

USING DRAMA TECHNIQUES TO ENCOURAGE ORAL INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

The writer argues drama is certainly not a panacea for all the ills existing in the language teaching world, but it would seem to have strengths in the oral skills area that conservative teaching methods do not.

Applying Drama Techniques

I first experimented with the use of drama in English language teaching in 1974. At that time, I was teaching the language to students, whose mother-tongue was Malay, at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Since there was a fixed syllabus that had to be strictly adhered to, I was only able to introduce elements of drama occasionally, whenever I felt that the students were getting bored or tired. Despite the incidental nature of such activities, I was struck by the realization that the students were participating more than they normally did, and appeared to be enjoying those moments. Encouraged by the seeming success of drama techniques, I pursued the matter further in the 1980s at Universiti Malaya, where I introduced and coordinated a 30-week subject entitled 'Language Enrichment'. This subject was based on *hands-on* English language learning, with the central tenet being *learning by doing*. The students, who had been selected to be future teachers of English, were all native-speakers of Malay.

Most of their classes were drama-based, and included improvisations, role play and simulations. They also had to write an original play each, and from their creations, I selected a few that I felt were stage-worthy. Then, in groups, they rehearsed the chosen plays and at the end of the course, they staged them, watched by staff, students and the general public. Throughout the rehearsals and the final performance, I kept as low a profile as possible, with the intention of *teacher-proofing* the activities; however, I made sure all the time that the students were actively participating as required (participation marks ensured they did!) It was only when the students needed me to step in that I did, like, for example, to help them analyse their roles, work on their pronunciation and expression, and discuss costumes, makeup, blocking, sets and props.

The feedback I got from my students was that, other than the enjoyment they got from the course, they were more motivated to learn English than they ever had been before. Some of my colleagues,

too, commented that they had never seen the students articulate as well as they were articulating, and that the students seemed to have come out of their shells and appeared more confident when speaking in English. Their vocabulary appeared to have increased and they had started to use English when talking with each other, being especially keen to express social niceties in English, where previously they had used their mother tongue.

The crucial improvement was that they were more willing to speak in the target language than previously and were not letting their incomplete control of the language hinder their communicative intentions. They were able to discuss wide ranging topics in English, and although their utterances were not altogether perfectly structured, there was a natural, everyday flavour to their speech.

The philosophy of the programme could be summed up in the words of Gainer, Lee and Lee (1989:85), who ran a three-day intensive English language course based on a drama workshop format for Japanese learners of English:

By approaching drama as both preparation and presentation.... the students use English in several ways.... It is a well-rounded approach to English language learning.

When I arrived at Bond in 1991, I was determined to continue in the same direction. Given Bond's progressive and innovative outlook towards education, we presently have a subject titled 'Language and Drama'. Although it is much shorter in duration (14 weeks) than 'Language Enrichment', it is essentially run on similar lines with the significant difference that at Bond, I am able to tap native and native-like English-speaker resources.

This is by way of allowing Australian and non-Australian speakers of English and others whose English language skills are on par with native speakers to register for the course. They serve not only as role models but also as guides in classroom activities, providing appropriate comprehensible input (language which is slightly above that of the level of the learners). They also take on the roles of drama directors, both during classroom skits and for end-of-semester performances. And for a period of about 4 weeks, they act as 'surrogate' teachers, although their job is to guide rather than 'teach'.

During this time I do not schedule regular classroom meetings, but get the students to meet in groups at times determined by them, with each group headed by a surrogate. At these meetings, the leaders ensure that rehearsals are effectively conducted, and that all members participate in preparation for the final presentations. Obviously, each group's activities are monitored to ensure there are no slackers (again, their motivation is assessment). Just as with the Malaysian experience, there is a deschooling of activities, i.e., out-of-class learning occurs, during which I make myself as physically scarce as possible in order to ensure learnercentred learning and to not make the learners feel restricted by my presence. In doing this, I subscribe to Di Pietro's (1987:70) philosophy that

Students who are not naturally talkative often appear more willing to join in the discourse when they realize that they are not dominated by a teacher figure.

Non-native speakers are exposed to a barrage of English, with more interactional English being spoken than they would expect to find in class. This sort of *immersion* is continued in other activities like writing original one-act plays, preparing 'radio plays', play reading, a visit to a local theatre to see a play, dinner at a karaoke restaurant, and Strategic Interaction (Di Pietro 1987). Needless to say, the different batches of non-native English language speakers have so far felt that their confidence and motivation in relation to spoken English has improved tremendously. Of course, I am not claiming that drama has given the Malaysian and Bond language learners native-like oral English

skills (In fact, it is highly questionable whether any other sort of formalised programme would, anyway). What I do believe, though, is that it has given the learners the impetus to accelerate their progress, and instilled in them the sort of *intrinsic/integrative* motivation necessary to love a language and therefore learn it better. Drama allows for *activity-centred immersion* (Genesee 1987: 73-74) which can give language learners optimum exposure to a target language. Educators could do worse than recognize this fact and formalise its application in class by adding an *experiential component* (Sesso 1986: 10) to a language syllabus, something that is long overdue.

Uncertainty About Drama

Although drama has existed as a potential language teaching tool for hundreds of years (Smith 1984: 2), it has only been in the last thirty years or so that its applicability as a language learning technique to improve oral skills has come to the forefront. However, while there seems to be evidence that points to its benefits in target language learning, there still appears to be some doubt in the minds of many language teachers as to its efficacy (Wessels 1987: 8). This is probably due to the fact that the average teacher feels comfortable with traditional teacher-centred teaching methods, and perhaps distrusts 'revolutionary' methods because he/she fears "There is no teaching going on" (Hawkins 1991: 125), or feels insecure and unknowledgeable about them (Davis 1985: 28-29), or sees "...drama activities as peripheral to language teaching" (Dougill 1987: 146). A statement made by Newmark and Reibel about thirty years ago (1968: 145) is relevant even today, as we enter the twenty-first century:

In his zeal to teach language students to produce well-formed sentences, the language teacher is in great danger of underestimating the importance of teaching students to use the language.

Such a teacher, with misplaced good intentions, invariably denies learners the opportunity to immerse themselves in the target language, preferring instead to keep within the 'safe' and 'well-trying' comfort zone of traditional classroom teaching. He or she does this despite sufficient evidence to show that generations of learners have passed through such courses without any appreciable improvement in their language skills. Showstack (1982: 179-180) quotes a number of comments made between 1948 and 1980 that reinforce this statement. He goes on to ask (182):

Why is it that the system of language education has changed so little for thousands of years?

Perhaps it is because schools still give textbook-based classroom language priority, and consider real world language to have little educational value. Language lessons are still based on teaching units which, intrinsically, have changed little over time. Such units are made up of selected items predetermined very much in advance, packaged artificially, and sequenced in order of difficulty, to be dealt with in a systematic pattern by teachers, a teacher-centred activity with a structural linguistics orientation (Quinn 1984: 61-64, Rivers 1988: 6). The teachers in question might feel that this is the most workable process but, as Gill (1995: 79) points out,

Unfortunately for their students, there is nothing predetermined, systematic or sequential about everyday language.

It may be time for schools to seriously consider the merits of what Holden (1981: 2-7) defines as the language of communication. Such language is seen as being real-life or authentic, made up of verbal and non-verbal communicative messages produced on the basis of the demands of each societal situation, untextbook-like in design, and unrestricted by rigid structural accuracy or difficulty-indexed sequencing, the central motivation being to convey meaning. Dougill (1987: 5) puts it succinctly when he argues that

... language is above all a means of communication, not an abstract body of knowledge to be learnt.

And Gill (1995: 79) reminds teachers that

... they are preparing learners not for a permanent existence in the classroom, but for the real world, where language is untextbook-like in design, and is used mainly to convey meaning.

Of course, not every learner wants to, or can, dramatize in a foreign language. This is especially true of mature-age and shy target language learners who balk at the prospect of losing face and self-esteem. It is up to the teacher to create a friendly and positive environment that will encourage such learners to participate. The teacher should create a humanistic environment which is positive, non-coercive and sensitive to the feelings of every body, and which caters for both shy and talkative students without demanding grammatical correctness (Moskowitz 1980 in Sesso 1986: 6).

Another criticism that is often leveled against communicative approaches like drama is that they generally do not demand grammatical accuracy. Be that as it may, there is nothing to stop teachers from ensuring that lessons have scope for elements of grammar correction from time to time. Robert J. Di Pietro's Strategic Interaction, developed in the 1970s and 1980s, falls into this category because it is based on a combination of communicative language acquisition and formal, structure-oriented learning. Smith (1984: 4), when discussing the use of theatre in Second Language teaching, could very well have been referring to Strategic Interaction when he stated that

In order to become skilled at interacting spontaneously in the second language, language learners need the opportunity to practice language without inhibition and without interruption from the teacher. However, learners also need to receive correction and explanation from the teacher.

The Benefits of Drama in Target Language Learning

To a normal functioning human being, listening and speaking are natural, everyday activities. Both these macroskills must function at the same time for normal communication to occur. The communicative process is further enhanced through the use of paralinguistic cues. However, the situation becomes rather complex when the focus is on a target-language learner. Unlike the native or native-like speaker, a learner has to contend with the dual problem of making sense of new sounds and using his/her speech apparatus in hitherto untried ways (Dickson 1989: 301). Gassin (1986: 58) identifies lack of voice control, lack of speech-body synchrony, and inappropriate paralinguistic features as factors inhibiting a learner's progress and suggests (1990: 437) that in order to communicate better in a target language, the learner must approximate the speech and body rhythms of a native-speaker of that language. My students at Bond are encouraged to work along these lines

by using their native-speaker classmates as role models. They listen to these classmates and attempt to imitate their verbal and non-verbal styles, including colloquialisms and 'culturalisms' throughout the weeks they are together.

At the same time, they benefit from experiencing the target language as it is used in its natural, everyday form. Gill (1995: 80) suggests that

... by working on a task like preparing for a performance and then presenting it in a TL, learners get to hear and produce the sounds of that language more authentically and in a more wholesome fashion than they would in a regular class...

Dunkel (1986: 103) certainly seems to believe that this is true in relation to listening when she states that

As a general rule, listening exercises are more effective if they are constructed around a task.

The same may be said of speaking exercises. In fact, Smith (1984: 40) states that

Through acting, language learners become better articulators.

Of course, not every teacher has the luxury of native-speaker assistance, especially when they are in their home countries. In such cases, unless he or she has native-like skills or is able to use native speakers or, as a weaker alternative, has access to specially prepared audio-visual materials, it is difficult to see how similar circumstances could exist. Still, the fact remains that learners get listening and speaking practice in the target language, albeit minus the correct accent, intonation, stress, and so on. And, in the words of Smith (1984: 19)

It is not necessary to measure success in terms of native-like fluency.

In addition, drama helps shift the focus from teachers to learners, giving the latter greater opportunities to participate in the production of the target language. Through group discussions in preparation for role play, for example, learners are able to produce more spoken target language than they can ever hope to in a conventional, teacher-fronted lesson. As Davies (1990: 90) states it,

Discussion sessions... would certainly increase the amount of individual student talking time.

And, according to Hawkins (1991: 124),

... role play in pairs and small groups gives rise to a torrent of speech practice.

Long and Porter (1985: 208) suggest that, unlike in conventional classes where the teacher has administrative duties in addition to his teaching workload, and where learners have limited opportunities to speak because of class numbers, group-work in drama gives learners more speaking time. In fact, they point out that while in the former case total speaking time might average only one hour per year, in the latter, it increases by more than 500%.

It is not only the quantity of the target language, but also the nature of the language that is affected, when compared with lockstep methodology. In the place of textbookish, grammatically rigid language, Gill (1995: 81) says that drama generates

... authentic, everyday language with all its false starts and mid-speech adjustments and, given that it is learners' language in question, with its *developmental errors* and elements of *interlanguage*.

Khanji (1987: 152) stresses that developmental errors and interlanguage occur naturally in language learning. The fact of the matter is that, while structure is an integral part of a language, it would not be very wise to insist on accuracy if it stands in the way of communication. After all, a learner attends language classes in order, eventually, to use the target language in the real world where, according to Long and Porter (1985: 209)

... accuracy is important but where communication is always at a premium

and in which

...they can suggest, infer, qualify, hypothesize, generalize, or disagree

or participate in (210)

... topic-nomination, turn-allocation, focusing, summarizing, and clarifying.

The situations one encounters are functional in nature, incorporating (Jones 1982: 7)

... the language of discourse, transaction, negotiation, explanation and inquiry.

In other words, with the help of drama, a learner is able to produce a variety of utterances, thus getting practice in the target language in an integrated and holistic fashion, something which is highly unlikely in a conventional classroom. Smith (1984: 29) sums it up when he comments that

... language teaching goes on throughout the rehearsal and performance periods. This is a highly integrated approach to language teaching, and therefore, most of the time, many elements of language are in focus at once.

Such an environment should simulate what occurs in everyday language use, i.e., interaction between interlocutors in which (Anzilotti 1982: 68)

... one rarely encounters situations that would illustrate isolated grammatical points,...

Such day-to-day language is what learners are exposed to in drama, as they work in groups on drama projects incorporating preparation, rehearsals and the final performance. Drama is a communicative approach which caters for meaningful language acquisition, rather than rigid and methodical language learning (Krashen 1981 in Harmer 1991: 33-34). It allows the learner to participate naturally in oral communication with his/her interlocutors, giving free rein to thoughts and feelings in verbal and nonverbal interaction, and learning the language subconsciously. The greater the participation, the better the chances of the learner's language muscles being developed, the same way one's bodily muscles are strengthened through physical exercise. As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to claim that drama as a technique can result in native-speaker-like learners. However, Smith (1984: 19) contends that the same is true for most courses anyway. Perhaps what is important is to ensure that the right learning environment be created to develop the learner's communicative competence (Hymes 1972: 269-293) and to help point the learner in the direction of future proficiency in the target language. It can be argued that through such participation, learners internalise a foreign

language (FL) or second language (L2) in a manner not unlike the way they did their first languages or mother tongues in their formative years. To quote White (1984: 595-596):

Like the mother tongue, communicative competence in an L2/FL is acquired through use and active participation in behavioural situations which trigger off speech.

And Pross (1986: 37) adds

... most theatre games create an environment closely akin to the acquisition of the native language in the home.

Genesee (1987: 73-74) mentions a Canadian language immersion study involving grade seven learners of French in which regular (teacher-centred) immersion and activity-based (learner-centred) immersion programmes were compared. The study found that despite the latter sessions being only half the length of the former ones (40% compared to 80% of class time), both groups developed the same level of speaking and listening skills. The explanation for such a phenomenon could be that, in Genesee's words (74),

... an activity-based approach provides opportunities for students to experience a much wider range of speech events and to use a much wider range of speech acts than is possible in conventional medium-oriented classes in which the language is taught as a subject, or even in message-oriented classes in which regular content is taught through the second language.

The psychological impact that drama has on language learners is quite significant. When they start a target language course they are normally (Dougill 1987: 146)

... quite unprepared for the challenge of a foreign language situation, full of self-doubt...

It is not uncommon for them to feel uncomfortable with the new, unfamiliar language. Failure to come to terms with the new sounds and structures they are faced with could result in a further loss of confidence and self-esteem, not to mention a sense, real or perceived, of rejection. A further source of discomfort is the culture of the foreign language, especially if it is very different from their own. To quote Smith (1984: 17)

The foreign student may be thrust into situations with natives who have certain behaviour patterns with which the foreigner could never agree or sympathise.

Their inability to empathise with the target language culture can further dent their motivation. As evidenced by my personal experiences, drama can play a major role in helping them. Many of my Asian students, because of social factors like culture and 'face', and barriers to communication like affective filters and monitors, initially lacked the confidence to participate. However, once their affective filters had been lowered and they had overcome the temptation to monitor their language output at every turn, they found that it was possible to have fun and still learn. They could experiment with the new language, and not fear the threat of an imposing teacher-figure constantly supervising and correcting them. Similar findings were made in an informal study conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles, where English language lessons were conducted using drama techniques (Stern 1980: 77). The study revealed that

... drama encourages the operation of certain psychological factors in the participant which improve communication: heightened self-esteem, motivation, and spontaneity; increased capacity for empathy; and lowered sensitivity to rejection.

Both Di Pietro (1987: 3-4) and DiLaura Morris (1983, 1987) found that creative and imaginative activities helped alleviate problems that hindered language learning.

Conclusion

Drama is certainly not a panacea for all the ills existing in the language teaching world, but it would seem to have strengths in the oral skills area that conservative teaching methods do not. It is now a question of harnessing those strengths for the benefit of learners. To do this, we must rid ourselves of the paranoia about techniques that are perceived as risky, 'disorganized', 'frivolous', and so on. For too long, we have been shackled to the belief that language should be taught like other subjects: in a systematic, sequential fashion. There is nothing systematic or sequential about language, which is a tool of life, unlike other subjects like mathematics and history which are applied only occasionally in our everyday existence. Drama can help us prepare learners for the real world (Davies 1990: 97), purely by immersing learners in authentic communication in which there is integrated rather than disintegrated language.

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