

The Role of Drama in Language Teaching

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For many years, a small group of people in Universiti Sains Pulau Pinang and Universiti Malaya and more recently at Institut Teknologi MARA, have been agitating for greater recognition of drama as an essential part of education but so far little has been done to exploit the obvious advantages of drama as an instrument of language teaching in our schools. I hope however that very soon the teacher training institutions will be able to include drama courses in their curricula not only as a pleasurable means of teaching language but also in increasing the creative potential of the young people in our country.

Part of the reason why drama has received so little attention in our education system is perhaps the confusion regarding the term "Drama". To many teachers and headmasters "Drama" is nothing more than the annual presentation of the School Play in

conjunction with Speech Day or some such function. The director of the play (who is usually also the language teacher) is told to "do a play" for a variety of reasons: "to give children a chance to use language", "to occupy them after the exams", "to collect money" for the innumerable building funds, and "to help pupils understand the year's drama text in the literature class."

These are noble aims, but they have obviously done nothing to create any real interest in theatre among the thousands of children who have gone through our schools over the last twenty years. To date, we have not created even one internationally known playwright, director or actor and a play cannot draw a crowd of more than a few hundred people even in Kuala Lumpur.

The experience of putting on one play a year cannot do very extensive good because by its very nature the traditional method of producing a play from a script

limits the number of children who can take part. Even the most ambitious play does not need a cast of more than twenty children at a time. We can then ask, is it fair to waste so much time, energy and money for the sake of a few children alone? In any case the choice of play is very often unsuitable for the understanding and capability of adolescent actors. Shakespeare, Moliere, Terence Rattigan, Shaw and Arthur Miller wrote their plays for adult audiences and actors and to my mind it is grossly unfair to expect child actors to fully exploit the adult conflicts and emotions that these plays explore.

This very often results in poorly performed plays which are embarrassing for the audience as well as the actors. And certainly, except may be for the few chosen to act, the majority of the children do not gain much linguistic skill during a production, if that is the primary aim of a school play.

This is certainly not to belittle the good work of many language teachers in this country who have worked selflessly to produce school plays, sometimes with great difficulty. All too often we find headmasters who feel that they can only justify spending a few dollars on a production if the teachers in charge can "make a profit". The success of a play is judged not by how much creativity was engendered but by how many tickets were sold. I suppose we can console ourselves with the knowledge that even in developed countries the same kind of narrow thinking persists. To quote Frank Whitehead: "Yet in the minds of some headmasters and administrators there still lingers the idea that drama is something of a luxury, a concession or indulgence which could be neglected without much loss to the dinner hour, to the end of term (when the "real" work of examinations is over)". *The Disappearing Dais*.

What we need to do, therefore, is to re-define what is meant by drama in schools. We need a form of drama activity that will not only help every child in the class to use language to the best of his ability, but also release his creative energies, give him the confidence to express his ideas freely and encourage him to look at the world around him with greater sensitivity and to describe that world with all the language skill he can command.

If we are concerned with the teaching of a second language, then we must recognize that most playscripts written in that language are unsuitable for the learner, because of the high literary standard of the plays and also because these plays deal with cultural values to which the learner may yet be unfamiliar.

Hence anyone wishing to teach a language through drama must be able to provide a situation which is not

too far removed from the learner's own cultural background but which gives him ample opportunity to express himself freely in the new language. It must help him express his *own* feelings and thoughts without being hampered by the complicated and often bewildering cultural differences between himself and the native speakers of the language he is learning. A Malay student learning English, for example, should be encouraged to express himself as a Malay in the English Language: if he had to become an "Irishman" in *Juno and the Paycock*, he will have more than language problems to deal with. Drama in language teaching must provide the opportunity for the learner to use language as a living organism.

Drama is a living experience and as such it should deal with things that happen to the learner in a kampong, in the local post office or the local market and not what happens to Mr. Hill in London. When the learner talks about things he knows and which affect him personally he is more comfortable and therefore more inclined to talk without inhibitions. "Under the stimulus of an imagined situation words move from their passive "recognition" vocabulary into active use; as they lose themselves in their roles and so become freed from inhibiting self-consciousness, they learn to move gracefully and easily" (*The Disappearing Dais*).

During the Drama Lesson the learner is able to use all the sentence patterns he has learnt in the formal class freely and at random. However a free flow of language will not occur unless the learner has "something to say".

Language is the most obvious means of communication but before it can be used effectively the speaker must have something to communicate, he must have ideas. Part of the function of drama is to encourage the development of ideas through observation and imitation.

A language learner must understand very early that in any language people communicate not only with their vocal organs but with bodies as well. Drama teaches the student to express himself through action and speech. And finally through drama the learner can be taught not only to speak, but to listen, because listening is a vital link in communication.

The kind of drama activity that can help every child use language effectively therefore is not the annual school play but Creative Dramatics or Improvisation. Creative Dramatics is the process of extemporaneous situation and story playing under the guidance of a leader. It is different from formal theatre in that in Creative Dramatics we are concerned with providing a

situation where the child will be motivated to use spoken and body language in order to communicate with other members of the class. It is not concerned with an audience and has special value to the language learner.

Creative Dramatics is concerned solely with the participant and his growing ability to describe his world and his experiences. The greatest value in Creative Dramatics in Language learning is not the end product, the PLAY, but the process itself. The situation being acted out may never reach a polished performance quality but if it does, the only presentation it is likely to receive is a demonstration for the class.

The annual presentation of a play which represents the theatre activity of a school is at best a sporadic affair. The teacher decides to put on a play, a lot of interest is generated, the work reaches a frantic pace, there are two or three performances, there is a cast party and after that everyone breathes a sigh of relief and drama is forgotten until the following year. Obviously the serious drama teacher cannot effectively gauge how much learning has taken place. With Creative Dramatics however, the teacher can programme his activities to cover a whole year. He can emphasize language learning as his primary aim, he can worry about the development of the slower learners and he can test the effectiveness of his teaching by watching his work over an extended period of time.

Through Creative Dramatics, we can provide a 'safe' environment for a student among other learners of comparable linguistic ability to practice his language skills and we can provide him with the motivation to *want* to express himself. We also provide him with a chance to use as many structural elements of the language as freely as possible. At the beginning, he can use a limited range of structures but with growing ability he can use a greater number of structures with confidence. One of the great advantages of this kind of activity is that as the learner sheds his initial embarrassment he begins to enjoy working with his fellows. It encourages team work and he learns from other members of the class rather than from the teacher alone. Learning becomes a group effort centred around the learners with the teacher taking a back seat, making himself available for advice but not directly controlling the activity. The learner also becomes sharply aware of the need to increase his vocabulary and the range of sentence structures at his command. He begins to see the new language not as a neatly arranged series of tables in a text book but as a multi faceted gear throbbing with vitality.

So far we have been examining the role of drama in language teaching on a theoretical level. Now I would like to discuss a few ways in which a course in drama could be conducted in a class.

The first thing to clarify would be that we need not worry unduly about the ages of any particular group of learners. Obviously when working with younger children there will be less inhibition and a greater willingness to participate. However older learners can also respond wholeheartedly if their confidence can be built up in the early sessions. Adult learners of a language can select their own material more suited to their greater maturity when enacting a scene. Unlike when working with a common text book, different age groups could deal with different situations provided that the experiences being explored appeal to the age group we are working with. In most cases, after the first few lessons, students suggest their own situations and work independently to create a scene that interests them.

Our primary concern, especially at the beginning, would be to create an atmosphere in the class aimed at relaxing the students. It should be stated at the outset that the scenes to be enacted are not aimed at developing acting ability but language skills. It should be clear in their minds that they are not performing but trying to use language in a natural context.

At the early stages let the students work in large groups, repeating sentences together rather than individually. This releases tension and gives them safety in numbers. Do not pick out individual mistakes but address yourself to the whole group.

Initially there will be a lot of giggling and apparent lack of concentration. In many cases this is caused by embarrassment and it is best to allow this to wear itself out by constantly changing the activities and by paying attention to different members of the class. At any rate never show irritation as this may create a barrier between you and the student who finds the new experience alien to anything he has done before.

Remember too that the class can easily be taken over by the brighter or more extroverted students who are too eager to perform. Encourage the shy ones to participate by giving them attention and building their confidence without at the same time dampening the enthusiasm of those who are keen. Constantly reassure them that you are not seeking a "performance" and change roles often so that everyone gets a chance to be heard.

As their confidence develops and almost everyone is willing to participate, break the larger groups into

smaller ones and give each group an idea to develop into a scene. Allow them to select the characters and give them a few minutes (about ten at the beginning, progressively reduce the time for rehearsal as they become more competent) to discuss and prepare the scene. Then each group can enact the scene while the others watch and listen.

During the scene, the teacher can help by providing an odd sentence or two if the speaker is having too much difficulty. The main concern should be to get the speakers to communicate even if the sentences are grammatically incorrect. Make notes of every glaring errors and point them out after the scene is completed. Do not stop a scene to correct a grammatical error.

Discourage the class from laughing at others when mistakes occur either in acting or in speech.

After each scene, encourage a little discussion about the few words the listeners heard, about new sentences and finally put in a few words of praise about the way in which the scene was handled. Then ask for suggestions as to how the scene can be improved (don't ask what was wrong with the scene!) how it can be made longer and so on. Then ask the group to rehearse the scene again for presentation the following week incorporating the suggestions from the class. After two or three weeks, change the grouping and suggest new situations so that learners work with fresh faces and interest is maintained.

The art of teaching language through the medium of drama may be unfamiliar to many but the earnest teacher can bring great enjoyment to the learning process if he is willing to try new ideas and himself learn from previous mistakes. Given time, he will become adept at relaxing his students and providing them with the opportunity to speak, listen and use their bodies. I hope that when you return home you will try the method and convince others about the tremendous value of drama as an instrument for teaching language.

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