

## Drama techniques enable students to use language with a pragmatic intent

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### Abstract

With regard to creative teaching, the study brings forth arguments about the thesis that learning foreign languages by using drama techniques constitutes an innovative way in which the monotony can be broken and the lesson is made more real, more meaningful and purposeful. The use of drama techniques creates the right context for a meaningful language production, thus urging the students to use their linguistic resources and their language skills. Drama techniques enable the students to use language with a pragmatic intent. The study intends to meet an urgent need of the academic and educational staff of foreign languages for information about creative teaching, models and patterns for the development of creativity through drama techniques. It addresses specific issues related to drama as a teaching methodology. In short, it not only investigated reality in order to change it but, as Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) suggest, it has changed reality in order to investigate it. A university teacher-educator may change her approach to her own teaching style and the learning outcomes of her students.

**Key words:** Creative teaching, pragmatic intent, meaningful language production, equal distribution of power. Introduction

### Introduction

It is more essential than ever for teachers to take up the role of being researchers, not only for evaluative purposes but so to expand and explore the complex learning available in the aesthetic moment created in drama classes.

Calling us to focus on "knowing-in-action" Taylor (2000) draws our attention to drama teaching as an artistic process of meaning-making. He proposes that "to ignore reflective practitioner design is to remain ignorant to the kind of artistic processes which are the lifeblood of our work". (p. 27).

Drama can not only be used as an important subject discipline to teaching English as a second language but also as a teaching methodology that stirs students imagination and urges them to respond promptly in a creative way. It is being more widely used not only at primary and secondary education but also at higher institutions if planned carefully and managed properly by lecturers.

Returning to the question of value, drama, perhaps more pointedly than in any other subject area,

cannot hide that, as a subject discipline and teaching methodology, it is not merely value-laden but value-saturated. Heathcote once again focuses on the role of drama in education. "She (Heathcote) sees drama as the means of rooting all the school curriculum back in a human context where it sprang from, so that knowledge is not an abstract, isolated subject-based discipline, but is based in human action, interaction, commitment and responsibility" (Bolton, 1998:177).

Drama is practised as a method with first and second year students of our University not only during drama classes but also whilst teaching other subjects such as rhetoric, business English, ESP or Foreign Language Teaching in Tirana.

Whilst struck by the power inherent in working in role - how it engages emotionally, stimulates cognitively and creates a climate for greater understanding, you may find drama particularly useful in promoting the creative abilities of your students.

A Drama classroom remains a strong venue for learning to work in role and confirming its value in the practical sense. The teacher's role is defined as: helping students to form their ideas; helping students to test their ideas; helping students to communicate their ideas; and helping them to respond to different real-life situations. Teachers can use these skills for specific learning objectives by stepping into the fictional work of the students through using drama strategies, in particular, teacher in role.

The vehicle of drama for the teaching of a foreign language is a creative method of redistributing power and re-defining roles among students. Freire (1998) points out that working "in role" and critically reflecting on practice often uncovers

"surprising" findings when practitioners are able to systematically "think their practice" and create possibilities for learners to challenge previous assumptions about classroom achievement. The approach taken in this study fostered democratic principles in classroom teaching and learning (as an emancipating praxis), and the subsequent representation of classroom-based inquiry. The group's well-established social order was contested when drama became a new way to succeed for the classroom's most academically challenged students.

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### **Literature Review**

Literature plays a key role in providing a framework within which important questions are asked in carrying out any research. By actively doing research and challenging the validity of the literature, teachers may be engaged in a critical analysis of the related material, and question whether this literature is applicable to a relevant practice or environment.

In first and second years, students will draw upon a variety of sources - such as literature, historical and current events, and topics and themes from other subject areas, particularly the other arts - in order to create presentations in which they communicate their interpretation of situations and the motives of various characters".

### **METHOD**

It is an action research intending to offer a new way of checking the progress of students whilst organizing the classes to lead to creative and emancipating roles of individuals in schools, public institutions, private owned companies or multi cultured environment by using 'teacher in role'.

Teachers may take part in the classes by playing the role of 'teachers', i.e. themselves relating discipline and well-structured classes which have a didactic end as well as participants during improvised activities or whole students' performing roles.

The exercises used in the class were created and compiled specifically for the warm-up and language application phase which primarily benefit oral communication skills and the creation of a supportive and relaxed learning environment. Teachers can use them without any previous theatrical training.

The action research became a way to create a culture of inquiry through reflection on action with students and collaboration with university lecturers. As Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) have described, this research involved a systematic learning process in which I acted deliberately to improve my educational context and emancipate myself from institutional constraints. My colleagues are supposed to find dimensions of knowledge production and action that make meeting the demands of the new curriculum possible.

New requirements regarding the reform currently initiated in higher education in our country brings forth urgent tasks to generate new ideas in complementing the curricula at the Department of English in Tirana University which is used in this research as regards the project of involving first and second year students in workshops or theatre forums. It is not at all easy to plan experimental activities and organize them within classrooms or plan extra hours for the purpose of this research

### **Activities/materials**

Reading about or even watching a drama lesson is not the same as participating in one. And similarly, participation is not the same as teaching. Teachers benefit from teaching, presenting their work, receiving feedback and also by viewing how their colleagues navigate the unpredictable waters of drama. Here the process can be analysed while peers encourage, applaud and offer additional suggestions within a supportive and non-threatening environment.

In an experimental drama class students read and analyse on-act plays, explore improvisation activities, write their reactions and ideas in their journal, thus learning new vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, and gaining fluency and confidence.

Various drama activities that can be used include pantomime, role play and simulations, improvisation, reading plays, watching or listening to plays, staging plays, and writing plays.

Participants are physically and psychologically engaged in the dramatic action, which require actions-to-be taken in order to progress. 'Dramatic playing' is the exemplary form of this level of participation... At this level of participation there is the illusion, at least, of total transformation; the intention is that the participants will be personally transformed by the activity and they are rewarded for exhibiting responses and behaviours that conform to the 'illusion of transformation' (Neelands, 2000:50).

The teacher's role is defined as: helping students to form their ideas; helping students to test their ideas; helping students to communicate their ideas; and helping them to respond to different real-life situations.

Through the activities with students and the research carried on you may come to see that drama provides myriad ways for students to learn and appreciate language in meaningful, communicative contexts.

Teachers take part in playing minor roles thus allowing students to communicate their ideas more freely; and helping them to respond to different real-life situations such as that of 'escaping a country in which dictatorship prevailed for 50 years but people were eager to liberate themselves from the socialist ideology and join the democratic countries of Europe'. First students wrote about different stories they had read or heard and then discussed them in groups. Each group was supposed to prepare the part and play it in front of the classmates by elaborating the language and trying bring forth even the feelings and emotions of the characters they had created themselves. The two other groups took notes about their language performance and prepared questions for after session discussions.

Ethical considerations were taken into account prior to organising the experimental activities by inviting lecturers who teach Drama and literature and who are looking for new methods of creative teaching and feedback from their own students in upgrading the standards and empowering the teaching of language skills further.

### **Discussion of findings**

Consistently, there are numerous reports of unprecedented improvement in students' writing and speaking skills as a result of the use of drama structures. In the course of my practicum work, I have become a field researcher in my own classrooms, where students can speak with authority (and offer hard data) about what really works for student learning. It is more essential than ever for teachers to take up the role of being researchers, not only for evaluative purposes but so to expand and explore the complex learning available in the aesthetic moment.

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 intention is to examine the impact practical work has on the personal and artistic development of students while they try to integrate drama in the instructional process (language, 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 my research. The work demonstrates how reflections informed the practice in Drama in Education.

Teachers can use these skills for specific learning objectives by stepping into the fictional work of the students through the related drama strategies, in particular, teacher in role.

### **Analysis of findings**

This action research examines some of the ways in which students approach drama experience, ways in which they respond. Most senior Drama or Theatre Studies students (I call them drama students for I teach drama to them) are required to attend and then discuss, analyse or evaluate a range of performances. At this level there is an expectation that they will have acquired a language in which to do so, but this is not always the case. At all levels, students sometimes struggle to respond to theatre or drama performances even though they may have a strong reaction: "I really liked that ". "I really thought that it was not that interesting". They often need the tools to broaden their response.

That is why, teachers who use drama as a tool in their classroom can often cite "epiphanic moments" in which their understanding of their students and students' understanding of themselves and each other is radically altered. These moments that story-telling teachers share are key to our understanding of drama's special ability to shake up the social order of classrooms, redistribute power, and re-define the rules of the game.

In drama, the wearing of new identities in fictional worlds is the *modus operandi*. Students are invited to engage in the building of these worlds through analogy or simulation (Johnson and O'Neill , 1984), to role-play (Booth, 1994) to devise scenes (Neelands, 1990; O'Neill, 1995) and create alternate realities.

As Maxine Greene (1996) has reminded us, new voices, responsive to the talk of reflective practitioner, are becoming audible in education research and novel modes of participant observation in actual classrooms are asking practitioners to

think about their own thinking. In essence, this means that teachers can begin to explore beyond their own pedagogical boundaries by being creative at the same time.

Traditionally and formerly, a greater attention was paid to theory and little dedication was given to practical activities, role-playing, rehearsal or dramatisation of a situation or script or a poem to achieve the required level of language acquisition as well as aesthetic values in the classroom.

## Conclusion

Drama is a powerful way of fostering the use of creative methods and building capacities in the classroom. Therefore, the change taking place among students at the University was very real. My students reflected about their change in attitude towards social problems such as 'migration' which show the efficacy of using drama as a creative method in the classroom to foster learning and increase the students' awareness on different social issues. Conclusions are drawn in the end about the need to use drama as a method in solving problems, real life situations or difficult circumstances.

Whilst struck by the power inherent in working in role - how it engages emotionally, stimulates cognitively and creates a climate for greater understanding, you may find drama particularly useful in promoting the creative abilities of your students.

Being able to answer all the questions of the research, this qualitative study will be useful for foreign language teachers in their daily activities to turn drama into an everlasting teaching medium, to develop creativity by providing students with valuable information related to the perception of new concepts and methodologies.

Drama is used to improve their ability to speak and learn English in a professional and entertaining way.

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