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Drama in ELT for Refugee and Migrant Pre-Service EFL Teachers: Religious and Cultural Challenges

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ABSTRACT: *Forced migration has placed growing numbers of Syrian and Palestinian students in Turkish higher education, yet drama-based pedagogy—despite its recognized psychosocial benefits—remains poorly understood as a potential site of religious and cultural tension for these students. This study explores the classroom dynamics of Syrian and Palestinian female migrant/refugee students enrolled in a Drama in an ELT course within an English Language Teaching Program at a Turkish public university. Data were collected over a 4-week period through participant observation, semistructured in-depth interviews, and document analysis and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Sharing similar sociocultural characteristics—being Muslim, female, and war-displaced students—the two groups revealed strikingly different academic performances and social behaviors. The Palestinian students were highly successful, with active participation and confident self-expression, while the Syrian students reported academic difficulties, social withdrawal, and embodied vulnerability. The data were interpreted through the lens of cultural capital, rooted in a collective tradition of education-as-resistance. These findings suggest that one-size-fits-all approaches are inadequate in migrant/refugee education and point to the need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and differentiated pedagogies in language teacher education programs that serve religiously and culturally diverse student populations.*

Keywords: Immigrant Education, Syrian Refugees, Palestinian Refugees, Drama in ELT, Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

Forced migration has become a significant challenge in today's education systems, particularly in university education. In Turkey, 58,000 Syrian and 2,000 Palestinian students enrolled in higher education in the 2021–2022 academic year (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2022). Universities are more than places where these refugee students can acquire academic knowledge; rather, they can engage in post-trauma healing, language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and identity building in a multidimensional space (Dereli, 2022; Şafak-Ayvazoglu et al., 2021). However, the situation can become more complicated by factors such as language barriers, interrupted educational backgrounds, cross-cultural differences, and discrimination. Their financial and psychological states may be related to other factors that have negative or positive effects on their educational journeys in Turkey.

In light of these features of the educational environments they experience, a crucial issue arises in designing education. War and forced displacement continue to disrupt access to education worldwide, underscoring the need for integrative approaches that safeguard students' right to education even amid conflict and crisis (Salha et al., 2024). Research in the field of refugee education has highlighted that this area may pose risks when a one-size-fits-all approach is used. Syrian and Palestinian students who are fleeing from the war at home have different educational needs and adaptive processes. Their subsequent engagement in the new educational setting requires new understanding and perspectives. Instead of a uniform (one-size-fits-all) approach, we need to understand their cultural, religious, individual, and collective backgrounds.

Art-based approaches facilitate more active student participation and support students' social-emotional skills. These approaches can create nonverbal metaphorical channels of expression in situations where linguistic resources are limited, as in the case of refugee students (Ugurlu et al., 2016). However, drama pedagogy is not “universal” or “culturally neutral”: it makes bodies visible, requires sound, and densifies social exposure (McDonnell & O'Boyle, 2021). For students with cultural and religious sensitivities, this can create a problematic educational environment. The present study demonstrates that drama pedagogy can create a space of “exposure” when it clashes with migrant students' religious sensitivities and privacy boundaries. In addition to the concept of safe space, Khawaja et al. (2017) reported that international students who feel anxious about speaking in a second language also experience greater academic stress. This dovetails with the broader body of scholarship examining Muslim students' experiences in Western academic contexts, which underscores the need for culturally attuned pedagogical approaches (Al-Krenawi, 2025). In the case of the Syrian and Palestinian participants in the current study, different forced-migration backgrounds impact classroom participation since language problems add to the war, displacement, and lack of proper schooling that they experienced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forced Migration and Higher Education within the Turkish Context

Research has illustrated that Syrian students in higher education in Turkey face various problems; as Parkinson (2025) states, Syrian students encounter diverse challenges within and beyond the university that negatively affect their engagement, attainment, sense of belonging, and psychological well-being (p. 1). Academic and psychological challenges have been explored by Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al. (2021).

Their research focused on intergroup relations, psychological problems, and bonding-building processes among Syrian university students. They reported that these students develop identity protection strategies alongside academic integration. On the other hand, Dereli (2022) reported that higher education serves as an environment for building a sense of “belonging” among Syrian higher education students. However, financial, linguistic, and social barriers have challenging effects on this process.

The educational experiences of Palestinian refugee students are rooted in a more profound diaspora history. While UNRWA schools in Lebanon and Jordan provide basic education for Palestinian refugees, access to higher education remains more limited (Chaaban et al., 2010; Sajdi et al., 2021). Palestinian students in Turkey may have experienced multiple migration routes and been exposed to a more flexible approach to cultural adaptation and interpreting religious practices. This is another research subject that this current study does not cover.

Drama Pedagogy and Refugee Education: A Critical Perspective

Drama and creative arts therapy have been shown to have positive effects on the psychosocial well-being of refugee children and young people. Ugurlu et al. (2016) reported significant reductions in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma in an arts therapy intervention with Syrian children in Istanbul. Meyer DeMott et al. (2017) reported increases in life satisfaction in an expressive arts intervention with unaccompanied refugee adolescents in Norway. Quinlan et al. (2016) reported that a controlled school-based creative arts therapy program in Australia reduced emotional and behavioral difficulties among adolescents of refugee origin. However, most of these studies focus on the general effects of the intervention and fail to offer in-depth analyses of how students interact with pedagogical processes on a moment-by-moment basis.

Drama pedagogy engages students in academic, affective, and cultural learning, and it is not universal or culturally neutral, which is central to critical discussions. Because drama makes bodies visible, demands a voice, and intensifies social exposure (Meyer DeMott et al., 2017), it can create a potential risk area for students with religious or cultural sensitivities. The healing power of dramatic activities is emphasized, but students' cultural background and religious sensitivities should be considered; otherwise, it will be a problem for both them and the teacher. Dallavis (2011) calls attention to the ways in which pedagogical theories might be extended to consider religion as a salient dimension of culture (p. 138) and continues:

“For people who share beliefs about the nature of existence, the existence of a deity, or the meaning of life, religious belief often shapes the cultural patterns of daily life. For communities shaped by religious group membership, religious identity is a functional dimension of culture. Finally, when the cultural

regularities of religious individuals and communities take the form of religious rituals and routines, religious practice becomes a salient feature of culture" (Dallavis, 2011, p. 140).

Therefore, as Hunter (2008) suggested, a "safe space" in a drama class is not static but rather a dynamic space that should include both physical and psychological security so that students can integrate into the learning and practicing process. Additionally, this pattern is generally observed not only among refugee students but also among international students more broadly. Hsu and Huang (2017) demonstrated that many international students might remain quiet in class because speaking in English makes them anxious and suggested that supportive teacher behavior could help reduce this anxiety. More recently, Barbour and Debreli (2026) similarly reported that poetry- and drama-based instruction shaped adolescent EFL learners' emotional safety, confidence, and willingness to communicate while also showing that these psychological benefits remained constrained by institutional and curricular pressures—a tension that resonates with the religious and cultural constraints examined in the present study.

Religious Identity, Privacy, and Education

For refugee students with Islamic beliefs, concepts such as privacy, modesty, chastity, shame, and dignity affect how they interact with classmates, especially socially and bodily, depending on the context of the drama activity. Teachers need to provide a safe and flexible learning environment and alternative participation options for such students because it might be quite challenging for them, as Mohammed (2025) demonstrates:

"Interviews and observations showed that cultural norms, such as expectations of hijab and strict gender roles, made it hard for girls to work with boys during group activities. Teachers said that parents often did not like English being linked to Western culture and that they did not know how to talk about gender issues" (Mohammed, 2025, p. 133).

These values may conflict with the "individual freedom of expression" and "bodily openness" promoted by Western pedagogy. This perspective offers a framework for evaluating the behavior of religious students when they are unwilling to participate in activities. A similar intersection of religious, gendered, and cultural expectations has been documented among Muslim female students navigating Western academic settings, where identity negotiation strategies shape classroom participation in comparable ways (Hassan, 2025).

Research Gap

Recent research on drama pedagogy with migrant/refugee students is limited. While the healing power of drama is emphasized, the participation of religious female students in dramatic activities has not been explored much through the concepts of gender roles, boundaries of religion, and bodily privacy. Wengrower (2023), working with migrant/refugee and host-country children in a drama course, noted that the literature remains insufficient to understand emotional and subconscious dimensions. The pedagogy of using drama in language teaching with EFL students requires further investigation and testing. Carter and Sallis (2019) emphasize the importance of using drama with students from different countries and cultures and note that findings on this

issue are still developing. Few studies have examined how ready and prepared teachers are to enter class with these concepts and awareness in mind. Kurbegovic (2016) conducted a survey exploring the perceptions of teachers who teach migrant and refugee students. Finally, Hamamra et al. (2025) highlight the need for longitudinal research on changes among Palestinian students in drama-based language teaching courses.

Additionally, refugee/migrant students are often considered a homogeneous group, and their withdrawal and silence are documented merely as results of language barriers and shyness. This study aims to explore the resistance patterns of Muslim refugee/migrant students in a drama-based language teaching classroom environment. It also examines how their religious sensitivities shape their lesson-management strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was conducted within the framework of practitioner research and self-study methodology (Samaras, 2011). The researcher is a faculty member of the English Language Teaching Department at a public university and used the Drama in the ELT course as a source of data. During this process, the researcher collected data through self-focus to progress the teaching, interacted with colleagues in the department, used qualitative methods, and systematically explored her practices and students' responses to the teaching process. The study established validity using LaBoskey's (2004) method, following the steps of constructing, testing, and sharing examples of teaching practices.

Data collection and analysis were conducted by the researcher through interactions with 22 migrant/refugee students over four weeks. The interviews were held at the end of the semester, after which the students received their final grades, to prevent any reciprocal misunderstandings related to authority. To establish validity, two academicians were asked to provide feedback on the data analysis, following the “critical friend” approach of Costa and Kallick (1993).

Participants and Context

The researcher conducted this study in the compulsory “Drama in ELT” course at the English Language Teaching Department of a public university in Türkiye. The participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Groups and Migration Characteristics

Group	Number	Features
Syrian female students	19	Recent forced migration (2015–2020), war trauma, educational disruption
Palestinian female students	3	Long-term diaspora (of Lebanese origin), multiple migration experiences
Turkish students	22	Host-country citizens, as a comparison group

Most Syrian and Palestinian students arrived in Türkiye between 2015 and 2020 because of the civil war and experienced a 1–3-year interruption in their education. Among other sources, the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) in Turkey has been providing scholarships to Palestinian students from Gaza city. The different migration

patterns constitute the main variables of this study and are expected to result in significant differences in pedagogical responses.

Data collection

Data were collected over four weeks (2 hours per week, 8 hours total) from three sources:

a) In-class observations and reflective journals: During each lesson, students' participation levels in activities, physical reactions, and verbal and nonverbal communication were recorded in field notes. The researcher also documented her own pedagogical decisions, feelings, and thought processes in a reflective journal.

b) Semi-Structured Interviews: After the course ended, semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 Syrian volunteers and 3 Palestinian female students (13 interviews total). The interviews lasted an average of 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with the students' permission. The interview questions focused on the following: the reasons behind decisions to participate or not participate in activities; the influence of religious beliefs and cultural values on these decisions; perceptions of privacy, modesty, and dignity; and classroom social interactions and language barrier experiences.

c) Visual Data: With students' permission, photographs taken during lessons (facial expressions, body postures, physical distance) and drawings made by students during drama activities were collected.

Data Analysis and Reliability

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) inductive thematic analysis method. Documents and data (transcriptions of audio recordings, field notes, and reflective journals) were first examined thoroughly to identify interesting or unusual points. Generating codes was the next step and was used to construct themes, which were then organized into tables detailed by scope. For reliability, the data sources were cross-verified to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the findings, and two critical friends provided objective feedback. The findings were presented to the participants to verify their correctness through member checking. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants; confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed through an approved document from the University Ethics Committee.

FINDINGS

After the analysis process, the study identified four main themes, comprising 19 associated codes. Table 2 shows the distribution of these themes and codes according to participant group. The interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed in NVivo 12, and relationships and hierarchies among the codes were systematically established.

Table 2: Theme-Code-Participant Matrix

Theme	Code	Syrian (N=19)	Palestini an (N=3)	Data Source
Theme 1: Religious Resistance and Privacy Management	Refusal of physical contact with male	17/19	2/3	Observation + Interview
	Reference to "sin" (nonmahram)	14/19	1/3	Interview
	Family teaching reference	12/19	1/3	Interview
	Strategy to minimize physical contact	15/19	2/3	Observation
	Whispering within the group/collective decision	16/19	1/3	Observation
Theme 2: The Boundaries of Dignity and Modesty	Anxiety about being funny	13/19	2/3	Observation + Interview
	Performance refusal (silence)	14/19	1/3	Observation
	A clear reference to the concept of modesty/dignity	10/19	2/3	Interview
	Superficial participation (smiling but not acting)	16/19	2/3	Observation
	Fear of speaking incorrectly	15/19	1/3	Observation + Interview
Theme 3: Language Barrier and Social Withdrawal	Attempting speaking in mother tongue (Arabic)	18/19	0/3	Observation
	Short answer/silence	17/19	1/3	Observation + Interview
	Expression of feeling excluded	8/19	0/3	Interview
	Difficulty in understanding due to speed difference	12/19	0/3	Observation + Interview
	Reference to fresh trauma/migration experience	11/19	0/3	Interview
Theme 4: Migration Trajectory and Identity Flexibility	Education interruption impact	12/19	0/3	Interview
	Strict boundary-setting versus a negotiating approach	17/19	1/3	Observation + Interview

Note. Since the number of Palestinian students was small (n = 3), percentages were not reported; raw numbers were used instead. "Observation" data were obtained from the researcher's field notes; "interview" data were obtained from the related transcripts.

Physical Contact and Privacy (Theme 1)

"The Human Knot" game, first found in the New Games Foundation's book (1978), is an effective icebreaker and team-building exercise in which participants hold each other's hands and solve a physical "puzzle" through communication and collective movement. While they played the game, the migrant/refugee female students appeared shy and resistant because of the physical closeness needed. As shown in Table 2, 17 of the 19 Syrian female students avoided touching male students' hands; this was their general attitude toward similar classroom activities, and they tended to withdraw from the games and whisper among themselves.

While they played the Human Knot game, Syrian female students avoided holding male students' hands, hiding their hands behind their backs or in their pockets—a strategy to minimize physical contact and create a safe space of their own ($n = 15$). The classroom atmosphere did not grow tense because the Turkish male students were familiar with this religious sensitivity and simply continued to play with other students. Notably, some Turkish female students shared a similar sensitivity but did not resist and participate in the activity without difficulty.

This interaction is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the physical distancing strategies adopted by some Syrian male and female students during the Human Knot activity. Additional supporting visual data are provided in the Supplementary Material.

Figure 1a. Syrian female students avoid hand contact with male peers during the Human Knot activity. Overhead view of the activity, outdoor setting.

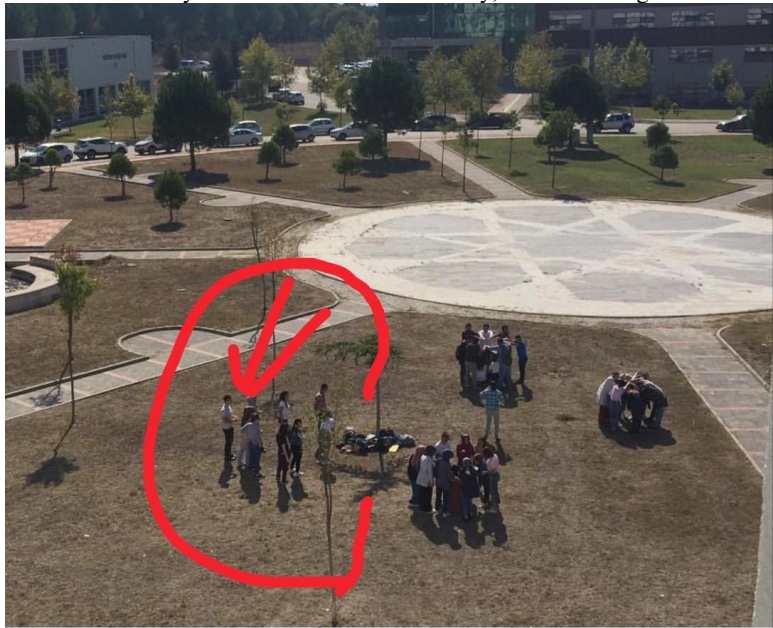


Figure 1b. Syrian female students avoid hand contact with male peers during the Human Knot activity. Close-up view of the same scene, outdoor setting.



Figure 1c. Indoor Human Knot activity. The photograph includes only one male participant because the Syrian female students did not provide consent to be photographed.



Figure 1: Syrian students' physical distancing strategies during the Human Knot activity
Note. Photographs were taken during the Human Knot game activity. Syrian refugee female students who did not want to be photographed while not participating in the game are not shown; only one Syrian male student who did not join the activity permitted his photograph to be taken. All identifiable individuals provided explicit consent for the publication of their photographs.

Quotes from Interviews:

Syrian Student A (22 years old, Theme 1 codes: nonmahram/sin, family teachings): "In our religion, holding hands with a man is a sin, even in the classroom. This is a rule in our faith, and our family taught us this way, too. We did not feel comfortable."

Syrian Student B (20 years old, Theme 1 codes: intimacy, minimizing physical contact): "I do not have contact with men before marriage. That is a red line for me. Even though it was a lesson, we did not want to break that rule. The teacher was quite understanding, but I was still very stressed at that moment."

Palestinian Student C (21 years old, Theme 1 codes: minimizing physical contact, pragmatic religious interpretation—Theme 4): "It is not very well received here either, but if we have to for class, maybe we will touch it with our fingertips. However, I would still feel uncomfortable. My Syrian friends were stricter; maybe they are more protected because they have just arrived."

There was a deviant case among the Syrian students: while 17 of 19 revealed strong resistance, 2 were flexible and simply focused on the activity, adapting to the environment. This suggests that a family's level of religious sensitivity may influence students' pedagogical responses:

Syrian Student L (21 years old, Theme 1 and Theme 4 codes: pragmatic religious interpretation): "I can do it if it is necessary for the class; however, I still feel uncomfortable but not as much as my friends. I was not brought up in a strictly religious family."

Notably, some female Syrian students participated in the Human Knot activity only when the group composition was rearranged to be all-female, further illustrating how strategies for managing physical contact varied by context (see Supplementary Figure S3).

Turkish students were largely neutral toward Syrian students' withdrawal and resistance. Some were mildly frustrated by disruptions to the activity; others were simply observed without comment. One Turkish student remarked after class, "I do not understand why they are not playing the game," suggesting that this game can create a visibility problem for those unfamiliar with cultural differences. Rousseau et al. (2007) explained that speaking or acting in front of a class can feel dangerous for migrant/refugee students given their war and migration experiences.

Dignity (Theme 2)

In the characterization game, students are asked to imitate animals—moving their bodies like a bird, fish, or elephant and making that animal's sound—while classmates guess which animal is being portrayed. This game is intended to overcome shyness, since everyone, including the researcher-teacher, acts silly together, hopefully dissolving embarrassment.

When the researcher asked students to imitate a duck, most of the Syrian girls hung their heads (performance refusal, $n = 14$); 16 smiled but did not actually participate (superficial participation, $n = 16$). In interviews, 13 Syrian female students said they were afraid of looking ridiculous, with one noting that they were adults, not children, and that such activities did not benefit them.

Students' participation patterns during the imitation activity are presented in Figure 2, which illustrates the contrast between active and superficial participation described in this theme.



Figure 2: Contrast between active and superficial participation during the characterization (imitation) game

Figure 2. Syrian female students and one male student during the duck imitation activity, illustrating limited physical expression associated with the boundaries of dignity and modesty. During the activity in which participants were asked to imitate a duck, the Syrian male student appeared reluctant to bend down and perform the movement. Moreover, the hijab-wearing female student moved to the back of the classroom, distancing herself from the activity, while another female student covered her mouth and smiled nervously, appearing embarrassed. As a result, the group remained hesitant and was unable to complete the task.

Quotes from Interviews:

Syrian Student D (19 years old, Theme 2 codes: fear of embarrassment, “not befitting a grown girl,” modesty/dignity): “Older girls do not do things like that. We did not want to look ridiculous. In our culture, it is frowned upon for a girl to behave like that. My dignity is important to me. It would not be appropriate for me to do something like that in front of everyone in the classroom.”

Syrian Student E (23 years old, Theme 2 codes: modesty/dignity, performance refusal): “Modesty (shame) is a part of faith. That is how we were raised. Even though we are at university here, we should not forget our values. I found imitating a duck childish and damaging to my dignity.”

Palestinian Student F (20 years old, Theme 2 codes: fear of making a fool of oneself, pragmatic religious interpretation—Theme 4): “I do not like to do

overly dramatic things, but if I have to for the class, I will. Nevertheless, I do not want to look childish and silly. My Syrian friends are strict in acting in such games; maybe this environment is new for them."

Compared with only 1 Palestinian student, 11 Syrian students directly used the phrase "not befitting older girls," suggesting that migration trajectory may shape perceptions of dignity differently across the two groups.

Language Barriers and Social Integration (Theme 3)

Language barriers were a major factor limiting Syrian students' participation in the games, compounded by cultural differences, hesitancy about making mistakes in front of the class, and occasional misunderstandings of words or jokes. During observation, 18 Syrian students spoke their mother tongue, Arabic, and 17 responded with short answers or silence. Turkish students, in turn, reported discomfort toward their silent Syrian classmates.

Quotes from Interviews:

Syrian Student G (21 years old, Theme 3 codes: fear of speaking incorrectly, feeling of exclusion): "I do not speak English correctly; I am afraid of saying things incorrectly. I am also hesitant because my friends will laugh at my English. Therefore, I stay silent. I feel excluded. This is very difficult."

Syrian Student H (20 years old, Theme 3 codes: difficulty in understanding due to speed difference, short answer/silence): "Turkish classmates speak very fast, and sometimes I cannot understand them. That is why I do not talk to them. I just give short answers like 'yes' and 'no.'"

Palestinian Student I (21 years old, Theme 3 codes: difficulty in understanding due to speed difference): "I studied in Lebanon; therefore, I find it easier to communicate with others and feel comfortable. However, I understand that my Syrian friends have some difficulties both in English and cultural differences."

Turkish Students' Reactions: During these drama activities, Turkish students' reactions to Syrian students' attitudes varied. They were generally discontented about communication difficulties in group work; some made veiled complaints about their silence and use of Arabic, while others showed empathy and stayed quiet themselves. Some female Turkish students gently encouraged Syrian female students to participate in the activity. Language barriers and cross-cultural differences negatively affect social cooperation and integration. Table 2 indicates that Syrian, but not Palestinian, students reported feeling excluded, suggesting that the phenomenon extends beyond language proficiency alone. These interaction patterns, including Turkish female students' encouragement of unwilling Syrian female students, are illustrated in Supplementary Figure S1.

Comparative Analysis (Theme 4)

The differing migration backgrounds of Syrian and Palestinian students corresponded with differing attitudes toward the educational environment. While Syrian students related their experiences to recent, traumatic, disrupted schooling, Palestinian students more often referenced a "pragmatic religious interpretation". The codes "recent trauma/migration experience" and "educational disruption impact" were expressed by 11

and 12 Syrian students, respectively, highlighting the impact of immediate displacement on their perspectives. This contrast, including Palestinian students' comfortable participation in mixed-gender contact, is illustrated in Supplementary Figure S2.

Quotes from Interviews:

Syrian Student J (22 years old, Theme 4 codes: fresh trauma, schooling disruption, strict boundary setting): "I left my country with my family because of the war. We lost everything. I could not go to school for about three years. My religion is the only thing that I hold tight. It protects me from every bad thing. Everything changed. Most likely, I act strictly just because of it."

Palestinian Student K (20 years old, Theme 4 codes: pragmatic religious interpretation, thoughtful approach): "I was born in Gaza but grew up in a refugee camp in Lebanon. Afterward, I came here to study. I have lived in different countries and seen different rules. Therefore, I became very flexible with some things. I think, I will do it if I have to, and if it is good for my future."

The code "strict boundary-setting versus negotiating attitude" in Table 2 demonstrates that migration trajectory affects the flexibility of students' religious attitudes.

DISCUSSION

The literature points to several benefits of drama pedagogy alongside recurring challenges, and both are visible in this study's findings. The use of body language and physical proximity created a pedagogical risk area, producing discomfort in this conservative setting. Migrant/refugee students resisted physical expression through mixed-gender interactions because it conflicted with cultural and religious values. Palestinian students were highly successful, with active participation, confident self-expression, and strong academic outcomes—which is consistent with the lens of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977) rooted in a collective tradition of education-as-resistance. Syrian students, by contrast, showed greater academic difficulty, social withdrawal, and embodied vulnerability during dramatic activities. These findings align with those of Khawaja et al. (2017), who reported that academic stress may be strongly influenced by socially based experiences such as fear of negative evaluation and marginalization, with stressors manifesting as performance apprehension and fear of failure (p. 615). This research therefore reveals that drama pedagogy does not always provide a free and safe space for religious students with a background of forced migration. Research frequently labels such students' resistance to dramatic activities as evidence of trauma or poor communicative competence; however, as shown in the findings, this resistance is better understood as a form of agency exercised to hold onto religious and cultural values and identity. Mahmood (2011) refers to this as "religious agency"—students choosing to behave in a particular way.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus and cultural capital helps explain the attitudes of migrant/refugee students during dramatic activities. Their behaviors are shaped by the cultural and social environment in which they are raised. Syrian students' avoidance of contact with male students reflects socially constructed and embodied discipline; in this context, religiosity and an emphasis on privacy function as a form of cultural capital—a

resource students draw on to protect their identities and maintain their dignity. This withdrawal pattern aligns with Wasli's (2024) findings among Malaysian students, where gender roles and cultural expectations negatively affect participation. "Silence," in this light, does not stem from a lack of motivation but should instead be understood as a self-protective mechanism (*habitus*) shaped by religious and cultural values. Drama pedagogy, accordingly, needs to shift toward a culturally responsive model that respects privacy and religious sensitivities.

This aligns with the broader call for trauma-informed pedagogy (Sajani & Johnson, 2024) introduced earlier in this study, which similarly emphasizes that safety in the classroom must be understood as a multidimensional construct—physical, psychological, and, as this study demonstrates, religious and cultural.

The concept of "safe space" in drama pedagogy should encompass not only psychological but also theological and bodily dimensions. Approaches that balance trauma-informed work with immigrant students through "sufficient distance" can allow students to re-engage with the classroom; the findings of this study suggest that such frameworks need to be expanded to address religious identity and privacy boundaries more explicitly. The avoidance of contact between Syrian female and male students is better interpreted as "religious agency" (Mahmood, 2011) than as an adaptation problem, supporting Hunter's (2008) argument that "safe space" in dramatic settings involving different ethnic and religious groups must include cultural and identity-based, not only physical and psychological, security.

Rodricks's (2015) concept of a "restorative third space" further elaborates on these findings. Rodricks emphasize that drama education should be designed as a "negotiation space" where immigrant students do not sacrifice their cultural identities. The differing resistance patterns of Syrian and Palestinian students in this study challenge the assumption that this "third space" is experienced homogeneously; instead, it appears to be shaped differently depending on migration trajectory.

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) helps explain how language barriers restrict students' learning potential; however, this study suggests that ZPD should be considered not only in terms of cognition but also in terms of cultural and religious dimensions, since students' "zones of proximal development" are shaped by the boundaries of their cultural comfort zones.

The differences between Syrian and Palestinian students highlight the impact of migration trajectory on the flexibility of religious practice. The more flexible attitudes of Palestinian students can be described as a "diasporic skill"—the ability to negotiate identity across different cultural contexts—relating to Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space": from their "in-between" position between Lebanon and Turkey, Palestinian students appear to have developed a more hybrid and flexible identity construction. The more rigid boundaries of Syrian students, by contrast, can be interpreted as an "identity protection" strategy, in which religious identity functions as a "fixed point" providing continuity and security amid recent trauma and migration.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the behavioral patterns of Syrian and Palestinian female students in Drama in ELT activities and revealed that drama games could conflict with religious values of privacy, modesty, and dignity. Resistance emerged as a form of agency—not shyness—protecting religious identity. A significant difference emerged between the two groups: Palestinian students, shaped by an enduring migration experience, showed a more reconciliatory attitude, while Syrian students, reflecting recent forced-migration experiences, protected their religious boundaries more firmly. This can be linked to abrupt educational disruption, linguistic fragility, and unprocessed trauma (Adalı & Türkyılmaz, 2020; Aydin & Kaya, 2017). Drama served as a stage of self-actualization for Palestinian students while initially serving as a space of vulnerability for Syrian students, as evidenced by their withdrawal from simple expression exercises. Language barriers further limited social and performative participation. These findings support recent arguments that migrant learners should be viewed as active agents who continuously renegotiate their identities rather than as passive victims of displacement. Educational spaces should therefore recognize learners' lived experiences and cultural resources as central to this process (Le Pichon, 2023).

The study offers several practical pedagogical suggestions. First, before designing activities requiring physical contact, a contract should establish students' cultural and religious boundaries, allowing them to determine an “adequate distance” themselves. Second, a culturally sensitive safe space that preserves cultural and religious identity—a “safe enough” space where students negotiate their own boundaries (Hunter, 2008). Third, drama is a “restorative third space”, where immigrant students renegotiate identities between home and host cultures without sacrificing their values (Rodricks, 2015); as Gembus (2018) notes, drama participation is a strategic tool that learners use to redefine themselves and negotiate complex identities (p. 441). Fourth, with respect to gender segregation, creating exclusive spaces for girls with strong religious privacy needs to enable freer expression. Finally, drama activities should be accompanied by language-learning support, such as visual materials, native-language explanations, and peer support.

This study has several limitations, including its small sample size (especially the 3 Palestinian students), and the possible influence of the researcher's dual role as a teacher and in a single-university context.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

☐ None

☒ Some sections, with minimal or no editing

☐ Some sections, with extensive editing

☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing

☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

The author used a generative AI tool for language refinement. All the academic content, citations, interpretations and conclusions were created and verified by the author.

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