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ABSTRACT

Using a format of frequently asked questions about teaching foreign languages using drama, this article explores the evolution of this approach, its benefits and drawbacks, and the various theatrical activities that can be used to teach languages. After describing how drama fits into the communicative approach to language teaching, the article discusses how the idea of drama in the language classroom developed from the 1970s to the present, also noting certain textbooks that can take advantage of what drama offers and other resources for language teachers. Benefits to using drama in language classrooms include acquiring and practicing new vocabulary and grammatical structures, lowering the affective filter, and learning the language because of practicing it with communicative activities in a real context. Potential drawbacks to this approach include students' backgrounds and skepticism, teachers' lack of preparation in this area, and perceptions that drama is not serious. Various theatrical activities that can be used include pantomime, jazz chants, role play and simulations, fairy tales and folk tales, improvisation, reading plays, watching or listening to plays, staging plays, and writing plays. There is some drama-related English as a Second Language computer assisted language learning software available. (Contains 37 references.) (SM)

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FAQs: Learning Languages Through Drama

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FAQs: Learning Languages Through Drama

SARAH L. DODSON, Colorado State University

Although drama has played a role in language classrooms for more than three decades, theatre techniques and plays have not been fully taken advantage of for learning second and foreign languages. Using a format of frequently asked questions about teaching with drama, this article will explore the evolution of this approach, its benefits and drawbacks, and a wide gamut of theatrical activities that can be used to teach languages. I hope to convince other teachers and graduate students in languages and education to try some of these techniques with their students.

HOW DOES DRAMA FIT INTO THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING?

In the communicative approach to language teaching, students use language for a purpose--to convey real meaning and to solve real problems. Drama is a communicative language-learning technique because it is student-centered and meaning-based. With theatre activities, students use language in a genuine way in a context that engages them. The idea of "theatre in the language classroom" encompasses everything from improvisation and role-play activities that encourage fluency, to reading and discussing plays as literature, to producing full-length plays that require careful attention to language and pronunciation while developing problem-solving skills in the target language.

HOW HAS THE IDEA OF DRAMA IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM DEVELOPED?

The use of drama in language classrooms is not a new concept; it has played a small but consistent role in language teaching in Britain and the United States since the 1970's. This section will very briefly trace the evolution of drama as a language-teaching tool.

1970's and 1980's

The early, most well-known advocates of drama in the L1 classroom were Heathcote (collected writings, 1984) and Bolton (collected writings, 1984), who encouraged teachers to integrate the theatre into all that they did. Bolton, in particular, championed the use of drama in classes for all subjects, making it "the centre of the curriculum." These ideas soon transferred to L2 practitioners and gained many proponents.

As early as 1973, in fact, Hines commented that drama, and especially role play, "has long been recognized as a valuable and valid means of mastering a language" (ii). Pioneers in the field of ESL/EFL include Via (1976), Maley and Duff (1982), and Smith (1984), who all published books based on their experiences as language teachers who have used drama in their classrooms. Their

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books are a mix of theory and practice. Via's students have acted in plays during his whole career as an ESL teacher. Smith speaks to practicing teachers and develops an analogy between L1 actors and L2 students as well as provides many communicative theatrical activities. Maley and Duff also collect myriad activities and offer advice on how to use them.

These authors are followed by more and more others who also encourage the use of drama in the language classroom. Wessels' *Drama* (1987) is a very practical book that provides rationale for using drama as well as a number of activities. She also offers suggestions of how a class might go about staging a play in the target language and describes one such experience that she had with a class. Porter Ladousse (1987) published a similarly useful book, hers devoted to role plays, with justification and many examples.

1990s-Present

Some professional books also discuss the theories behind theatre techniques and language learning. Half of the volume edited by Byram and Fleming (1998) is devoted to describing how teachers have used drama to promote cultural understanding and awareness among their students. In a different vein, Kao and O'Neill (1998) explain the technique and the merits of process drama, an extended role play activity that uses integrated skills to involve the whole class. Brauer (in press) has edited a volume about the connections among language, writing, and drama.

Books with practical drama activities for teachers continue to emerge as well. Whiteson (1996) is the editor of a volume of activities in the *TESOL New Ways* series written by practicing language teachers. These are games, lessons, and exercises that are based on theatrical techniques. Another book by Hess (in press), *All the World's a Stage*, will offer more suggestions of activities. Other general books for teachers also include suggestions for theatrical activities, like Woodward's *Fun With Grammar* (1996), written to accompany the Azar ESL/EFL grammar books. Rinvolucchi (1984) also has some creative ideas.

Textbooks

In the field of ESL/EFL, some textbooks take advantage of what drama can offer. Rathburn's *Taking Center Stage* (1997) is an advanced content-based text about the history of drama and plays that also encourages writing and acting. *The Play's the Thing* (1998), by Whiteson and Horovitz, is an intermediate text with a whole language approach to ESL/EFL, using short scenes from classic plays. Finally, the *Best Plays* (1998) anthologies are suitable for students of English and exist at three levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced), offering one-act plays and acts taken from full-length plays with unmodified language, including *Trifles*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and *Our Town*.

Other Resources for Professionals

After quickly exhausting this list of books about drama and language teaching, I must conclude that

most textbooks, SLA, and theory books for professionals, in the field of ESL/EFL, at least, don't pay enough attention to drama's prospects for language teaching and learning.

The outlook for other forums for professionals is similarly bleak. At the TESOL 2000 international convention, while there were nearly one dozen presentations listed in the program book about teaching with drama, only half of the presenters showed up. Professional journals like *TESOL Quarterly* and *The French Review* have published only a handful of articles about teaching with drama (see Dickson (1989), and Haggstrom (1992) for examples of teachers who have used drama to teach French); the *TESOL Journal* "Tips for Teachers" section has occasional descriptions about successful role plays and drama activities (see Ernst-Slavit and Wenger (1998) for an example).

Other forums that reflect what classroom practitioners are currently doing, like listserves, have not yielded much information recently either. However, a February 2000 discussion of role play on TESL-L offered suggestions of new ones to do with students, and it is worth noting is that these exchanges did not question the value of these drama exercises--each person who posted seemed to be a strong proponent of this type of activity. Suggestions for games that incorporate theatrical elements have also come up on TESL-L. On the other hand, no one has recently commented on drama as a technique. In fact, when I responded to a post asking for ideas of communicative activities by de-

scribing some drama games and requesting other suggestions, there were no responses to my message. FL-Teach, another popular listserve for teachers and professionals, also has not lately dealt with drama--the closest they get is discussing Total Physical Response Storytelling. When I posted to FL-Teach in the summer of 2000, asking for suggestions and advice for directing a play in French at a university, I received only one response, off-list. [To join TESL-L, send an e-mail to

listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu

and type "subscribe TESL-L Firstname Lastname" (don't type the quotation marks) in the message area. To join FL-TEACH, send an e-mail to

listserv@ubvm.cc.buffalo.edu

and type "subscribe FL-TEACH Firstname Lastname" (don't type the quotation marks) in the message area.]

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF USING DRAMA IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

The most immediately apparent benefit of using dramatic activities with L2/FL students is that they acquire and practice new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Equally important, the affective filter is lowered: increases in self-esteem, self-confidence, and spontaneity often result from theatre activities in the classroom, thus reducing inhibitions, feelings of alienation, and sensitivity to rejection (Via 1976, Stern 1980, Kao &

O'Neill 1998). Other psychological and social benefits include developing problem-solving skills, working well in groups, and taking more risks. Additionally, students explore variation of register and style, and develop conversational skills such as turn taking, topic changing, and leave taking.

Perhaps the most important facet of using drama in the language classroom, however, is at the core of all these ideas: the students are learning the language because they are practicing it with communicative activities in a real context. In drama, expressing and understanding is what is important. Moreover, students frequently come to better understand and appreciate the culture(s) of the target language. And overall, I would like to emphasize how much the students and teachers like it: most of my sources that discuss the theories behind this approach use the words "fun" or "enjoy" when describing it.

ARE THERE ANY POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS TO USING DRAMA IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM?

Why, then, has the majority of the language-teaching world not embraced drama as a language-learning technique? Some possible drawbacks, which I will refute or offer suggestions for mitigating, include students' backgrounds, teacher preparation, and the perception of drama as not serious.

Individual Differences

It is true that students differ widely in background, abilities, personality, confidence, motivation, and

expectations, and that acting in plays may not meet the needs of all the students all the time. However, this does not mean that certain drama activities cannot be useful teaching tools with many students. Theatre can be one component of a class that focuses on one aspect of the language, like grammar; it can be part of a content-based class, like role plays in a Business English course (see Rebscher (1998) for one example of this); it can be used to complement the plays studied in a college-level foreign language literature class; and it can be offered as a stand-alone integrated skills class. Making courses such as the latter optional, not mandatory, means that those who are not comfortable with the prospect of doing theatre do not have to sign up.

To help overcome students' fears of speaking and performing, I would suggest easing them into drama activities—don't require them to "act" in front of their peers with no preparation or no warning. You can begin with low-key activities, like pantomime games designed to elicit certain vocabulary words or key grammatical structures, and work up to activities that necessitate more language. Keep the class atmosphere supportive by applauding and complimenting and congratulating the students who participate. Create an environment where students feel comfortable discussing and volunteering, where they know that teachers and peers will not ridicule them when they make mistakes. In fact, you can thank them for making mistakes that lead to productive "teaching mo-

ments." Also, be aware of your student population when doing activities that require more physical interaction, for some students may be unable or unwilling to participate.

Teacher Background

Another argument that I hear from language teachers is that if they themselves are not actors and directors, there's no way they can teach their students to be. But you don't have to be an "actor" to lead your students in improvisation games or help them recognize good intonation when they read from a script. Besides, as teachers, we put on a show every time we are in front of our students, and the classroom becomes our stage.

Additionally, teachers who were not trained to teach communicatively may shy away from drama. But incorporating certain aspects of the theatre into your teaching does not require that you change your entire teaching philosophy—you just add new ideas to your "bag of tricks."

Student Skepticism

However, students may be as skeptical as their teachers about the benefits of drama in the language classroom. Because our students at first may not see it as learning, we need show them that it is fun but not unstructured. Highlight what they're learning all along—point out what skills, structures, language they're using. After the activity, you can do a "debriefing" session where you emphasize what they have learned and practiced.

Commotion in the Classroom

A final problem that I have heard people express about drama in the language classroom is that chaos and noise are inevitable. Well, so is laughter—and I don't see that as a drawback.

HOW CAN I USE DRAMA IN MY ESL CLASSROOM?

The first half of this article was designed to convince current and future language teachers to use drama in their classrooms. The second half will describe a number of different ways to integrate drama into your teaching, beginning with very simple activities and culminating in full-fledged theatre projects. This list is by no means comprehensive; it is limited to what I have used successfully as a teacher. And while the majority of these activities were carried out in an ESL setting (an intensive English program) with adults who plan to enroll in an American university, I believe they will carry over into other L2 and FL contexts.

Pantomime

Pantomime is a good place to start. Like the familiar party game of Charades, it is simple and fun because it is non-threatening to the student performing. He doesn't have to worry about speaking—it is his classmates who must produce the language. You can use pantomimes to elicit specific vocabulary and grammar from rest of class or to have other students describe what is being acted out, which encourages fluency.

Some examples of pantomimes that I have used in an intermediate grammar class include the following: differentiating verb tenses like the simple past and the past progressive (students mime actions like washing a car which suddenly starts rolling down a hill or washing a dog that suddenly bites) or the simple past and the past perfect (for example, the students act out a situation like "the child had already eaten all the cookies when Mom got off the phone"). These situations require that the students watching produce the correct verb tenses, formed correctly and used correctly to contrast with the others.

Jazz Chants

Jazz chants, popularized by Graham for ESL/EFL, certainly have dramatic elements; in fact, some are written as fairy tales to act out, some as role plays. Students seem to enjoy jazz chants, and they appreciate having a script to follow, which focuses their attention on the language, particularly supersegmentals. (See Graham (1991) and Graham (1993) for examples of dramatic jazz chants.)

Role Play and Simulations

Teachers seem to be very comfortable with role plays, traditionally using them to practice vocabulary appropriate to certain situations (i.e., in the airport, in a restaurant). But role plays do not need to be limited only to this function. They can illustrate different levels of register, for example, when students write or act out the same basic situation or conflict (such as trying to get an appointment with a

busy doctor) in two different ways—rude and ultra-polite.

Role plays also seem to lend themselves well to teaching modals. For instance, two students sit side-by-side in front of the class; one is learning to drive while the other is trying to teach her. As the driver asks questions (using modals) and makes mistakes, the teacher yells out what she's doing wrong and how to fix it (using modals). The class should be encouraged both to take note of which modals are used and to call out other pieces of advice to the driver. This can get quite lively, especially if the driver exaggerates her problems.

Moreover, role plays work well in reading and writing classes; they can be used to demonstrate comprehension of both fiction and non-fiction texts. A student (or a pair or a group) can assume the roles of the people they read about, while others ask questions and they respond in character. Or groups of students can act out what they have studied. The latter is especially effective with short stories that the students have enjoyed reading. When there are not enough roles to go around, the other students become key parts of the set, reacting to what is said, moving when appropriate.

I have also made short role plays required in my listening/speaking classes, where the students are supposed to study idioms. Each pair of students is responsible for choosing an interesting phrase that seems important and writing a very short skit that illustrates and uses the idiom. Their classmates then try to

identify the phrase and explain its meaning. When each class begins this way, it quickly becomes a ritual that we all look forward to.

Fairy Tales and Folk Tales

Fairy tales and folk tales easily turn into skits (which can be written and edited as well as acted out spontaneously) because they draw from stock characters and familiar plots. Perhaps fairy tales are best used with FL students who have a common background and common knowledge of these tales. For example, a group of my high school students in France first acted out "Cinderella" and "Hansel and Gretel," and then wrote a play that combined the two of them—to show after the "happily ever after"—and because these girls were enamored of American television, the conflict was solved when X-Files Agents Mulder and Scully intervened (and then Cinderella ran off with George Clooney). My ESL students, on the other hand, have read and acted out fables they studied in reading classes like "The Fox and the Crow." Grammar students have acted out "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" to emphasize the past perfect progressive ("Someone's been eating my porridge....").

Improvisation

Many theatre games that actors use lend themselves well to language classrooms. The emphasis is on fluency and creativity, little preparation or materials are needed, and depending on how much control the teacher allots to the students, the games can

be highly structured or very free. In an advanced listening/speaking class, my students did improv for an entire class period once a week, and clamored for more.

Most of the ideas I used were adapted from Maley and Duff (1982), Wessels (1987), and Spolin (1999). Icebreakers and warm-up activities with dramatic elements also worked well, as did simple games like Freeze and having the students invent advertisements selling an object in the classroom for a new purpose. (In Freeze, two players begin acting out a situation provided by the audience. It should involve a lot of movement. Another actor calls out "freeze!" and the two on stage stop moving. The third actor takes the place of one of them and begins a different scene, this one suggested by the positions of the actors.)

The activity that my students have perhaps liked the most is The Last Scene. The premise is that the students have walked onto a stage empty except for a table with six objects on it. The audience is still in their seats, and the actors must continue the play for them. The students must decide, based on the objects, what the play is about, what the title is, who the characters are, and how the play ends. After a short period to plan and rehearse, they present the last scene of the play.

Reading Plays

By "reading" plays, I mean both studying them as literature and reading them out loud. In many foreign language classes in the United

States, it is common to read a play, or scenes from a classic play, eventually. However, rarely is this play acted out, and rarely does this happen in the ESL classroom. Yet what better way to understand the beauty of the language than by participating in such carefully crafted dialogue, and how better to expose them to the culture? Additionally, Whiteson, a champion of drama in ESL, explains that "by introducing students to English drama and real literature, we pay them the compliment that they are capable of enjoying the best that English has to offer" (1996, p. 9).

And after reading and discussing plays, the class can move on to reader's theatre. In this activity, students sit on stools, script in hand, in front of the audience. Because they are not moving around, they must take care to make their voices very clear and expressive. This is a low pressure situation for the students, because they are not required to memorize lines or blocking, but it is still excellent for improving pronunciation and intonation. Students in my intermediate university French class who read *Merlusse* by Marcel Pagnol (1935) delighted in playing the roles of little boys and mean teachers.

Watching or Listening to Plays

It is important to encourage students to attend plays, at least in L2 environments, where it is easy to find plays in the target language. Field trips to theatres could also become part of a listening/speaking class or culture class, where the students must prepare questions, take notes, and

then write reactions. When a whole class attends a play together, it is likely that they could receive a backstage tour and an interview with some of the actors, or at least a group discount on the tickets.

When going to live theatrical performances is impossible, students still can get a lot out of watching on plays on video. They could watch plays they have studied or look at others as a basis for listening and speaking activities. Some plays are also available on audiocassette—Lucille Fletcher's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), for example, which was on the 1940's radio program *Suspense*, and Lou Spaventa's *Stranger in Town* (1992), which was written especially for ESL students and recorded by profession actors.

Scene Study

Scene study is another theatre activity that brings many benefits. This involves selecting and intensively studying short scenes, which are then presented before an audience. It requires much reading, discussion, and analysis as well as pronunciation practice with word stress, thought groups, and intonation. For the teacher who wants to do some kind of a performance with her students, the logistics are much easier than trying to find the perfect play at the correct level with the correct number of male and female parts; it is also easier, less time-consuming, and less daunting for a few groups of students to prepare a ten-minute scene than it is for one large group to rehearse a longer play. And the performances can be in

front of a paying audience in a theatre or in front of a group of peers. The French high school students I worked with really enjoyed picking out their own scenes and "directing" themselves with little input from me; then they memorized and performed in front of the others students in the English club. (See Bayoff (1986) and Fancy (1991) for descriptions of American and Canadian college students who did scene study in their French classes.)

Staging Plays

Staging plays is a large project that can be done with as many or as few bells and whistles as the teacher/director wishes. It can be a full-length production with lights, sounds, sets, costumes, and memorized lines in a theatre, or a one-act play done in a room with scripts in hand, depending on the context of the class and the time and money limitations. Producing plays in other languages has been described in Wessels (1987), Smith (1984), and Augot et al. (1993), but not recommended anywhere else that I've seen. However, I feel that the intensive work with language that ensues is very valuable, as is the pride that it instills in the students.

When I taught an ESL drama class, the culminating project was a performance of one of the plays we had studied. The students chose Edmond Rostand's *The Romancers* (1915), a one-act parody of the story of Romeo and Juliet. They had very positive reactions to the play: in a representative response on the teacher

evaluation, one student explained "I really enjoyed acting it was a big step for me. I feel that I gained confidence in Speaking and I am more enthusiastic and optimistic thanks to you." Another student remarked that "it is surprising that it is easier for [her] to play in English than in Japanese."

I am currently directing a play for a university French club: *La Cantatrice Chauve* by Eugène Ionesco (1954). After the two-month rehearsal period, it will be performed in French at a small salon-style university theatre with surtitles projected above the stage for the non-francophone members of the audience. All of the preparation—auditions, rehearsals, decisions about lights, sound, costumes, set, and props—takes place in French, and all the actors, techies, and translators receive independent study credit in French.

Writing and Staging Plays

Having the students create their own original play is not something that I've encountered in the literature, which is unfortunate, because it seems to be a very productive and exciting way to learn the language. If the thought of writing an entire play from scratch seems overwhelming, there are other ways to go about writing an original piece. For example, modifying stories or books into plays or skits is not too difficult, because the plot and characters (and frequently dialogue) already exist. For example, high school students I once observed at a French camp had written a short play about the characters from the comic strip "Peanuts." Students can

also write scenes that happen before the beginning of the play or in between acts to practice writing dialogue and doing character development. The students in my ESL drama class wrote whole acts to add to the end of *Stranger in Town*; they then modified the language and the ending of *The Romancers*, because they want to make it funnier and more accessible to other ESL students in the audience. They also changed the gender of most of the characters and created an entirely new character so that each student (all female) could have a part in the play.

Benefits of These Activities

Overall, all these techniques require that students communicate in English to succeed. At the same time, they are internalizing the language, improving intonation and pronunciation, and having fun. What's more, these activities can serve as a springboard to writing and to the other skills.

WHAT DIRECTIONS SHOULD DRAMA IN THE LANGUAGE-LEARNING CLASSROOMS TAKE IN THE FUTURE?

Research

While it would be hard to pin down the quantifiable benefits of doing plays and drama activities, I would like to see studies that try to examine psychological and linguistic results. My students in many different classes have responded favorably on their evaluation forms, but just saying "I liked the games" is not enough

proof that their language improved because of it.

Reading and Writing Plays

Students should not be deprived of the joys that drama can bring and of the great feeling of satisfaction that can come from creative writing. They should be allowed to take ownership of the language. Besides, one of the best ways to edit one's own writing is by reading it aloud, and drama is the perfect medium. When my students write scripts and act them out in groups, they frequently can hear when the grammar and punctuation is wrong, and they receive suggestions from peers of how to fix it.

CALL and Drama

Technology makes so much available that language teachers. And as more and more of our students are computer-literate, they expect to use technology in their language classes too. There is some drama-related ESL/EFL software, in fact: *Hollywood High* (1996) provides sets and characters, while students write dialogue that the animated characters on the screen speak; *Karaoke Conversation* (Bradin 1994) is listening software that enables students to record themselves taking part in an onscreen role play.

Besides software programs, there are film clips on the web, listserv discussions about the theatre, radio shows on audio files, research possibilities on the web, and much more. My ESL drama course had a web page and a class web forum where the students responded to the

plays we read and the activities we did. You are welcome to visit our page at the following address:

<http://lamar.colostate.edu/~sdodson>

Integrated Skills Drama Classes

I feel that the various language skills should not be taught separately, for it is rare that we as language users only employ grammar or only speaking or only writing. Drama is an ideal way to bring the skills of grammar, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and pronunciation together in a course where the focus is not on form but rather fluency and meaning.

"Language and pronunciation through theatre" is the ESL drama class that I taught at an intensive English program. In this course, students read and analyzed one-act plays; learned about the history and the conventions of American drama; toured theatres; attended plays; interviewed a playwright; explored improvisation activities; interacted with American students who volunteered in the class; and modified and performed a one-act play. All along, they wrote their reactions and ideas and their own scenes in a computer web forum journal, learning vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, and gaining fluency and confidence.

CONCLUSION

As a language learner and student of the theatre, I had always wanted to combine the two to help me practice the language, but could never convince my teachers of its merit. Therefore, when I began to teach, I

was determined to try it with my students. Through the activities I've done with these brave and creative students and through the research I've done on my own, I have come to see that theatre provides myriad ways for students to learn and appreciate language in meaningful, communicative contexts. I urge you to try it too!

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