46) = 7.103, p = 0.011, \eta_p^2 = 0.134$) because spontaneous physical improvi-

sation prioritized spatial movement and verbal tactics over formal lexical polishing, whereas the text-first class benefited from lexical transfer from exemplars.

- Micro-intervention constraints: The 4-lesson module transformed structural execution and character differentiation but was too brief to alter deeper personal traits like life sensitivity.
- Short-term evaluation horizon: Immediate post-Lesson 4 testing left long-term retention and transferability to standard literary composition unmeasured.
- Logistical dependencies: Execution requires double-period (60–80 min) and dedicated drama space, posing friction for schools with rigid 40-min timetables or standard classrooms.

5.2. Future Research Roadmap

These empirical insights establish a clear roadmap for subsequent research directions:

- Multi-site expansion: Scale the trial across a broader, more diverse sample of secondary schools to evaluate generalizability across varying academic achievement bands.
- Longitudinal skill tracking: Implement tracking mechanisms to examine whether somatic-first competencies yield long-term improvements in dramatic writing and spatial awareness.
- Teacher professional development: Develop a standardized toolkit to equip non-specialist teachers with the facilitation skills needed to guide physical improvisation and manage dual-loop video reflections.
- Role of physical props as somatic catalysts: Examine how tactile objects generate material resistance (Lecoq) and physical concentration (Spolin) to spontaneously trigger spatial tension and subtextual dialogue.
- Cross-context pedagogical transferability: Examine how somatic-generative frameworks can be adapted across higher education writing, screenwriting, second-language learning, applied theatre, and drama therapy.

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