Using Drama as a Creative Method for Foreign Language Acquisition

Abstract

This action research explores the use of drama in teaching English as a foreign language. It includes practices through a cyclical process which involve planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The most immediately apparent outcome of using drama in language classrooms is the acquisition and practice of new vocabulary and grammatical structures, and the performance of certain patterns of behaviour through communicative activities. The paper shows how integrated skills can be acquired and manifested during drama classes, since drama is suggested as an ideal way of bringing together the skills of grammar, reading, writing, speaking, listening and pronunciation in a course where the focus is not on form but rather on fluency and meaning. Through the activities done with my students, I have come to see that drama provides an interesting way for students to learn and appreciate language in meaningful, communicative contexts. Ward’s (1999) words better express my research purpose: ‘We expect education to prepare young people for the world of work and for economic independence, to enable them to live constructively in culturally diverse and rapidly changing society. We expect to help young people to build lives that have meaning and purpose in a future we can scarcely predict’.

Introduction

It is really interesting to look at the Aesthetic and Educational Qualities of Live Drama processes and video-making which contain within them the potential to change.

Dramatic methods/techniques such as role playing and simulations are well documented in social studies and history, business and vocational, foreign language, and even science classes. The literature of classroom drama suggests that there is considerable untapped potential for using drama as a teaching method.

Experts emphasize that using dramatic techniques as a teaching method is not the same thing as teaching theatre. Theatre is an art form which focuses on a product, a play production for an audience. Drama in the classroom -- often referred to as creative dramatics to distinguish it from theatre arts -- is informal and focuses on the process of dramatic enactment for the sake of the learner, not an audience. Classroom drama is not learning about drama, but learning through drama. Combs (1988: 9) explains:

“While drama is informed by many of the ideas and practices of theatre art, it is principally valued as learning medium rather than as an art form, and is governed and validated through criteria other than aesthetics. Informal drama’s goals are based on pedagogical, developmental and learning theory as much or more than they are arts-based; its objectives are manifold, but they are all directed toward the growth and development of the participant rather than the entertainment or stimulation of the observer.”
Drama is a highly valued teaching method

In dramatic activities, students use and examine their present knowledge in order to induce new knowledge. Bolton (1985) points out that while much school learning is an accruing of facts, drama can help students reframe their knowledge into new perspectives. Dramatic activity is a way of exploring subject matter and its relationships to self and society, a way of “making personal meaning and sense of universal, abstract, social, moral, and ethical concepts through the concrete experience of the drama.” (Norman, 1981, p. 50, as quoted by Bolton, 1985, p.155)

According to Dorothy Heathcote (1983: 701), an important value of using drama in the classroom is that “in drama the complexity of living is removed temporarily into this protected bower so that students not only can learn it and explore it, but also enjoy it.” Heathcote also emphasizes the way drama encourages enactment of many different social roles and engages many levels, styles, and uses of language. Language is the central tool and concern for Heathcote, who notes the crucial nature of communication in society and places communication at the centre of the educational system.

Other researchers and theorists also attribute many benefits to using drama in the classroom. In “Dramatics and the Teaching of Literature”, James Hoetker (1969) contends that drama increases creativity, originality, sensitivity, fluency, flexibility, emotional stability, cooperation, and examination of moral attitudes, while developing communication skills and appreciation of literature. Hoetker describes drama as a method of better accommodating students whose learning styles are visual or kinesthetic, of teaching critical skills, and of producing aesthetic experiences with literature.

Most of the research on drama in the classroom has been done at the primary level, where drama has been found to improve reading comprehension, persuasive writing, self concepts, and attitudes toward others (Pellegrini and Galda, 1982; Gourgey, 1984; and Wagner, 1987). In her research with high school students, Renee Clift (1983) found that students using dramatic enactment performed as well as students in traditional lecture, discussion, or seatwork modes. Moreover, they experienced more instances of higher order thinking, more topic-specific emotions, decreased apprehension, and less topic-irrelevant thought than students in the non-dramatic mode.

Benefits can be gained with varied application

Drama has many applications in the classroom. The teacher may work in role, as Dorothy Heathcote (1985) demonstrates, assuming for him/herself and his/her students the “mantle of the expert.” With this role-playing technique, students and I assumed the attitudes and language of present-day scientists planning a Bronze-Age community; or they could become monks who find an ancient manuscript and must decide what should be done with it. Whether students become the town council in “The Pied Piper” (Tarlington, 1985), government officials in Farley Mowat’s “Never Cry Wolf” (Barker, 1988), or representatives of the publishing industry (Martin, 1982), teacher and students collaboratively construct their imaginary world. The gradual construction and exploration of this world results in a better personal understanding of the central issues being studied.

Improvisation takes many useful forms besides role playing (this has to do with methodology of the research). Theatre guides like Spoil’s classic “Improvisation for the Theatre” (1963)
provides a wealth of activities, but the most successful improvisations are those derived from the work at hand. For example, a class might dramatize “what it is like to be an outsider” while reading Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (Bailey, 1982) or might simulate being survivors on a deserted island before beginning Golding’s “Lord of the Flies” (Sheehy, 1982).

Other techniques useful in the classroom are readers’ theatre and choral readings and writing and producing radio programs, television screenplays, or documentaries. Students develop both the understanding of and appreciation for literary genres and for particular works of fiction by writing scripts from fiction or writing fiction descriptions from play scenes. Dramatic activity is a useful way to begin a piece of literature or to generate ideas for writing. Drama can encourage students to explore, clarify, and elaborate feelings, attitudes, and ideas. Because drama requires students to organize, synthesize, and articulate their ideas, it provides an excellent opportunity for reflection and evaluation at the conclusion of a unit of study.

The teacher plays the role of facilitator

In using drama in the classroom, I have tried to act as a facilitator rather than an authority or the source of knowledge. Hoetker (1969: 28) warns that “the teacher who too often imposes his authority, or who conceives of drama as a kind of inductive method for arriving at preordained correct answers, will certainly vitiate the developmental values of drama and possibly its educational values as well.”

Classroom drama is most useful in exploring topics when there are no single, correct answers or interpretations, and when divergence is more interesting than conformity and truth is interpretable. As Douglas Barnes (1968: 3) puts it, “Education should strive not for the acceptance of one voice, but for an active exploration of many voices.” As collaborator and guide, the teacher sets the topic and puts things in motion, but the students’ choices determine the course the lesson will take. The teacher encourages students to take the major responsibility for giving meaning to the curricular concepts and to communicate them through action, gesture, and dialogue. Heathcote (1983) says that the teacher and students make a journey into new territory together. Cecily O’Neill (1985: 160) writes, “The dramatic world of educational drama is most valuable both educationally and aesthetically when its construction is shared and its meanings negotiated.”

Constructing shared, negotiated meanings requires that teachers feel secure enough to give students centre stage in the classroom. Practitioners advise interested teachers to begin by devising brief activities, to use familiar subject matter, and to resist making hasty judgments. Hoetker (1969: 29) cautions that “development through drama is a gradual, cumulative process, and it is very uncertain what may be the developmental timetable, especially if drama is only an occasional activity.” However, with practice, teachers of English will discover that the use of drama techniques in the classroom can become a vital part of their teaching repertoire.

The drama method from social constructivist perspective

According to Oldfather, West, White, and Wilmarth (1999: 8), social constructivism is “a particular view of knowledge, a view of how we come to know”. In this view, “learning is constructed through interactions with others, which take place within a specific socio-cultural context” (Oldfather et al., ibid.). The most significant base of social constructivism was
laid down by Vygotsky [p.11]. EFL lessons, viewed from a Vygotskian perspective, should provide collaboration, small group interaction, and work space for peer interaction. The instructional design should be structured to promote student interaction and collaboration. Thus, the classroom can become a community of learning.

Scaffolding, a concept developed by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), refers to the process that "enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (Wood et al., 1976: 90). Scaffolding is said to be an effective way of promoting learning in the class. In scaffolding learners get opportunities to extend their current skills and knowledge. Drama method appears to promote interaction in the class and scaffolding (Wagner, 2002) when used appropriately.

Some researchers (e.g., Edasawa, Takeuchi, and Nishizaki, 1989) have suggested movies can be a good motivator for English learners. There have been many studies and reports on movies in EFL classrooms. For example, Voller and Widdows (1993) show some guidelines of using movies in EFL classrooms. Carter and Miyauchi (2005) explored socio-cultural motives for using Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone and suggested several ideas to improve learners’ socio-cultural knowledge. Most of the published studies have focused on adults and adolescents.

The methodology used is significant. It would not be possible to evaluate the research on a purely empirical basis. Most of this research is qualitative and for this reason may not be generalizing. Therefore, the change taking place among the students of second grade at University level is very real. There is clear evidence of interpersonal and bodily kinesthetic development.

Drama is a successful method of teaching and can develop potentials. Through observations the range, type and nature of teaching methods and strategies are being explored. Observations are representative. In the light of observations I would recommend the increase of creative teaching methods in the context of international understanding of creativity even through drama, which is a powerful way of fostering the use of creative methods in the class.

Activities

This part shows the content of the research. It looks at an important issue at the moment, which is the “status of women in the family and the place of women in society”. It coincides with a session on ‘The Doll’s House’ I took later (Part 4) with my third year students at the University of Tirana as part of a validation (appraising) exercise. Here the focus is on the activities of a social group, the way the traditions and relationships are expressed in patterns of behaviour or cultural norms and the types of language used.

Comparison of these patterns of behaviour, cultural norms and types of language within Albanian students, to whom I address the distinct aesthetic properties inherent to live drama and video that affect the learning experience in different ways, including insights gained from my experiences as a beginner drama educator, constitute the essence of this qualitative research.

After a review exercise and warm up games, the students were split into two groups to discuss about some questions formulated by me to comment on ‘The Doll’s House’. The
data given below may be seen as evidence.

Some of the findings are that students unanimously felt that the best way to address the complexity of women’s status would be through fiction. Despite the fact that they had little or no experience of drama-making, they seemed to know instinctively that we start with narrative. “It is necessary. It situates our knowledge in time and place, and that is not only an artistic effect for the knowledge which we would describe as intertwined with Nora’s position” (Grumet 1991:87).

Students were introduced to all of these modes of approaching literature to learn how both to evaluate them and to engage in them as practices. As a literature educator, I have narrowly conceived the potential ‘drama’ aspect. I have always enjoyed drama and was interested in learning how to use it, but I had never facilitated drama workshops. Drama-making was to become a pivotal process in coming up with the scenario, script-development, and much more. Moreover, it was the improvised, informal, live drama-making from which the students and I gained the most in learning and enjoyment.

Responses

Live drama was used to brainstorm scenario ideas for the fiction video. At the beginning of the research on October 6, 2006, I was a little bit surprised that the stories to be analyzed during the school year were wildly elaborate and exotic, often unabashedly ‘borrowed’ directly from popular movies and television. Over time, however, as the group became more comfortable with drama-making, the depth and range of their created roles and plotlines increased. We reached the first degree, that of ‘Players’:

One of the questions asked was: “How do you approach Nora”? The group’s responses were various. However, the change in direction also had an impact on their attitudes. There was one sample interaction after the other, like the following.

L H: “You meet this woman who’s extraordinarily light and happy and you think everything’s hunky dory and there’s this journey that allows you to end up somewhere completely different psychically or psychologically, to undergo a psychic transformation” (Personal notes, Part 2)

R G: “Yeah, quite delicately I think is the answer to that. I thought it was always an interesting place to start from. Everyone says you can’t judge your character and you must love your character. It’s an interesting challenge for me, because I have in a sense judged her. So what do I think? Part of me thinks she just moves in around the corner, she doesn’t really go that far. The thing that’s really made it, for the women that particularly have left their families or women I’ve heard about who leave their families, like really leave and don’t come back for a long time, it seems to be very rarely a rational decision and it seems to be the product of a breakdown” (personal notes, Part 2)

Reflection

In validating the work, some of the students were very aware that this was their first experience with drama in education. They all felt challenged and their perceptions altered. It is difficult to think of young imaginations being freed without young learner’s first finding out how to take a critical and thoughtful approach to the simulacra, the fabricated realities, presented to them by the media. To think in relation to what we are doing is to be conscious of ourselves struggling to make meanings, to make critical sense of what authoritative others are offering as objectively, authoritatively “real”. When we hold an image of what is objectively “the fact”, it has the effect of reifying what we experience, making our experience
resistant to re-evaluation and change rather than open to imagination (Greene, 1995:126). Some of the written comments made by the group to the question “What is special about drama itself that makes it a potentially potent learning experience” were also significant:

B N: “Drama-making allows us to be openly and actively responsive to learning in both a creative and critical mode”. (personal notes, Session 3)

Criteria for transforming data into evidence.

In making this very important claim to knowledge, I identified the following significant criteria:

- Observe changes in attitude and behaviour that have come about as a result of a dramatic activity or exercise. This might be expressed in improved interpersonal skills, more self-confidence, a greater understanding of a difficult concept than was previously exhibited.

- I would look for evidence through a close examination of personal notes and comments which would suggest an improved intrapersonal intelligence.

- Changes in understanding of difficult concepts by comparing what is in store before a series of activities and afterwards would also be observed as evidence. I would hope to see a progression in evaluating the aesthetic values of the drama class and development as a result of role-playing and improvisation.

- Examining student’s oral and written comments for evidence of an improvement in their ability to evaluate and reflect on their own progress. This might be demonstrated by a clear change in thinking or an awareness of a greater empathy towards others or their environment.

- Evidence of changes can be observed in practice from responses of students both in class and during interviews (conducted at a later stage).

- I would hope that interviews or semiformal interviews will indicate evidence of a change in critical thinking or attitude which was a direct result of the work carried out in drama class.

Summary and Conclusions

Drama rich in dialogues provides students with dramatic skills by placing the learners in situations that seem real. Since learners use English for specific purposes, language is more easily internalized and, therefore, language is remembered. Drama provides the ultimate multi-sensory learning experience, it is inclusive and it supports the learning of a foreign language.

Teachers who engage in action research like I was in using drama in the classroom promote their own development and the development of their practice, as well as contribute to the evolution of their field. Teachers’ action research on using drama as a creative method in the classroom can bring new and important knowledge of the teaching/learning process of a foreign language. Clarke and Erickson define teacher inquiry as an insider research that
critically examines teaching and student development and that this knowledge can improve the effectiveness of teachers.

Since Ibsen’s day, women have made great strides in gaining the choice to determine their role in relation to the family and society. However, the most cursory inquiries made of an audience that has just watched a performance of “A Doll’s House” will confirm that the issues that caused such a stir in the nineteenth century continue to touch raw nerves today.

Where there has been much social conflict, like in my country, people turn to drama as a means of conflict resolution and for healing unhealthy social relationships amongst opposing groups. Alanis Obomsawin speaks about the South African Aboriginal belief that ‘the healing is going to come from where the pain came’ (Kin-Gagnon and Fung 2002:93). Social and individual healing and collective creation processes require some level of trust amongst the participants: “Drama not only requires participants to establish a network of trust with a number of participants, but also to find ways of working which demonstrate reciprocal respect for each others’ physical, emotional and intellectual well-being” (Nicholson 2002: , 83).

An ethic of care in drama education does not suggest, however, that there should always be consensus and harmony at all times but rather ‘a robust environment in which debate, dissent, generosity and artistic experimentation might be encouraged and valued’ (ibid: 90). A creative learning environment based on trust is a safe and welcome haven for youths’ ‘wild thoughts’, the kind of thoughts that are all too often discouraged in classrooms, where there seems to be a fight between wild thoughts and classroom order and between wild thoughts and their adventure with intelligibility. We ask students to hold that thought for another time. We ask what does that have to do with this, or we say “Don’t get me off the topic?”, or maybe “How did that thought pop into your head, what were you thinking?” We worry about staying in the right place, of ordering thoughts so that they can be easily learned” (Britzman 2001: 12).

Drama-making, through its narrative essence, provides a vehicle for learning through imagination and story-telling which facilitates a process of change. After all, drama- and video-making, like living, are by nature multi-sensory learning experiences. Drama and video-making can also both be an aesthetic (or unaesthetic) learning experience in which ‘the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment, then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experiences from other experiences’ (Dewey 1934:35).

Drama-making, whether using a live or digital form, is a cultural action that ‘is always a systematic and deliberate form of action, which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving the structure or of transforming it’ (Freire 1993:160).

Cultural invasion occurs when ‘the actors draw the thematic content of their action from their own values and ideology; their starting point is their own world, from which they enter the world of those they invade’ (161). To avoid cultural invasion both video and drama educators/artists/activists can use the principles of what Freire calls problem-posing education, in which students are critical thinkers instead of passive recipients...‘they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process’. 

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Pavis suggests that there are aesthetic qualities proper to the film/video medium that create a... Cinematic language of close-ups, long shots, in order to give a living and very subjective impression of the [live version of the drama]... In the 'theater film', the camera moves toward its object, trying to capture it; in the 'film film', the object is placed in relation to the camera... The filmic narrative is structured around units and types of shot, ... (sequence shot, scale of shots) (Pavis, 2003:109-111).

A Drama classroom remains a strong venue for learning to work in role and confirming its value in the practical sense. The teacher’s role is defined as: helping students to form their ideas; helping students to test their ideas; helping students to communicate their ideas; and helping them to respond to different real-life situations. Teachers can use these skills for specific learning objectives by stepping into the fictional work of the students through using drama strategies, in particular, teacher in role.

Consistently, there are numerous reports of unprecedented improvement in students’ writing and speaking skills as a result of the use of drama structures. In the course of my practicum work, I have become a field researcher in my own classrooms, where students can speak with authority (and offer hard data) about what really works for student learning. It is more essential than ever for teachers to take up the role of being researchers, not only for evaluative purposes but also to expand and explore the complex learning available in the aesthetic moment. Calling us to focus on “knowing-in-action” Taylor (2000) draws our attention to drama teaching as an artistic process of meaning-making. He proposes that “to ignore reflective practitioner design is to remain ignorant to the kind of artistic processes which are the lifeblood of our work”. (p. 27).

Traditionally and formerly, a greater attention was paid to theory and little dedication was given to practical activities, role-playing, rehearsal or dramatisation of a situation or script or a poem to achieve the required level of language acquisition as well as aesthetic values in the classroom.

In a lucid description, Swortzell (1996) recalls:

“Each time we leave a performance, we are reminded that theatre and dance are the most evanescent of art forms, and that what we have just seen can never be beheld again in the exact same way. Even if we should return the next night to repeat the aesthetic process, a second viewing cannot reproduce the reaction of the first because we have been changed, by both the production and by everything else that has happened to us in the interim” (Taylor, 1996, 97).

Whether they are auditory, visual or kinaesthetic learners, the staging of a play in a foreign language offers a variety of opportunities for language acquisition. The association of words with their visual representation clearly helps those who see to learn.

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Adriana Dervishaj (BA from Tirana University, Faculty of Philology, Albania, 1987, MA from Birmingham City University, UK, 2008) is a University Language Lecturer and Researcher in Literature, Translation and Interpretation methods, Creative Methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and Terminology Exploration in different fields as in Law, Finance, Architecture, Art and Science.