# *BREAK A LEG!* THE USE OF DRAMA IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS. A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

*The use of drama techniques and activities in the classroom provides exciting opportunities for second language learners to use the language in concrete "situations". Besides, some research studies (Maley & Duff, 2001; Phillips, 2003) suggest that drama activities can promote interesting ways of motivating language learners and teachers. With drama we can play, move, act and learn at the same time (Phillips, 2003).*

*In this paper, I present the implementation of a drama project with primary students of English as a second language, together with several tools for its evaluation (diaries, video-recording, co-assessment, observation, field notes, etc.). A total of 40 pupils of the first year of Primary Education participated in the project. The activities presented have recently been tested on primary school language learners with some very positive and interesting results regarding learner autonomy, motivation and pronunciation. Some of the findings of this study could be extrapolated to the use of drama in other language teaching contexts and levels.*

Key words: drama, language teaching, EFL, primary school, young learners.

RESUMEN

*El uso de actividades y técnicas teatrales en el aula proporciona interesantes oportunidades a los estudiantes de segundas lenguas para usar la lengua en "situaciones" concretas. Hay varios estudios (Maley & Duff, 2001; Phillips, 2003) que demuestran que estas actividades pueden proporcionarnos interesantes formas de motivar a estudiantes y profesores. Con el teatro podemos jugar, movernos, actuar y aprender al mismo tiempo (Phillips, 2003).*

*En este trabajo, se muestra la puesta en práctica de un proyecto teatral con estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua, junto con varias herramientas para su evaluación (diarios, vídeos, co-evaluación, observación, anotaciones, etc.). Las actividades presentadas han sido probadas recientemente en estudiantes de primaria mostrando unos resultados muy positivos e interesantes en cuanto a autonomía en el aprendizaje, motivación y pronunciación. Algunos resultados derivados de este estudio se pueden extrapolar al uso del teatro en otros contextos y niveles de enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas.*

Palabras Clave: Teatro, enseñanza de lenguas, inglés como lengua extranjera, educación primaria.

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The use of drama activities has clear advantages for language learning regarding motivation, the use of the language in a context, teaching and learning cross-curricular content, etc. (Phillips, 2003). From the 60s onwards and overall in the last decades, drama has been increasingly taken into consideration in linguistic research and in the field of language learning. There are several studies that support the benefits of drama in foreign language learning, such as Maley and Duff (2001), Brumfit (1991) and Phillips (2003), to mention just a few. Furthermore, nowadays there are a great amount of materials available to teach languages through drama techniques. Some of these are Di Pietro (1987), Holden (1981), Kao & O'Neill (1984) and Phillips (2003).

Many teachers may see drama as a troublesome thing to implement because they think of drama as the performance of a play and all its obstacles (stage, time to rehearse, noise, ...). However, thinking of drama or theatre in language learning as a professional performance is an error. Drama is not only performance; this is just the final product of a whole learning process. Teachers need to notice that drama:

- Allows learners to become actively involved in the text and be active participants in the teaching and learning process as drama activities follow a learner-centred approach.

- Is a motivating activity because it is fun and learners get actively involved and work in pairs or groups; if learners are motivated, their affective filter (degree of anxiety) is low (Krashen, 1984), they are relaxed and they will acquire the language almost without effort. Motivation encourages greater effort from language learners and usually leads to greater success in terms of language proficiency (Gardner, 1994).
- Allows the use of language with a clear purpose and in a specific context, and being contextualised, its content becomes more relevant for learners, fostering meaningful learning.
- Helps shy students to speak in class because they can hide behind the character they are performing. Simulations, role-playing and mime contribute to giving confidence to language learners.
- Helps language learners with their pronunciation, acquisition of new vocabulary items, fluency and with the familiarisation with the target culture fostering interculturality.
- Involves the development of the four linguistic skills integrated (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and what is more important, it fosters interaction and the negotiation of meaning among learners.
- Develops social and interpersonal skills, stimulates imagination, cooperation, creativity, critical thinking, discipline, learning autonomy, etc.

However, apart from all the advantages drama has, there are some authors who referred to several disadvantages of drama such as Richards & Rodgers (1986); they mention the artificiality of the language used in the classroom, the difficulty of monitoring these activities, the possible frustration of shy students, cultural bias (not everyone is used to learner-centred activities) among others.

From my viewpoint, these disadvantages can all be solved with an appropriate attitude from the teacher, planning carefully the lessons and being ready to be flexible. The language used in the classroom may not have to be artificial if it means something for the learners and if it is useful. If drama activities are noisy it is because learners fully

participate in them. Monitoring drama activities need not to be so difficult if we keep our students motivated and seeing the purpose of the activity. Teachers have to be careful when choosing the roles; they must help learners to select the appropriate role for each of them in order not to allow shy students to frustrate. The teacher himself/herself must be convinced of the effective use of these activities if s/he wants to encourage students to have a positive attitude towards these innovative ideas in language learning.

## 2. PROJECT

This section will examine the drama project implemented with two equivalent groups of children from Primary Education in the English classroom. It consists in a didactic unit to learn vocabulary items related to body parts through drama. With group A I developed a didactic unit based on a simple play adapted to their level and with group B I used several drama activities and techniques to support the existing planning. The implementation of the unit in group A took seven sessions of 50 minutes each; in group B we dedicated six sessions to drama techniques because we did not video-record their activities, they received feedback during the lessons.

The present paper presents a study conducted with Galician primary students in order to determine how useful drama can be to teach and learn a foreign language. I hope this study will help teachers overcome the obstacles encountered when using drama techniques in the language classroom.

### 2.1 Method

I followed a learner-centred and eclectic methodology taking ideas from different teaching methods[1] and theories[2].

In this project, the four linguistic skills have been worked upon in an integrated way: children listened to oral texts in class, they re-elaborated the original text, reading it and writing a new one, and they spoke a lot while they rehearsed and performed the play (group A) or do the drama activities (group B).

The evaluation of this project has been continuous, global, formative and integrating as the Education Act 2/2006 (LOE) states. To evaluate students the teacher used a diary in which she has taken notes of the learners' difficulties and progress. Children also evaluate their own performance in the L2 (self-assessment), they received feedback from both their partners and the teacher (co-assessment) and also after the performance when they watch themselves acting in English.

## 2.2 Subjects

They are students of the first year of Primary Education. They have been in contact with the L2 since they are three years old thanks to the Early Foreign Language Learning Policy (Anticipación de la Lengua Extranjera en Educación Infantil).

They make up two mixed-ability groups. Group A consists of 18 students and group B consists of 23. They are all in the same situation and spent the same time learning English.

## 2.3 Didactic Unit "Where is my baby?" (Group A)

In this section I present a practical example of the use of the methodology explained in the previous sections. This unit of work has been designed for 18 children with a beginner level of English, between 6 and 7 years old (group A). It has been developed in 7 sessions of 50 minutes each (once a week).

The main objectives of this didactic unit read as follows:
- Get familiar with drama activities and use them to develop the four linguistic skills and learn vocabulary items related to body parts and interrogative structures (Where is ...? Is that your ...?).
- Foster creativity and imagination, encouraging students to be spontaneous and improvise.
- Develop performance skills and speaking in front of an audience, acting from a script, helping them to overcome stage fright.

- Build self-confidence among students; they perform in a non-competitive setting where there are no stars, everyone has a chance to shine.
- Develop cooperation and collaboration working in groups, together with autonomous learning.

The resources needed to implement it were basic materials that can be found in any school: the textbook, cartoon paper, glue, stapler, scissors, a digital camera and a photocopier. The selected play resulted from an adaptation of a story present in the learners' textbook; therefore, it is adapted to their linguistic and cognitive level. The original text has been modified attending to the children's suggestions and preferences. The text was chosen because the students already knew it from their textbooks and it contained vocabulary items related to body parts, which they were studying at that moment. Furthermore, it has a repetitive structure which helps the memorisation of lines.

The sessions of this unit have been divided into three stages:
- Beginning (session 1): introduce theatre, familiarise children with drama, simulation and role play, check their previous knowledge and their prejudices towards drama techniques and reach an agreement regarding rules of work during the unit (concentration, cooperation, communication).
- Middle (sessions 2 to 5): warm-up activities to work body language, voice and so on; working with the text, adaptation of the original according to the children's preferences, listen to, read and re-write the text; assignation of roles; familiarisation with the characters searching information about them in the Internet; creation of masks for the performance; rehearse and learn the lines.
- End (sessions 6 and 7): performance and video-recording; feedback watching the performance.

During these stages the teacher took notes in her diary about the students' progress and their difficulties in order to evaluate everything.

*2.4 Drama activities (Group B)*

This section presents an analysis of the activities used with group B:

1$^{st}$) Introduction (1 session): warm up activities to introduce students to drama techniques and familiarise them with these activities in order to overcome cultural bias and know learners' previous ideas about them.
- Shaking hands: Students will go round the classroom shaking hands to their mates, as much as they can during ten minutes.
- Simon says: children obey the commands of the teacher when she says first "Simon says". For example: *Simon says touch your arms (children who do not touch their arms will lose one turn); bend your knees (those who did bend their knees, lose one turn); ...*

2$^{nd}$) Make a monster (1 session):
Aims: Learn vocabulary of body parts and listen for detail.
Description: The children work in groups of 6/7. The teacher describes a monster which the children make between them with their bodies.
Preparation: Prepare the descriptions of the monsters, example: *make a monster with two heads, three arms, one leg and a tail.*

3$^{rd}$) Listen and mime (2 sessions):
Aims: listen to a story and listen for specific words and phrases; use actions to illustrate a story.
Description: Children listen to a story, and do actions as they hear the body parts.
Preparation: Choose the story, introduce it to the children, select key words for the story (body parts) and think of gestures to illustrate them. Tell the story to the students illustrating it with the gestures at the same time, ask them to stand up in a circle to see you. Ask the students to listen to the story and do the appropriate action each time they hear the key word. Retell the story in the next session to consolidate.

4th) Telling a story with finger puppets (2sessions): (one session to listen to the story and make the puppets and another session to listen to it again and retell it with them).

Aims: practise vocabulary related to the family, act out a story with finger puppets, co-operate in retelling it.

Description: the teacher tells a story with big flashcards illustrating it. Children make the finger puppets themselves from a model provided by the teacher and act out their own version of it.

Preparation: choose the story and provide the model to do the puppets so that the students only have to colour, cut and paste.

These activities were adapted from Phillips (2003) and were included in the lesson plan already existing in order to enrich it. Each activity was carefully introduced and preceded by a review of the vocabulary items used in the activity.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

From this experience, I am glad to say that children were able to work fairly independently at times. This allowed me to stand back and observe the working relationships and dynamics within the groups and take notes. I could observe an important improvement of listening and speaking skills: students listened attentively to their mates while rehearsing to be ready for their turn. I was surprised to see that some of the students improvised greatly. I have to say that all the students were very keen on playing a role, so I did not have problems of cultural bias; they were motivated and they liked the experience. Moreover, acting exercises helped students understand and use body language.

I did different things with the two groups in order to show that using drama in the classroom does not necessarily mean preparing the performance of a play with the students, but it can also be enriching the textbook with activities involving drama techniques. Actually, this study did not show any significant difference between the two groups

regarding motivation, learning improvement, confidence or group dynamics. Both groups showed very positive results.

Some teachers feel frightened about group work and drama activities because they think that everything can get out of hand. However, with careful preparation and planning, things should not get out of hand. The main danger is over-enthusiasm on the students' part, leading to noise and confusion, as everyone tries to make themselves heard at the same time. The teacher has to show firm control over potentially problematic moments such as furniture shifting and group rehearsal; and clearly state the aims and method of the project. The possible obstacles of drama activities can be minimized if the teacher has a good lesson planning, all we have to do is give clear instructions to the students and reach an agreement with them establishing some rules of behaviour in the classroom. Teachers need to believe in the efficiency of drama techniques in order to transmit that to their pupils.

The need to use more drama techniques in the teaching and learning of languages is clear. It not only follows the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, but also any kind of modern method or approach to language teaching. Through drama, we can teach communicative competence and its subcompetences (Canale & Swain, 1980), we can foster interculturality and teach cross-curricular topics, among many other things already mentioned.

The use of theatre in education has got a lot of benefits for students overall, but also for teachers. There is an exchange of ideas between the teacher and the students. Learners are active participants in the teaching and learning process. They negotiate the meaning and the kind of input received. Collaborative work is promoted and this helps to lower the students' affective filter and reduce frustration. Learners' multiple intelligences are involved and the quantity and quality of language learnt or memorised is increased. Using the language in a context, the learners can see the meaning and the purpose of it and are more motivated. With a high level of motivation, the learning process takes place almost unconsciously and better because the affective filter is low, being more like the acquisition process. If the student is motivated, s/he will learn more, and if s/he learns more, s/he will be more satisfied and will show more

confidence in his/her learning capacity. It is like a chain, one thing leads to the other.


NOTES:

[1] The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Total Physical Response (TPR)

[2] Krashen's Affective Filter hypotheses, Vygotsky's socio-cultural concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory

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