DRAMA TECHNIQUES BEST SERVE TO ENHANCE THE LEARNING OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Teachers need training to use Drama as a methodology in the classroom as Dorothy Heathcote did in UK. But teachers of High School may use elements of drama such as asking students in the class to adopt different roles and act them out, watch how they improvise, use their imagination which urges their creativity and speak about their own life experiences in different situations. Sometimes unknowingly teachers have used it by just asking students' opinion to express their ideas in group works or write questions after reading a story aloud.

Drama may beused as a teaching methodology not only during drama or literature classes but also in other ESL classes like Business English, PR classes or research methodology.

The primary aim of this qualitative research is to use drama as a method in the classroom to teach English as a foreign language and to use it as an emancipating praxis. What do I mean by emancipating praxis?

By using a well-selected drama, students not only acquire language skills but also grow and evolve as social human beings through drama practice and rehearsal. The impact my practices have on the personal and artistic development of students is examined while integrating drama in the instructional process (language use, writing and acting to involve the whole class). This is written from the perspective of a reflective practitioner researcher using reflection-in- action to guide the research in the classroom. The work demonstrates how reflections inform practice in Drama classes.

Drama as a method contributes evidence of students potential to change, analyse and improve whilst role-playing a certain piece of drama. Drama is used to improve their ability to speak and learn English.

Keywords: research on practice, reflective notes, drama elements, action research, etc.

Introduction

Drama is widely used as a methodology in Foreign Language Teaching nowadays. Combs (1992) upholds that classroom drama is not learning about drama but learning through drama.....

Through exploring drama, students will develop an understanding of themselves and others, and will learn about the lives of people in different times, places, and cultures. They will develop practical, artistic skills, as well as critical-thinking skills and a variety of communication skills in English language.

Students may also be asked to consider the context in which the language takes place.

In drama terms, students may be asked to consider the key words in improvisation – who —what —where. It is needed to consider the difference between the sentence —Is this a blackboard? which may take place in a language lesson, and the line in MacBeth —Is this a dagger which I see before me?

That is why in the drama/languages experimental class simple dialogues with fixed content were given a huge variety of meaning through the imposition of different contexts. Students did this through use of body language, pitch, pace, tone, the use of silence.

Drama and languages have much in common. As curricular areas, both need their learners to be active, expressive and communicative participants. Using our strategies to teach the four skills of language helps learners to learn the mechanics, but using drama helps them to experience the language.

This research studies professional growth whilst directly engaged in practise-based inquiry. Likewise, it represents the contributions that drama teachers, as insiders in the field, can make to using drama as learning method through systematic research that informs practise.

Most of the studies answer the broad question, "Does classroom drama actually teach anything?" Wagner presents the best studies in both the qualitative and quantitative research

paradigms. Betty Jane Wagner summarizes recent research on drama in education and creative drama, featuring studies that show drama's effect on thinking, oral language, reading, and writing.

According to Wagner ―Process Drama and Multiple Literacies takes you inside classrooms where process drama successfully taps students' multiple literacies, integrates content from across the curricular areas, and develops students' social and critical awareness. These classrooms span a wide range of ages, and their stories will show you how this technique allows students to view the world from multiple perspectives by involving them in situations where they must make informed decisions. And far from simple classroom plays, drama texts are conceived and enacted by students in response to the issues and questions raised by content/topics in the classroom‖.

Methodology issues

Several tools may be considered useful in drama classes. The image based study uses photographs to prompt reflection, interpretation and analysis. During practical application of such tools it was observed that the use of the digital camera as a data collection medium was positive in many ways. It opens the possibility of allowing the participants to be actively involved in the research process, in addition the images prompted reflections on practise, and provided a way for teachers to dialogue with students about their values about drama in education.

Linthwaite, Lewis, Staton (2006) support that ―Qualitative researchers try to be more useful, wanting to engage with the complexity of practise by developing a range of practise-based research strategies such as action research, grounded theory and reflective practice‖. Drama and role play is often used in a similar way as storytelling and for a similar purpose.

The interview schedule centred around three basic phases. The pre-study interview invited the three of us who teach drama in our Higher Education Institution to describe our teaching methodologies and our philosophy of drama teaching (How have we taught drama in the past?; What kind of evaluation tools have we traditionally used?; What has our students' interest been?). My colleagues were interviewed and asked to paint a vivid picture of themselves and their working environment (What do you like about your teaching environment?; What do you find challenging?; What has changed for you over your career?) During these initial conversations, it was necessary to understand the teacher's goals for the teaching of drama.

They were very enthusiastic in participating in my practice-based research and offered new ideas. They were invited to contribute with their opinions (ethics has been highly respected and applied) in a workshop organised in the University premises and which constituted the main part of the activity.

Some details on collecting evidence during the workshops and analysis of evidence

The workshop or experimental class was organised with the purpose to use drama as a methodology with 2nd year University students in the class and reflect on the related teaching strategy and effects we believe it may have on the ESL students. My colleagues‗ notes and journal entries recorded the observations they made of the students as they worked through dramatic role-

play with the "guest teacher" (What was it like watching your own students?; Did anything happen that surprised you?; What did you see that pleased you/disappointed you?)

Whilst asking certain relevant questions and discussions, it was intended to bring to light some assumptions about the students and teaching in order that we might explore together how these assumptions can be challenged by drama methodologies.

Meetings after the class were organised to discuss with colleagues how to better design and implement drama strategies by learning from each other and sharing ideas how to improve our teaching practices (both anticipated and unanticipated) as well as the limitations of the methodology (questions often asked were: How would you describe the rhythm of the lesson?; What did you find difficult/interesting?; How would you describe the nature of your students' engagement with the work?; What would you do differently next time and why?)

It is this ongoing reflection on practice, long-term observation, hours of videotaped drama work, Students' writing-in-role, reflective writing, formal and informal feedback, and test results that provided us with triangulation of data and clear emergent categories of analysis in our research.

The teacher becomes a learner not only in her/his own eyes but also in the eyes of others. And as a learner, these students had a glimpse again at their own potential, essentially connecting them to what Freire (1998) has called their "unfinishedness". This action research involves the teacher setting the classroom activities so that students are engaged in a problem based learning situation. It then becomes both —a teaching strategy and a foundation for research‖ entity.

It is a viable approach to inquiry where teacher researchers are actively involved in learning while researching. Attempts were made to explore different issues as corruption of higher ranked officials, reform in education, freedom of press and expression, etc through hands on practice and explain that qualitative teacher research may be considered valid when it promotes transformation in practice which is evidence of learning.

Students have shown to feel comfortable during live-performances/drama classes and enjoy their role playing at the same time. As soon as the opportunity of role-playing the characters came to question, the students started to decide the roles and came up with new ideas how to make it look like a real drama played on scene.

The teacher is neither a co-player in the drama, acting like another student, nor is she a performer who uses role to either command attention or entertain like an actor might do. O'Neill (1995) insists that "the initial purpose of using role is emphatically not to give a display of acting, but invite participants to enter the fictional world" (61). The purpose of role for the teacher then is to support student role-playing, invite students to transform the dramatic action as they are moved and challenged to do and otherwise facilitate complex learning using the tools and entry points of dramatic art forms.

The lecturer may slip in and out of role so smoothly and constantly surprises students. This keeps them alert and focused because they are never quite certain of what is coming next: as in life, they are walking on a tightrope trying to adjust to the future. (Richard Courtney, in Taylor, 2000:45)

Moving into a whole-group role-play, the teacher may assume the role of a young girl, a deposit officer in a bank or a reporter. Reading my research journal sometime later, it was evidenced that:

As Gallagher commented in her chapter in Booth's (1998) book, *Writing in Role*, when she says, "When we are working with drama and writing-in-role, we are interested in engaging the whole of the students in inquiries relevant to her/him. Because of the great security of role, students and teacher can take greater risks. Because you are in safety, you can go into danger" (150).

I thought how often as teachers, we provide students with challenges that demand risk taking on their part (write a story, move around the gym like a president, sing out loud as part of the choir...) while we merely observe and encourage. In this situation, the students were able to take a risk and enter into role as the teacher was risking along side of them (Reflective teacher journal, 10 December 2014).

A student in the role of a reporter may write his/her reflective notes as well as the teacher writes her own which might lead to another cycle of further improvement and dissemination of acquired knowledge and expertise.

Out of role, students explained that they had the option of discussing freely about the text and experimenting with the terms previously given by the teacher. It was nice watching them write the test afterwards regarding the selected topics.

There was a further education for us as we read the reflections of the academically strong students in the class. Some of these "high-achievers" had taken special note, without any solicitation, of the unusual participation of their peers who were normally quiet or unsuccessful in their work.

One student explained in her assessment:

Doing drama was less tiring and more fun than writing notes according to students and taking into account the colleagues comments as expressed by them in their notes: playing different roles was a very interesting idea. I did like the casual atmosphere, and the freedom to express our feelings creatively. The only thing that could have been improved would be to include more facts and information into the technique.

I feel that if this could be met, it would have been nearly perfect. Some of the less attentive students may be intrigued by the idea of learning through drama. In fact, they may not even realize that they're learning at all, but the information is more likely to "stick in their minds."

Many students in the class had taken note of surprising and new participation from their peers in the drama work and the subsequent breaking of old patterns and dynamics in the classroom.

Other reflective notes taken during the practical activities

This is an illustration of one of the experimental classes using drama as a method in teaching English as a foreign language.

The teacher tells the class a story of a situation and explains new/difficult vocabulary and grammatical points. In groups the students share their views about the situation presented in the story and imagine how they would feel if they had been involved in the story.

They imagine three or four characters, a scene and write their ideas about the situation. Then one group starts asking questions about their characters, how they feel about the situation (maybe assisted by the teacher asking an introductory question to establish the spirit of the enquiry). Then it is the turn of the group who have to ask questions of the characters to the other group.

Each group improvises the story, choosing the methods of presentation they wish to use. One group may improvise a sequence of freeze-frames, another group may present a mime, another group may use words and movement or still images. For the spoken version of the improvisation, the whole class may contribute: if a student in the performing group runs out of words or ideas, any other student in the classroom can assume the role. No-one therefore is excluded or frightened of getting involved, and the whole class contributes. Meanwhile they may take notes of what they liked or disliked and at the end express their non-judgemental opinions.

An extension to this process is to ask the students to listen to an audio-cassette recording of a scene once or twice with pre-listening questions to focus on their listening (e.g Lady Windermere's fan by Oscar Wilde).

Knowing the scene in detail they can then write a summary of the action, and can characterise the people involved in the story. Then the scene can be extended, again using freeze-frames to imagine what may have happened or could happen before/afterwards, adding or substituting new ideas and vocabulary. At this stage the students will want to learn their scripts, which will be very easy. I found this very useful in my drama classes. The students will also want to write their own versions of the story or situation.

Using a photograph or poem as the starting-point is more advanced, as this implies inference and visual literacy? These skills need to be developed first.

Drama can work together with students creative writing and visual art as long as carefully observed during drama classes.

Further explanation of the data collected with clear objectives whilst using drama in improvised classes are therefore observed.

Drama has not been previously considered as a useful method of teaching at a University level in Albania. It has just been used as a subject in itself looking only at its theoretical importance and analysis of plays, theme, subject, main idea, related ideas, messages, moral and figures of speech.

My colleagues were curious to know and consequently asked: How do you do it? Some of the Students look at a painting or illustration of a historical scene that shows a selection of different characters. They bring it to life by representing the characters with their bodies.
Some other situations to be used in the classroom

Current Affairs/History: Small groups are given different newspaper reports of the same incident (or differing accounts of an historical event) and asked to produce as accurate a tableau as possible. This can be used to examine how events may be communicated differently according to the observer's point of view.

For a more light-hearted activity, groups can devise a tableau on a specific theme, such as epic books or movies, famous locations or well-known historical events. The other students then try and guess what the tableau represents.

One of the ways of the practical activity was:

Students stand in a circle, or around the performance area and a theme is given. One by one, they step into the space and establish still images in relation to one another until the tableau is complete.

At this point thought tracking can be used to find out more about each of the characters. The scene can also be brought to life through improvisation, with the teacher clapping her hands to signal the beginning and end of the action.

Conclusions

Drama strategies - also known as drama techniques or drama conventions - are the everyday tools of the drama teacher to enhance the learning of a foreign language. Drama strategies develop different skills to encourage discourse, interaction and creativity. They aim to improve communicative and performance skills through activities such as character development and storytelling and be used across the curriculum to actively involve students in their own learning.

Once students are familiar with the technique, they can also work in small groups on different aspects of a theme. The class can discuss each group's tableau in turn, mentioning what they

can see happening, what they would like to know more about and what they think could happen next. Afterwards, each group can comment on how these viewpoints compared with their initial intentions. Some of the examples well thought beforehand were analysed in the classroom.

Linthwaite, Lewis, Staton (2006) support that ―Qualitative researchers try to be more useful, wanting to engage with the complexity of practise by developing a range of practise-based research strategies such as action research, grounded theory and reflective practice‖.

In a classroom where drama has been exploited, there is often, too, this experience of profound change for the participants. For the weaker students we tracked in a particular class, they had the surprising and necessary experience of success and in so doing became different learners and different people. Much educational research confirms that success begets success. What we could not have anticipated is the extent to which this success would change others' perceptions of their peers.

Drama needs sufficient knowledge about the topic and a certain level of language to cope with and use it successfully. The process of experimenting drama elements is more important than the objectives as set in the beginning of the class or expectation of outcomes.

In this context the researcher may often use a tableau as well to boost good communication skills of the students.

A tableau can be used to quickly establish a scene that involves a large number of characters. Because there is no movement, a tableau is easier to manage than a whole-group improvisation – yet can easily lead into extended drama activities. It can be used to explore a particular moment in a story or drama, or to replicate a photograph or artwork for deeper analysis.

This reflective process is the equivalent of what psychologists have called ―meta-cognition,‖ and psychotherapists have called, ―psychological minded-ness. Thinking about thinking– questioning assumptions, the meanings of words (semantics), the emotional power of images (semiotics), the way language and arguments are structured (rhetoric), looking at forms of personal and cultural self-deception (psychoanalysis and propaganda analysis)–this is an unending challenge to learning. Drama can help make learning a foreign language fun, and changing roles and using other dramatic approaches generate types of thinking that reflects greater mental and emotional maturity and flexibility.

Drama and narrative form work well together if the drama explores the story rather than merely acting it out. But on the other side, acting out adds values to storytelling and text analysis.
Lifting the text from the book requires good knowledge of the structure of the language and masterful interpretation of even the implied meaning in order to express it in well pronounced sentences.

Rather than learning stories rote pupils should identify key images and important moments, and retell the story in their own words. Still images can be used to mark out those key moments, as can drawing storyboards and story maps or (for younger children) sorting pictures into the right order. It is well worth playing some games to develop oral skills and get the creative juices flowing. These can help to develop vocabulary, story- making and storytelling techniques. Still images need to be explored further in another research paper

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