

## FROM PAGE TO STAGE: TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN PLAYWRITING, PRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE



### Language Teaching

**Keywords:** English language teaching-learning process, language and culture acquisition and attainment, theatre stage, language proficiency, British and American culture.

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### Abstract

English language teaching is both challenging and satisfactory, especially when combined with student-oriented approaches. The focus of the paper will be the experience with third year undergraduate students of University of Tirana, Faculty of Foreign Language, English Department, during their courses on British Studies and Translation Criticism. The paper is a qualitative research describing the way English language students were involved in playwriting, production and performance of a variety show in English called "Curtain Call" by the end of their academic year April-June 2022. The paper reinforces the importance of offering extracurricular activities to English language students to encourage their creativity, academic development, language proficiency, cooperative learning and team building. The paper also seeks to offer a positive perspective of students' experience on the stage of National Experimental Theatre in Tirana, and their familiarity with backstage, forestage, light effects, music, stage design, stage directions, proxemics, prosody, speakability, breathability, and many other theatrical elements. From the English language and culture teaching-learning perspective, the research offers a series of findings and recommendations on the importance of applying all the acquired knowledge on British and American Studies and Translation teaching-learning process in front of English-speaking spectators who could test their successful language and culture attainment when performing live in English while taking the stage.

## THE USE OF DRAMA IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

While the use of drama for educational purposes goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century, the theoretical framework was developed in the 1950s (Zafeiriadou 2009). The argument is that learning is basically individual and that students have different learning styles and preferences (Alasmari and Alshae'el 2020).

In contemporary English Language Teaching, drama and theatre are recognized as elements of the 'Communicative Approach' by involving the students in social situations that also include other forms of communication, going beyond language competence, such as gesture, body posture, intonation and other prosodic features. Drama activities "take the focus away from the teacher and put it on the students to give them the maximum amount of talking time" (Davies 1999: 88).

The process of second-language teaching is grounded in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky that "emphasizes meaningful interaction among individuals as the greatest motivating force in human development and learning" (Mohammadi and Hamidi 2020: 6). Drama has been incorporated into language classrooms to stimulate students' motivation and engagement (Gao and Dowdy 2014).

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented on the 5th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference (IMSC-2022) held by The Association-Institute for English Language and American Studies, Tetovo, North Macedonia.

Gao and Dowdy (2014) noted that, while drama technique is more interesting and attractive to the language students, it includes a set of combined skills. On the other hand, “the drama technique also ‘challenges’ language teachers to brainstorm with more effort, which in turn develops their teaching techniques” (Gao and Dowdy 2014: 28).

Alongside with the arguments for using drama in the language classroom, the researchers have been exploring the limitation of its drawbacks, including the effectiveness of drama as an effective teaching tool (Alasmari and Alshae’el 2020).

## **CASE STUDY: ENGLISH LANGUAGE, UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA**

The case study involved twenty-nine students of Third-Year Bachelor of British and American Studies and Translation and Interpreting studying English as a foreign language at the department of English Language, University of Tirana, Albania. The students participated in co-creating, co-writing, co-editing, co-producing and co-staging a variety show in English which was then performed by them in the National Experimental Theatre in Tirana. The entire process was divided into four stages: the first stage involved brainstorming ideas for a period of two weeks (March); the second stage involved the writing of the script, setting up groups and assigning the tasks and roles in co-creating, co-writing and co-editing the script for a duration of two months (March – May 2022); the third stage involved rehearsals of the script for staging purposes for a duration of one month (May –June 2022). The fourth stage involved performing the script: the variety show was performed in front of an audience of more than two hundred spectators on 2 June 2022.

The dramatic text used in the research study was a script developed on prior exploration of students’ preferences and talents by the professor. The title of the variety show was selected and adapted after the script was written based on students’ options and alternatives and on the principle of an alluring, inviting, intriguing and meaningful title.

### **FIRST STAGE – THE EMERGENCE OF THE IDEA**

Given that the professor has taught British Studies and Translation courses for twenty-two years and her research area is theatrical translation criticism and stage performances of George Bernard Shaw and Arthur Miller plays, last year she brainstormed ideas to her third year students of British and American Studies group by encouraging them to put on stage a play from one of these playwrights.

Only a few students out of thirty managed to read the play “Pygmalion” and “The Crucible” as extracurricular reading tasks assigned in the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022. However, out of many interesting topics on contemporary British culture and lifestyle, they were introduced to the British theatre. The discussion was especially lively regarding the comparison

between theatre and cinema. Some students talked energetically and passionately about their experience at the theatre as both spectators and amateur performers.

The professor took note of their excitement and joy about this topic and invited them to the premiere of an Albanian dark comedy entitled “Pak Pakt” written professionally by Ledian Gjeçi and staged by him in March 2022. Most of the students had never been to the theatre, and their experience there as spectators was extraordinary. After the premiere, the professor arranged for them to meet the stage director and some of the main actors and take pictures with them.

As they were still under the effects of post-theatre experience, they came up with the request to try putting on stage some play. Since the time was too short to learn a too complicated play, the professor started a discussion about their musical preferences in British and American culture, their favourite English poems, and their first-hand experience with the theatre stage as previous actors in high school.

The discussions were really inspiring and refreshing. The professor could find out important information about their hidden talents, passions, experiences and preferences. Hence, without hesitation, she explained that she had in mind to develop together a variety show involving different genres. She suggested building a performance on British and American culture differences in a humorous and entertaining way, involving jokes, poems, singing and dancing. Some students pulled out right away because they could not commit because of their stage fright but the professor told them to help backstage. This process was repeated with the Translation group.

## **SECOND STAGE – SETTING UP GROUPS, ASSIGNING ROLES, AND TASKS**

The professor had to check on the students' readiness to participate in an extracurricular activity comprising the staging of a variety show in English language. She asked the students to start thinking about what they could do in the show. After that, she grouped the students into performers and backstage crew based on their preferences, free choices and talents.

Furthermore, the professor identified the moderators of the show, the actors, the singers, dancers, reciters, advertisers and backstage students. From April to May each group had a coordinator, and the professor played the role of facilitator and supervisor. The tasks were assigned via WhatsApp, which is the easiest social media form of communication. All groups started to work together with their professor to co-create, co-write and co-edit the script.

The poetry group consisted of six female students out of whom two decided to learn two American poems: Emily Dickinson's “Hope” and Mary Oliver's “I Worried”; two others decided to learn two British poems: William Henry Davies’ “Leisure” and Christina Rossetti's “Remember”. One student volunteered to learn Robert Frost's poem “The Road Not Taken” in

English to pair with the last remaining student who would recite her Albanian translated version of the poem.

The dancing group was composed of eight talented students who were assigned to select two folk songs: one British and one American. However, due to time constraints they decided to keep only the American country song “Cotton Eye Joe”.

The acting group, which consisted of fourteen students, was given the task of choosing their favourite play and rewriting it into a twenty-minute script. The students needed the professor's help to suggest something interesting. The professor had in mind Shakespeare's “The Twelfth Night” and sent them a link to watch the British performance version. Afterward, she sent the Albanian performance version of the play, but she did not receive any feedback. She concluded they did not like the old style costumes and the setting, which was not in line with the rest of the variety show as a modern creation. She remembered seeing with her children the American modern movie adaptation of Shakespeare's “The Twelfth Night” into “She's the Man”. She also shared the link to the movie with her students, who enthusiastically accepted it and started to set the roles. Two talented boys were assigned to rewrite the most interesting scenes and adapt and connect them according to a logical chronological flow of events.

The singing group consisted of three students and had to learn their favourite songs and share them during rehearsals. They used Halsey's song “Sorry”, Adele's “Million Years Ago” and Amy Winehouse's “Back to Black”.

The advertising group was responsible for preparing the posters and finding the right image and text for the invitation. They were also responsible for advertising the show through social media networks.

The backstage students were informed that their role would be mostly required during general rehearsals and the final performance to assist the performers and actors with clothes and make up. Some off-stage students were assigned to assist the performing ones with forgotten lines or cues. A few more would help with bringing objects such as chairs, glasses, bags, etc. during scene changes.

The technician group consisted of two students who were assigned to download all the music clips and sound effects on one flash drive, meet with the theatrical technician of the National Experimental Theatre to understand how to operate the video projector and microphones, how to run the lighting and sound components of the variety show, ensuring everything ran smoothly and at the right times.

## THE THIRD STAGE – REHEARSALS

The professor, after having secured her administration's confirmation on the performance date on 2nd June 2022, asked to use the faculty premises for rehearsals after classes or at weekends.

Each group would meet separately to try out their roles. In the first two weeks, the professor allowed them some time to do things according to their way. They announced that they had learned their roles pretty well and were ready for the show. However, the professor needed to check and test their achievements. She found out that each group had difficulties in memorizing the lines and managing emotions.

She started to facilitate the work of the poetry group giving tips on the voice projection and intonation because sometimes it was not fine-tuned to the pathos of some specific rhythmic poems. The professor would read aloud the selected poems, encouraging students to record her while reciting in order that they could follow similar reciting styles in return. The selection of the music in the background was also another difficult aspect that they had to choose and decide together, as they were trying out different tunes. Moreover, the pairs were encouraged to cast a symbiosis on stage by thinking carefully about stage lighting, shadows and spotlight.

While checking with the dancing group preparation, the professor concluded that it needed to be more harmonious, elastic and artistic. She also had to cope with their lack of discipline due to taking the dancing part too lightly. She decided to add two more minutes on top of their selected part and told them to match their outfit with each other. She also encouraged them to try hard to bow all at once in front of the spectators.

The acting group was the most difficult to manage. Some students did not manage to be punctual or learn their parts on time. A few found it difficult to attend the rehearsals at weekends and the rest of the students could not put up with their negligence, because the entire comedy relied on everybody's lines. However, other students would read out the lines of the missing students just to give flair of the entire comedy. They were talking all the time about their dresses, suits and make up but were coming to school in casual clothes, making the professor feel a bit insecure whether they will really manage with their outfits despite they were saying "Do not worry professor!".

The professor realized that the moderators of the variety show needed to meet almost on a daily basis with her. They would carry the most important weight of the show. Hence, they had to show up during rehearsals and memorize the lines accurately. They had to be careful with intonation and pronunciation and try to be impressive, convincing, loud and entertaining. Every part was written with doses of humour and they would present each part of the show naturally and organically while inviting each group of performers to take the stage.

The singing group were frequently pondering whether to stand up or sit on a chair. After several try outs the professor decided they all perform standing up and be on the spotlight. She also decided that they create a smooth shift from the less potent song, to a more rhythmic one and culminate with a song involving a crescendo accompanied by acoustic guitar. The dresses were also selected to fit their songs nature.

The final part of the show was Phil Collin’s song “Another Brick in the Wall” to be performed by all students together. During that stage, they were figuring out to decide on the final title of the variety show which was suggested by the students as “Curtain Call Show” connecting the title with their theatre experience.

For better performing results the professor arranged to invite the professional stage director, Ledian Gjeçi during one of the rehearsals to provide the students with professional advice on stage left, stage right, forestage and upstage movements, voice projection, prosody, proxemics and performance tricks.

#### **THE FOURTH STAGE – THE FINAL PERFORMANCE**

The fourth stage was the final performance, which was accompanied by very strong emotions. The professor assigned the previous afternoon for general rehearsals. However, the students asked for another final rehearsal two hours prior to the final show. Some students were asked to show the seats to the key guests. Some others were asked to purchase bouquets for the professor and the moderators.

The students and the professor had decided to invite to the show the key people directly related to the accomplishment of it. Two deputy deans responsible for students’ academic career, the head of the English Department, English Department colleagues and students, other colleagues and students from the faculty or other public and private universities, high school students and their English teachers, American and British embassy representatives, students’ parents and their friends and relatives, attended the show.

#### **DISCUSSION OF PRACTICAL AND PROCEDURAL STRATEGIES**

The pandemic affected students’ lives tremendously in every respect: physical, social, psychological. Youth could not perceive life without outdoor activities, without socializing or spending valuable time with their peers. Online teaching and learning was another obstacle into their full enjoyment of face-to-face interaction and exchange. The new academic year 2021-2022 saw students back to their university buildings and their lives started to have nuances and colours again.

The internationalization process of universities took off with full speed and Erasmus plus exchanges resumed. In the framework of internationalization, student clubs were established at the faculty level serving as hubs where students could voice their ideas, manifest their talents, highlight their skills.

The Faculty agreements and memoranda of cooperation and understanding with many partner institutions of public and private sectors was a very good starting point for students' inclusiveness in extracurricular activities to experience something new and different from school context.

The cooperation agreement between our Faculty and the National Experimental Theatre was seen as a great opportunity by both the professor and the students to exercise their skills, talents, professionalism and passion. They decided to use this opportunity to produce a variety show in English to convey aesthetic and artistic values to the spectators as a showcase of teaching and learning achievement from page to stage. Furthermore, they took this opportunity to co-create experiment and produce something new, avant-garde, and unforgettable for them and the audience.

The theatre auditorium could accommodate two hundred spectators, but the number of people attending the variety show was higher, with many students sitting on the floor. The variety show was planned to run for one hour. It proved to be very successful, because every element was fine-tuned to the expectations of the spectators. The script, the humour, the jokes, British and American cultural differences, the educational goal and perspective, the music, light effects, the smooth scene changes, the role play, stage design, the performers' elegant outfit, contributed to an unforgettable and enduring outcome.

The students performed without any emotional blockage due to their rehearsal discipline, promptness, availability, acceptance of the role, use of time, meeting deadlines. Despite confusing the order of two consecutive scenes, nobody from the audience could realize it because the students carried on smoothly and elegantly with the next scene. Regardless of one student's appearing on stage with some delay, the audience perceived it as part of the script because the moderator managed the situation skilfully by improvising a repeated call of her peer and started to applaud as if she was encouraging her friend to join and not be shy. The entire audience started to applaud together with the moderator under the rhythmic music sounds until the other student took the stage.

The post-show period was the most interesting one. The professor was receiving many compliments by her colleagues and students at her faculty and beyond. Students were feeling very proud and recognized by their other professors for their talents and positivity. The professor arranged to organize interviews for radio and television, and invited students to express their emotions and appreciation on their unforgettable experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

As long as cultural activities play a crucial role in the improvement of social and educational life, the organization of cultural events at the university or faculty level has always been a necessity for every moment in time and space. Extracurricular activities are very much encouraged especially in the Post COVID-19 era with youth and adults wanting more optimism, more hope, more enthusiasm and entertainment.

In terms of English teaching and learning interaction, extracurricular activities performed after classes or during weekends give the students and their professors an opportunity to establish an organic bondage projected to last forever and cherish positivity, mutual respect, care, affinity, support, admiration. This bondage also shapes the students' beliefs and trust in role models to follow in their future careers. It enables students to grow more self-confident, resilient, hopeful and cooperative. It connects them intrinsically, integrally, permanently.

Through cultural activities, students learn about team building, appreciation, acknowledgment and recognition of each other's efforts, hard work, devotion, discipline, promptness. They learn about theatrical world as a new experience, a new environment. They learn about their hidden talents, and they encourage each other to bring them to the surface.

Through cultural activities students get motivated, diligent, inspired, and rewarded. Their English language level upgrades and pronunciation improves. They might also be recognized by representatives of British and American Embassies as potential future collaborators in the promotion of British and American culture and education. Moreover, they might also have higher chances for their future employment. They might also draw the attention of radio and television managers to potentially translate for their cultural columns or web pages. Their skills come to the surface through recognition and advertisement, and they are more praised by other professors that overlooked on them.

Many of these students are currently performing their postgraduate studies at the faculty, some have pursued their careers abroad, some have started an employment career, but their experience in the theatre will remain long in their memory. The experience will remain long in the memory of many other colleagues and students who attended the show because it was the first of its type for our faculty, and let us hope for its replication in the following years because students need to have extracurricular activities in addition to their regular classes at the university level.



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