Student playwriting for language development

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In this article I recommend the use of a particular type of drama activity—playwriting, and subsequent playreading—in English language teaching. I review the potential of playwriting activities for language development as described in the literature. I then describe how I organized playwriting and playreading activities within the framework of a language development course taught to first-year undergraduate students of TESL at the University of Brunei Darussalam. Playwriting provides a natural context for the integration of the four skills, as students write and rewrite their scripts and rehearse their lines. As an example of an authentic and recognized text type—a play for the theatre—the playwriting activity results in a text of more than transitory value, which is written not for the teacher, but for the benefit of current and unknown future audiences.

Introduction

Playwriting is a multifaceted activity which has great potential for use in language classrooms. Here I describe how I have used playwriting as a language-learning activity with tertiary-level students of English. After a survey of the literature on playwriting in ELT, I present the playwriting activities undertaken by Year 1 BA TESL students on a Language Development course at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), and suggest a methodology for the composition of plays in the classroom which lend themselves to dramatized playreading.

Playwriting and English language teaching

The benefits to be gained from the writing and performance of plays in both first (L1) and second language (L2) English teaching have been described by various authors. Rycik (1990: 40) advocates the use of playwriting in L1 English teaching, claiming that it ‘gives students the opportunity to hone their creative writing skills and cultivate their imaginations’. It also leads them to discover ‘the value of cooperation and the importance of teamwork’.

Salvante (1993) describes playwriting residency programmes she administers for US public schools. These programmes sponsor professional playwrights to work in schools, helping students to write plays. Through writing plays students can develop greater self-esteem, become more autonomous learners, and feel a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, ‘rather than perceiving students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with information, the visiting playwright can use the art form to
turn learning into a journey of self-discovery and assume that students are already overflowing with valuable potential waiting to be tapped (ibid.: 37). Sandock (1994), Baines and Dial (1995), and Jackson and Kerr-Norflett (1997) also propose the use of playwriting in an L1 context. Sandock (1994: 414) considers that students’ reading skills are promoted when they perform a play written by their class: ‘Students are encouraged, not by the teacher but by the play itself, to study words and phrases, to pay attention to cues—to get it right.’ Baines and Dial (1995: 86–7) suggest that scripting screenplays may be an appropriate classroom activity, given the extensive exposure of present-day students to the medium of film. Among other advantages, they note that screenwriting involves a complete writing process, and requires both individual and group work. Jackson and Kerr-Norflett (1997: 102–3) suggest the use of Jamaican-style play building, and write of how ‘[i]n the play-building process students speak, listen, write, read, generate ideas, pose problem statements, and generate logical solutions. All of these activities foster and enhance literacy skills in ways that actively involve students in the learning process.’

Wessels (1991) and Heath (1993; 1996) recommend playwriting in EFL/ESL contexts. Wessels (ibid.) describes an EFL course which centres around playwriting and performance. Through group discussion her students draw up an outline of a play. Each scene is then improvised. While some students act out the parts of the characters, others note down the dialogue which the actors produce. The scenes are then written up to be used as the script of the play.

The improvisation of plays gives rise to much intensive language practice. Moreover, because the participants ‘are creating the play themselves, rather than responding to an existing text, there is usually no shortage of ideas, nor any unwillingness to contribute to the developing scenes’ (Wessels 1991: 234). The playscripts can also form the basis of teaching material for other classes (ibid.: 235).

Heath (1996: 776) claims that literary writing ‘generates essentials of language learning. Students write and rewrite, listen to their own and other’s words again and again, read aloud to others, reshape their efforts to make words “say” just what they want them to mean. Literature has no rival in its power to create natural repetition, reflection on language and how it works, and attention to audience response on the part of learners.’

Heath (1993) recommends playwriting on the basis of research which demonstrated the effectiveness of the drama activities, including playwriting and performance, run by US inner-city youth organizations. She notes that young people who were underachievers in school were able to attain high standards when writing and performing plays, and that ‘once these actors became their own authors, they seemed to tap in performance a deep range of linguistic competence that they otherwise did not display’ (ibid.: 181). Indeed, playwriting activities enable youth leaders to impose high standards of performance on participants, since the leaders are ‘speaking through and for the potential future audience...’
the group will have to satisfy with their final dramatic performance’ (ibid.: 183).

Heath (ibid.: 185) draws implications from the success of such drama activities for the development of English language skills, suggesting that ‘schools would do well to imitate neighbourhood organizations and think of the power of drama and of fuller uses of role playing for bringing out performance that reflects the fullest possible range of linguistic competence of students’.

Blubaum and Chin (1995) interviewed all graduates from UBD’s TESL programme at their workplaces. They invited these former students to make suggestions for the future development of the programme by drawing from their current perspective as practising English teachers. Regarding the development of the language skills of future teachers, the graduates emphasized the importance of activities designed to promote oral fluency: ‘One of the points made very clearly by the graduates was that in the Language Development courses there should be confidence-building activities which require the students to speak publicly. In particular, the activities mentioned were role plays and drama’ (ibid.: 16).

Role-play activities have featured previously in the Language Development course at UBD, and are described in an article by Elliott (1990). However, whereas Elliott’s improvisation and role-play focused on existing works of literature, the revised Language Development syllabus, based on the findings of Blubaum and Chin (1995), also recommends playwriting as an appropriate activity to foster the language development of future teachers of English.

I was enthusiastic about the playwriting component of the revised syllabus. Playwriting offers scope for creativity and is ‘a self-chosen communicative activity in the genuine sense’ (Wessels 1987: 12). Playwriting, and subsequent playreading, provide an authentic context for language practice. In particular, there is a need inherent in the playwriting activity for the writing of revised drafts of each scene, as all the students, in their role as actors in the play, have a vested interest in the appropriateness of the development of the plot and of the words spoken by the characters. Correction of grammatical and lexical errors can take place naturally as part of this general process of revision. In playreading there is also a genuine need for repeated readings of the dialogue, rehearsals being a part of every actor’s work. This allows pronunciation and intonation practice to take place in a naturalistic context.

I felt it was valuable for future teachers of English to gain experience in writing dialogue, given the significant role dialogue plays in language teaching methodology. Moreover, I hoped the experience of playwriting might inspire my students to use similar activities in their subsequent careers as English language teachers. This accords with Berry’s (1990: 101) suggestion that language improvement activities for teachers should serve as models of teaching behaviour.
Although I was keen to involve the students in playwriting activities, I doubted whether we had the skills and time required to turn the plays into performances on the stage. Moreover, acting would necessitate the learning of lines at a time when the students were facing the many challenges to their memories posed by the unfamiliar subject matter of their other courses. I was also unsure whether the students would be able to maintain sufficient interest to write a play worthy of performance. In fact, Wessels (1987: 10) only recommends the full-scale staging of a play for groups of volunteers, since not all students will be sufficiently well-motivated to be able to participate in such a project successfully.

A playreading seemed a more appropriate goal to aim for. I therefore asked the students to restrict the setting of the play they would write to a single location in which the characters, would, for the most part, be sitting talking to each other. This would mean that a dramatized and realistic playreading could be presented, if the students wished, without the need for elaborate props or skilled acting.

Most students enter the TESL programme at UBD at around 19 years of age, upon completion of their ‘A’ levels. There are, however, a few older students who may already have had some years of teaching experience. The majority of the students are Malays, who speak a variety of Malay as their first language. There are also students from Brunei’s Chinese community, and occasionally some overseas students from the Southeast Asian region. The students’ level of English upon entry to the programme varies with regard both to their control of grammatical structure and to the breadth of their knowledge of vocabulary and idiom. However, all arrive with an intermediate level of English or better, and most have been educated within the Bruneian bilingual Malay–English education system.

Year groups on the BA TESL programme tend to be small, comprising 5 students in the first playwriting project, 6 in the second, and 12 in the third. Female students predominate: of the 23 students in these 3 intakes, 19 were female and 4 were male. Upon graduation students are qualified as secondary-level English language teachers.

The students undertook all the tasks relating to the playwriting project in English. In the first session I introduced the project, described its aims, and outlined the procedure we would adopt to write a play. The class then discussed possible themes for the play. Finally, I requested each student to write an original synopsis of a play they would like the class to write. The synopsis was to provide a title, a list of characters, with a brief description of each one, and an outline of the plot. I explained that the play should centre around a group of characters sitting indoors or outdoors and engaging in conversation. Most of the characters would be female, to reflect the predominance of women in each year group, and the characters would be equal in number to the students in the class, so that each student would have a role to play.

In the second session copies of each synopsis were distributed to every class member. The students studied the synopses and discussed their
relative merits. Finally, two votes were taken by secret ballot to decide on the play that the students would write, the two top-ranking synopses from the first round being cast against each other in the second round. After the first round there was further class discussion of the two remaining synopses. This gave the students an opportunity to focus on the potential and the drawbacks of the highest-ranking synopses before arriving at a final decision. Once a synopsis had been selected the characters, plot, and setting of the play were elaborated upon through class discussion, and the sequence of events to take place in the play was divided up into scenes. Each student was allocated a part to play and a scene to write, either individually or as a member of a small group.

The play was written scene-by-scene outside class time. Students were free to enlist the help of other class members in the writing of their scene, and frequently did so. Allocating the writing of each scene to a particular student or small group of students elicited their best performance, as each scene formed part of the whole play, and no student(s) wanted their scene to appear less accomplished than the rest. Allocating an entire scene to specific students also encouraged extensive writing. Although there was no minimum length requirement for each scene, the scenes needed to be fairly lengthy to fulfil the detailed stipulations of the synopsis.

Scenes were written in quick succession, with one week being allocated between sessions for composing, typing, and photocopying the first draft of a scene, and another week for producing a revised draft. Each scene was primarily focused upon during two successive sessions, the first being devoted to the draft version and the second to the revised version. Thus, in the third session of the project students read through, discussed, and amended the draft version of the first scene of the play, and discussed its implications for the writing of the second scene. In the fourth session they read through and commented upon the revised version of the first scene, and read through, discussed, and amended the draft version of the second scene. Work continued in this way until all the scenes were complete. Reference was made to earlier parts of the play wherever necessary, to maintain the coherence of the whole. Reading and editing of the entire play took place in one or two final sessions.

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The students’ plays

I did not expect the students to write outstanding literature. Similarly, Wessels (1987: 10) notes that teachers who use drama projects with their second language learners ‘should not hope to achieve anything of great artistic or theatrical merit’. Nevertheless I found the results encouraging.

The first play is entitled ‘Meeting at Five’, and involves a reunion between five former college friends at five o’clock one afternoon, in a café they frequented in their student days. The play recounts what has happened in their careers and relationships since they last met, and their unresolved relationships with each other. The main character, Sarah, is at a crisis point in her relationship with her husband, and hopes that her former friends might give her some advice. As it turns out, they are of no help, being only interested in their own advantage. Sarah realizes that she will have to solve her problems herself.
The excerpt below gives a feel for the dialogue the students created. At this point in the play the final member of the group of friends enters the café.

**Tim makes an entrance**

Betty: Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!
Sarah: What? What?

(Betty points to the entrance of the restaurant. The others watch with open mouths as Tim enters, all dressed up in a flaming red suit with a red tie, red socks, matching red shoes, and a bright green beret. He poses stylishly, surveying the room through star-shaped dark glasses.)

Bob: Well, if it isn’t a pop star come to tea! Hey, it’s Tim! Tim! Hey, old pal, over here! (He stands up and waves, while the others duck under the table in embarrassment.)

Maggie: Shut up, Bob! Now everyone’s staring at us! What a weirdo! Can you imagine anyone in such a garish outfit? Ugh!

Sarah: Always knows how to make an entrance, that’s Tim . . .

Tim: (Spreading his hands expansively to encompass them like some great benefactor.) Hi guys! Long time no see!

Maggie: (With a look of disgust.) Tim, you idiot! You look like a big red walking talking chilli!

Upon completion of their play the students decided to present their work to an audience. So a dramatized playreading was arranged, and a few guests were invited. With the minimum of effort, the classroom was transformed into a believable café, with a menu written on the blackboard, and a white cloth and a vase of flowers on the table where the friends sat. The students’ scripts masqueraded as menus. The audience claimed to have enjoyed the play, and the students felt that even such a minimal performance gave their work a sense of completion.

The second play, written by the next intake of first year students, is entitled ‘Childbirth for Beginners’. It is set in the corridor of a maternity hospital, where a group of women at various stages of pregnancy, with their partners, recount the ups and downs of childbirth, and debate the morality of various forms of parenthood. No reading of this play was staged, but the setting of a hospital corridor would be simple to convey.

In the following year the first year students wrote a play called ‘The Wedding Ceremony’. The central characters are a bride, Kasum, and a groom, Zulkifli, and the play tells the story of the events which unfold at the pre-wedding ceremony held at Kasum’s house. There the true nature of the groom is revealed, as first one and then another woman bursts into the room where the bride and groom and their respective families are gathered, and lays her claim to the groom. After much confusion, the solution to this dilemma proposed by the assembled families and friends, and reluctantly agreed to by Zulkifli, is that he should marry all three of the women. Everyone is happy, except Zulkifli, who is faced with the prospect of supporting three wives.

As with the first play, ‘The Wedding Ceremony’ was given a dramatized reading to a small but appreciative audience, with a few props to set the scene, and magazines and wedding invitations serving to camouflage the
students’ lines. The students also recorded the play on videotape, so the text and videotape form a resource for use on other English language courses.

**Conclusion**

Playwriting has much to recommend it as a language learning activity. It provides a natural context for the integration of the four skills, as students write the scene for which they are responsible, read aloud the words that others have written for them, listen to other actors reading their lines, and discuss and amend the dialogue in collaboration with the entire cast of the play. It also allows students to choose the detail of what they write, within the security of the framework of the synopsis for the play, and to display the full range of their linguistic ability. It gives ample opportunity for written and spoken language practice without being an activity devised for that purpose: the students write revised drafts of their work not for the teacher but for the benefit of their fellow actors, and of current and unknown future audiences. Furthermore, playwriting activities produce written texts of more than transitory value, which are examples of an authentic text type—a play for the theatre—which is found in many societies worldwide. The oral aspect of the activity, in producing a dramatized playreading, also draws on a genuinely communicative ‘real world’ activity: rehearsal for a performance to an audience. Finally, since it is not subject-specific, and can adopt themes from any area of human concern, playwriting has potential for use on many types of language courses, whether general or specific purpose.

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**References**


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