

Drama for English Language Learning in EFL/ESL Classes

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Abstract

The article, which draws on published literature in the field, aims to discuss how drama can be used in EFL /ESL classes, to acquire English at secondary and university levels. In the first half, the article briefly outlines different forms of drama in language teaching. In the second, it discusses its benefits, such as putting language in context, absorbing language through culture and making learning holistic and memorable, improving learners' social and personal interactions. It also discusses how drama can be used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses to enhance language acquisition. It concludes by summing up the benefits of using drama in EFL /ESL classroom.

Key words: drama, ESL, role-playing

1.Introduction

Drama, as it is action based and presented in the form of dialogues, has a tremendous potential for EFL / ESL students for acquisition of English language skills, in general, and oral skills in particular. Though this concept is totally alien to the Libyan educational institutions where English is taught as a foreign language, the use of drama is prevalent in other parts of the world. The authors of this article believe that drama should become a part of the English language curriculum at secondary and university education in Libya or elsewhere, for learning English, as role-playing and stage identities would loosen up the inhibitions for the students who usually shy away from speaking English, exhibit limited non-verbal communication and eye-contact, and use limited prosody: inadequate intonation, stress and rhythm(Gill 2004).

Drama, in essence, is giving up one's identity and becoming someone else. In order to be believable, we have to become as distant as possible from who we are and as close as possible to who we aspire to be for the duration of time that we are performing.. Actors, in the words of Stern(1980), "enter their characters' consciousness by temporarily giving up their own identity to take on a new dimension" (P 81). In the case of second language learners, such identity shifts can play an important role in helping learners achieve success in the learning process.

Though this article is written particularly keeping in mind the issues raised and dealt with are applicable to all ESL /EFL learners, elsewhere.

2. Drama in EFL /ESL teaching

Drama has been in use for teaching a foreign language for a long time. Its beginnings can be traced back to the 19th century (Schewe 2007). Since the late 1970s, with the emergence of the increasing prevalence of the Communicative Approach, the method has been an integral part of

foreign language teaching- for the area of English language teaching. For example, Via's *English in Three Acts* (1976). Other exemplary books from this time are Holden's *Drama in language teaching*(1981) and Maley and Duff's *Drama Techniques in language Learning* (2009). A large and continuously updated online research bibliography attests to on-going scholarly interest in the topic. However most academic publications on drama in language teaching focus on its use in primary or secondary schools and / or on general language learning. But it is not the aim of this article to give an exhaustive description of which forms of drama can be taken in the foreign language classroom, see, for example, Maley & Duff (2009).

Before proceeding further, for the sake of clarity, a short definition of drama will be provided in connection with an overview of some criteria that can be used to classify the different formats of the activities.

A widely cited definition of drama comes from Holden(1981:1), who defines it as “any activity which asks the student to portray : a.) himself in an imaginary situation, or b) another person in an imaginary situation”- a definition which can be applied to most formats of drama in language teaching and includes role-play as a form of drama. However vocal and physical exercises that do not imply the creation of a fictional character or situation, such articulation exercises or movement games, should also be included. Therefore, for a description that is wider in scope, the following characteristics can be used to classify drama activities.

- Short / long: a drama game can be played in only a few minutes while a drama project can extend over several months or longer.
- Non-verbal / verbal: while the use of verbal activities for language learning seems self-explanatory, non-verbal exercises can also have their benefit, for example, as icebreakers to decrease learners' anxiety, or to provide topics for discussion or broaden learners' perspective on a foreign language by drawing their attention to aspects of body language.
- Process drama: is a method of teaching and learning drama where both the students and teachers are working in and out of role.

Open / closed : Kao and O'Neil (1998: 5-18) suggest a continuum model of drama approaches ranging from “closed-controlled” (script- based) to “open communication” with process drama at the far end of the spectrum. Open forms will foster creative language use (focus on meaning) and while they can be used with lower- level learners, they may be more fruitful if a certain level of language competence has already been achieved. Closed forms (among which Kao & O'Neill also include language games), on the other hand, are suitable for a focus on accuracy / focus on form- for pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar or text-genre practice. But they can also be used for the introduction of new linguistic input. Again, different teaching aims and learners' needs will necessitate different approaches.

Process-oriented / product-oriented : is there an audience-product oriented approach- or is the focus on the experience of the participants –process-oriented approach (cf. Moody 2002 and Fleming 2006)? Product-oriented forms can be more motivating for learners who prefer working towards a concrete end –product (Fonio & Genicot 2011) and they tend to be more beneficial for focus on accuracy. On the other hand, process-oriented approaches are argued to be more creative (Kao & O’Neill 1998) and liberties for certain learners, as fluency is valued over accuracy and there is no or less pressure to perform flawlessly. On the other hand, process and product can be connected to drama projects, for e.g. as students’ process – oriented explorations of a topic such as improvisations, hot-seating though-tracking, etc are turned into scripted plays or skits which are rehearsed and eventually performed, either in the classroom with familiar audience or publicly.

One factor that is normally associated with such task- based, experiential learning is that the language associated with the activities is ever evolving. There is a dynamic production of the target language as the learners’ group write, produce, rehearse, and perform the plays. The language that they use is not pedantically grammar-based , but the one that they use in various ways, for a variety of purposes (Long and Porter 1985).In other words they are using the language of the real world, where the main idea is to get the message across without necessarily worrying about the whys and wherefores. In stead of grammatically rigid language , there is a potpourri of language elements, with the target language being used in an integrated and holistic fashion.

Particularly where speech is concerned, the common experience of many learners has been the lack of speaking opportunities in class. In many traditional foreign language classrooms, teachers tend to take over and do most of the talking, thus limiting learners’ speaking time. When they do get to speak, learners often find themselves facing the dual problems of making sense of certain target language words while having difficulty pronouncing them.(Dickson, 1989). This hinders their ability to communicate in that language. They stammer and stutter as they struggle through a morass of alien sounds, trying to make themselves understood. There is , often, an embarrassing gap between wanting to say in a target language and actually vocalizing it. Inevitably, what is produced is riddled with errors. The more errors they make the more diffident and unmotivated they become, and less likely they are to speak. There is the possibility that, if they shut shop, they will never get the sort of practice that is so crucial to the development of fluency. An environment has to be created which encourages spontaneity. Creating such spontaneity will help eliminate the gap that exists between thought and expression in the foreign language (Stern 1980). This can be achieved through constant participation in oral interaction via theatre techniques. Such regular participation can result in more speaking time, particularly by means of informal conversation practice. Consequently, there is the likelihood of a greater opportunity to practise using the target language. In fact, there is evidence of greater language output in an interactive classroom in two minutes that there is in one hour in a traditional

classroom(kagan1, 995). The more they speak, the better the possibility that they can overcome their target language problem.

3. Benefits of using drama for language skills development

It is needless to stress that using drama to develop English language proficiency is very beneficial. Sam (1990) and Boudreault (2010) have provided an overview of its benefits in ESL classroom. A limited number of empirical studies have aimed to prove its beneficial effects. The earliest studies date from the 1980s and 1990s. Stern (1983) examined psycholinguistic aspects. While Gaudart (1990) focused on different formats' effectiveness in different school types. In a more recent study, O'Gara (2008) examined the effectiveness of drama for teaching verb tenses in a secondary school setting, while Kao & O'Neill (ibid) tested the effectiveness of process drama for oral communication among adult learners of English as a second language. In addition, Gill (2013) names Miccoli (2003), Stinson (2007) and Ulas (2008) as "international studies which show the extent to which drama works". The benefits of drama in language teaching are presented in the following sections.

3.1 Absorbing a target language through culture

Referring to the TV drama, in contrast to traditional ELT, du Mont (2009) states that it can aid in absorbing a target language through culture. Tseng(2002) refers to learning that occurs as a result of facilitative tension that arises from cultural differences, and mentions process drama as a way of achieving this(P.19). Cultural taboos appear to matter less when students take on stage identities, and through them, say and do things they would not ordinarily do in real life. As Stern (ibid) puts it :

A play allows learners to participate in a new culture, helping them develop a sensitivity as to how the speakers of the target language interact with each other. It familiarizes them with the cultural appropriateness of the words and expressions to specific settings and social situations. Ideally, this integrative experience should motivate learners to achieve a higher degree of language proficiency (P.79).

Each time they adopt different personae, they create a world of make-believe wherein their fictional identities give them freedom to say and behave as the characters they represent would.

3.2 Contextualized, communicative and authentic language

Drama activities lend meaning to language structures by letting students experience the language in correct situations. Learners are, for example, not simply given a list of phrases typical for meetings to memorize, for a vocabulary test , but have to role-play a meeting situation-and can thus memorize difficult phrases in context. Here, parallels to communicative language teaching are apparent, but Fleming (2006) describes how drama can go further :

For example, instead of a simple scenario of buying an article in a shop, the teacher might set up a richer context in which the two participants knew each other at school and were great rivals. It is in this way that drama techniques can be used to explore thoughts and feelings.

Learners can practice using language and behavior adequate to potentially complex situations in the safety of the classroom. To extend Fleming's example, while in real life situation using the wrong register might lead to a conflict between the client and the shop keeper, in the classroom the situation can be analyzed, after being acted or frozen, slowed down or repeated with an alternative outcome. Moreover, the role of a fictional persona is often felt by learners to be a kind of protection and they seem to experience less embarrassment about making mistakes. In general, drama activities involve physical activities and emotional involvement which can lead to improved retention of language structures and vocabulary, as examined by Kao & O'Neill (ibid), O'Gara (ibid), and Sambanis (2013). At the word / phrase level accompanying words and phrases, with gestures, can make them more memorable, and can help learners to internalize the correct rhythm and intonation. The authors of this article have used written skits and short One-Act plays in the English language classrooms, and seen the dramatic effect it will have on students, in picking up the language faster than in the traditional teaching.

A point to be specially noted, is the involvement of emotional aspects in drama activities, at both a direct and meta-level. On the one hand, feelings are directly involved by acting them in role-playing. On the other hand, learners will have an emotional attitude towards drama activities themselves. Ideally, positive feelings such as enjoying a collaborative and creative atmosphere and pride in achievement will prevail, even if negative emotions such as insecurity or stage-fright are occasionally experienced, the learning will be more memorable than in a neutral, predominantly cognitive setting, as it is set apart from other events. According to De Coursey,(1994), "when there is emotional response, to a perception or a bit of learning, the brain marks it as useful to the organism. So, why do drama in the language classroom? In order to mark elements of language with emotion, so that students will remember them," (2012 : 7).

3.3. Intonationages

Usually languages are either tone languages or (e.g. Some African, Thai, and Chinese) or intonation languages (e.g. Arabic Spanish and Japanese), Celce- Murica and Olshtain (2001). English is also an intonation language. But they state that, "...just because two languages happen to be intonation languages does not mean that their utterance-level and pitch patterns will be the same. They rarely are. Quite often the EFL /ESL learners pronounce wrongly with incorrect intonation, which, the authors say, lead to miscommunication. This may invite comments by the listener which will lead to humiliating experiences for the speaker. As Gilbert(2005) puts it : " A few humiliating experiences may make learners so discouraged, that they give up trying. (P. viii); thus rendering the job of teaching them a difficult one. But through the medium of drama, a teacher can recreate the situations and work on the learners'

prosody and pronunciations. On the phoneme level, pronunciation and articulation games can help learners to explore the sounds of the target language”.

3.4. Body language (Kinesics)

Using body language along with the spoken words is another aspect, which can be developed through drama. The authors of this article who have been teaching English for a long time in Libya which has Islamic culture, have observed that female students usually avoid a reasonable, long-time eye-contact while talking to men, and hardly use body movements and gestures. Wolfe, L (n. d) notes that there many African, Asian and Latin Americans whose cultural upbringing requires them to avoid what they perceive as excessive eye-contact. To do so would tantamount to disrespect. While playing a role when they are transported to other cultures, e.g. Western, where it is normal to look at each other in the eye when talking face to face, the sense of nervousness is palpable, Samovar, Porter and McDanie (2009). Drama helps overcome this by giving participants roles and identities which give them a sense of pretending to be someone else. It allows them to “test boundaries and cultural sensitivities as well as their linguistic progress in the target language” (brash and Warnecke, 2009, P.12). Thus a Libyan student, with an Islamic cultural background, who would not make eye-contact with the person spoken to, is less likely to worry about this on stage. Through regular exposure to such practices, the learner will learn to make eye-contact and feel comfortable while talking to a person in face to face interactions.

Another aspect of kinesics is the gestures. The nature of drama requires that the person playing the role make louder gestures on stage than in real life, so as to be seen by the audience. Learners with personal styles or cultural backgrounds which involve less animated body-language i.e. inhibited gestures, and facial expressions, can learn how to convey their thoughts and emotions, in a less circumscribed fashion. Davies (1990), while discussing the value of spontaneous improvisations, says that “learners have the opportunity to develop their emotional range by playing roles unfamiliar to them and outside of their own experiences” (P.95).

3.5. Increased motivation

Learning English through drama, as it is collaborative and group activity, naturally increases the level of motivation. Compared to rigid, teacher –centered often uninteresting learning materials, learning through drama generates a sense of excitement, joy and creative achievement.

4. Drama for ESP

Can drama be used for English for Specific purposes?

Having looked at drama in foreign language teaching in general, it can be said that most of the benefits listed above apply also for teaching of the languages for specific purposes. His article suggests that drama can be helpful for an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) classroom, in a number of ways.

Drama can provide context for the learning of specialized vocabulary and for learners to actively practice work-related oral activities and genres , such as making appointments, meetings, business dinner, etc. short plays and skits can be written for these situations, and enacted as discussed above. As Brennen and Pearce (2009), and Pearce and Jackson (2009) outline, in their articles about the dramatization of case studies, or of particular concepts from the business world (such as the life- cycle of products), topics and material which might appear “dry” to students at first glance, can be made more accessible and memorable as students start to identify with characters in case studies, and experience emotional involvement through tension.

Drama activities encourage learners to explore topics of identity, as students can literally experience ‘ walking in somebody else’s shoes’ when take on fictional identities. This can be beneficial for exploring professional roles, both linguistically (register, jargon) as well as at a more personal level, and help young graduates to negotiate their own eventual future professional identity.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, as shown above, drama creates an atmosphere, conducive to learning grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, intercultural aspects and team –work skills. It can create memorable and practice –oriented learning experiences that can improve learners’ language competence, employability and personal development. Therefore, it should not be regarded as merely a ‘fun activity’ that can be used to fill the last five minutes of class, when the ‘real’ learning already has been done, but as a teaching approach in itself.

However as Gaudart (ibid) points out, not all teachers feel at ease with employing drama in the classroom-there are constraints of time and space and not every teacher feels confident to use a method they have not been trained in. But once the benefits of using drama are clearly understood, there is no reason why ESL ? EFL teachers should not be trained by the institutes concerned. Or, on the other hand, if there are teachers who are creative enough, to volunteer to use drama in their classes they should be encouraged positively.

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