Learning Through Dramatic Story Presentation

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Abstract

The use of story with dramatic presentation approaches produces an engaging and powerful instructional choice for today's adult ESL educators. Two engaging and timed-tested approaches are Reader's Theater and Tableau Vivant. Both provide English language learners with content tailored to their abilities in addition to numerable opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with language, content, and teachers and peers. This article examines dramatic story and its learning outcomes, as well as provides instructional guidelines for implementing two time-tested and appealing approaches to dramatic story presentation.

Introduction

Determining ways to more effectively educate adult English language learners continues to be an all-important pursuit in the 21st century. Among the numerous techniques and methods being examined, drama offers notable potential. Consistently, researchers report that the use of drama enhances learners' cognitive and affective development across areas of instruction (Fortney, 2010). More specifically, integrating drama into instruction is alleged to (a) improve students' performance in the four language domains (Podlozny, 2000); (b) facilitate the transfer of skills across activities (Chizhik, 2009); (c) boost student self-confidence (Wolf, 2005); and (d) promote community and cultural understanding (Wolf, 2005). Additionally, for English language learners in particular, dramatic activities pro-

vide engaging and vibrant ways to develop communicative competence through meaningful interactions with language, content, and peers (Fortney, 2010).

Given these noteworthy researched-based benefits, drama becomes an attractive instructional choice for ESL educators. However, knowing the value of dramatic activities and selecting and integrating drama techniques into the existing curriculum can be another matter altogether. Various questions may arise related to matters of practical implementation. This article addresses these probable queries by examining the desirable and numerable learning outcomes of dramatic story in addition to presenting foundational understandings and specific guidelines for implementing two time-tested approaches to the dramatic story presentation: Reader's Theater and Tableau Vivant.

Dramatic Story Presentation

Description and Outcomes

Story is one of the most ancient and elemental methods of teaching (Berryman, 2002). It originates from mankind's desire to communicate meaningful events. Story, as such, has universal appeal and form. Story's appeal stems from our innate attraction to narrative. Throughout the world, people are immediately drawn when they read or hear words like there once was… Story also has universal form in that stories from all cultures contain the same basic elements: (a) characters; (b) a problem to be solved or a goal to be reached; (c) actions taken to solve the problem or reach to the goal; and (d) some sort of resolution or conclusion. Story's universal aspects of appeal and form make dramatic story presentation an incomparably suitable instructional method for English language learners.

Throughout the ages in numerous cultures, the purposeful use of story has produced various and sundry outcomes including (a) entertainment; (b) impartation of knowledge, understanding and wisdom; (c) transmission of culture; and (d) formation of character and behavior. In today's ESL classrooms the use of story is a particularly powerful instructional choice in that it offers the same highly-desirable recreational, educational, cultural, and transformational outcomes. In addition to engaging and entertaining the listeners or readers, educationally, story fosters language and vocabulary development, refines and improves the use of all language domains, and promotes creative and critical thinking. Cultural outcomes involve transmitting cultural understanding and values, developing an inside story in a classroom of distinctively different outside stories, and weaving a community in which the individual can be showcased while having a satisfying sense of fitting in and belonging to the group (Dyson & Genishi, 1990). Story's transformational outcomes include fostering relationships, graciously conveying truth, and shaping character and behavior. In sum, the combining of story with dramatic activities produces a powerful dynamic in the instruction of adult English language learners.

Location and Selection of Stories

Locating and selecting an appropriate story is the initial step to integrating dramatic story presentation into instruction. For this, individuals and texts are obvious resources. Individuals include class guests identified by program directors, teachers or students. These personages are usually chosen for the intriguing nature of their stories and their notable story presentation ability. They serve as models for prospective student story tellers. Students and teachers are also rich resources for stories in that everyone has a personal story to tell as well as stories from their family and culture. Additionally, stories embedded in the class curriculum, class texts or pertain to class topics are particularly appropriate in that they align with the class goals and objectives and minimize teacher time and effort required to access a good story. Picture books are also a source for locating appropriate stories. These books have colorful and appealing pictures supported by text. Picture books not only present stories but also can convey subject matter information in story form. A picture book that presents the history of the Statue of Liberty in narrative form is an example. For story selection, certain guidelines are informative. Stories should (a) align with program objectives and student needs; (b) appeal to student interests; (c) be culturally relevant; and (d) possess a unified succession of events or actions that moves to its aim with directness. Once an appropriate story is located and selected the next step for integrating story into instruction is to choose an approach for dramatic story presentation.

Two Approaches to Dramatic Story Presentation

Reader's Theater

Reader's Theater is a rehearsed group presentation in which students convey meaning through dramatic

interpretative reading rather than the use of memorized scripts, acting, props, and costumes (Flynn, 2005; O'Neill, 2001). In Reader's Theater the voice becomes the main medium of expression supported by facial expression, simple gestures and sometimes visuals. Reader's Theater is a straightforward and easily-implemented instructional method because of the absence of script memorization, acting, props, and costumes is a straightforward and easily implemented. Although Reader's Theater can be used with expository text and other genre, stories are particularly appropriate and generally employed. Reader's Theater unfolds in three distinct stages: (a) preparation, (b) rehearsal, and (d) performance.

Preparation. Once an appealing story or excerpt from the story is selected, the text is usually read aloud by the teacher. Subsequently, from the story content, a script is written that will take between five to ten minutes to perform. Script writing can be done by the teacher or students with teacher guidance. Preparation for script writing begins with highlighting a copy of the story using different colors for identifying characters, dialogue, and any text appropriate for narration. Next, after considering the students' English language proficiency and reading levels, the highlighted story is used to develop the script. Scripts tailored to students' varying English proficiency and reading levels usually include a narrator, characters, and a chorus. Typically, the student with the highest English language proficiency and reading level is cast as the narrator. More than one narrator can be utilized. The narration sets the scene, introduces the characters and fills in the background for the dialogue. The characters read the dialogue. Dialogue can be revised or added to according to the abilities of the students reading the character parts. The chorus voices the story theme as a refrain. Students with minimal English language proficiency and/ or reading ability can join the chorus. With this kind of script tailoring and role casting, all students can participate with comfort and confidence. The final actions of preparation before rehearsal are (a) typing the script, (b) assigning roles, (c) providing students with copies of the script, and (d) having students highlight their parts in the script.

Rehearsal. Rehearsal is the stage of optimal teaching and learning. It begins with story and character analysis. Story analysis can be accomplished by using the acronym, C-SPAR, (**C**haracters-**S**etting; **P**roblem to be solved or goal to be accomplished; **A**ctions to solve the problem or accomplish the goal; and **R**esolution or conclusion. Through use of C-SPAR, students are acquainted with the essential elements of the story. The final step of the story analysis is determining the story's overall meaning, message, or theme in order to create a summary statement. For example, this story reminds us of the value of friendship. An analysis of the main characters follows the story analysis. One way to achieve this is to identify and discuss the main characters' appearance as well as significant thoughts and feelings. Next, students scan the script for words they may need assistance to understand the meaning or to orally read. When these words are collected, the teacher conducts a word study/vocabulary mini-lesson. This leads to rehearsing the script in a variety of ways until fluent, expressive reading is obtained. These multiple rereading provide adequate opportunity to refine language fluency and expression. This process begins by the teacher modeling reading the script emphasizing voice intonation, facial expressions, and gestures. Next, students echo read mimicking the teacher's presentation. Then students form dyads and read to each other as the teacher moves around monitoring and adjusting student performance. Finally, students stand or sit in a line to rehearse the complete script. At this point, if the technology is available, the teacher or one of the students video tapes the rehearsal. Using a checklist for assessment students self-assess their performance and determine areas for improvement. Recommended criteria for assessment include (a) Focus (concentration and posture); Diction (volume and articulation); Reading (attention to punctuation, accuracy, appropriate rate and phrasing, and appropriate expression through voice, facial expression, and gestures). The criteria can be rated by use of **W** (Well done) and **N** (needs improvement). A place for noting areas to improve should be included at the end of the

checklist. The teacher and students work together to improve the targeted areas in preparation for the performance for an audience.

Performance. Whether you have an audience of one of the school staff or of many friends and family members, all performers are motivated to do their best when an audience is present. Just as in the final rehearsals, participating students stand or sit in a line or semi-circle at the front of the room. A designated leader welcomes the audience to the Reader's Theater and declares the name of the story to be performed. Next, starting from left to right the performers introduce themselves. Finally, on signal from the teacher, the performance begins.

The benefits of Reader's Theater to English language learners far exceed the time and effort of teacher preparation. Once an appropriate and appealing story is selected, read aloud, and a story and character analysis conducted, the preparation of a script and assessment checklist tailored to student needs can be accomplished within an hour or two.

Tableau Vivant

Another approach to dramatic story presentation is Tableau Vivant. Tableau is a French expression meaning living pictures. In this dramatic form, groups of students freeze in place to create a scene representing a concept, theme, or pivotal events within a story (Fay & Whaley, 2004). Although in tableau the position of the body is the primary medium of expression, frequently, the voice is also involved through narration. The source of the commentary is a narrator or various members of the tableau who on signal respond individually or as a group.

Like Reader's Theater, content for tableau can include informational topics as well as poems and stories. In this article, the focus is the use of story. Some stories lend themselves to three tableaux portraying a distinct beginning, middle, and end while others are better expressed through one or more important events. As compared with Reader's Theater, tableau does not require as much time and effort on the part of teachers and students. Once an appropriate story is selected, read aloud, and a story analysis as described in the Reader's Theater section is conducted, the teacher or students with the guidance of the teacher decide how to convey important scenes through a living picture. The selfsame act of the physical formation of the tableau imprints its meaning in minds of the participants and observers. If narration is desired, the teacher or students with teacher guidance compose a simple commentary for the designated narrator or members of the tableau. For example, in a tableau on the story of the Statue of Liberty, the student representing the statue on signal and without moving would say, I am the Statue of Liberty. I stand am a symbol of freedom. I welcome immigrants to the United States. The signal can be given by the teacher or members of the class who are not participating can walk around the tableau and tap the shoulder of the participants as a signal for narration. As in a picture book, narration supports the visual image. Similar to Reader's Theater, narration can be tailored to student abilities in English language proficiency and reading skills. Typically, the commentaries are brief and straightforward so that any student can participate. If narration is employed, rehearsing for tableau is carried out with the same rereading activities as described in the rehearsal section of Reader's Theater. Interestingly, tableau can be used in conjunction with Reader's Theater; one can support the other. For example, while some students are performing a Reader's Theater, others can form a complementary tableau.

Conclusion

Story has a universal appeal and form. The combination of story with dramatic presentation produces an engaging and powerful instructional choice for today's educators. Dramatic story presentation results in numerous and desirable learning outcomes for adult English language learners. Chief among these outcomes are improved English language and reading ability, enhanced sense of community, and enriched cultural understandings. Two timed-tested approaches to dramatic story presentation are Reader's Theater and

Tableau Vivant. Both provide English language learners with content tailored to their abilities in addition to numerable opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with language, content, and teachers and peers. For these reasons and many others, Reader's Theater and Tableau Vivant are certain to promote and enliven learning in today's adult ESL classrooms.

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