

Language learning through drama

Nuriye Degirmenci Uysal*, PhD Student, Graduate School of Educational Sciences, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Canakkale, Turkey

Fatih Yavuz, Assistant Professor, ELT Department of Necatibey Education Faculty, Balikesir University, Balikesir, Turkey

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Abstract

This study presents a review of the literature regarding the impact of drama on dimensions of second/foreign language learning. The paper first discusses the importance of integrating drama into the second/foreign language learning process and the role of teachers and students in the learning process. Then, after introducing the pedagogical and linguistic aspects of using drama techniques in the language classroom in a broader perspective, it focuses on the drama-oriented verbal and nonverbal exercises. Next, the paper reviews the studies on the language learning through drama and concludes that using drama in language teaching would facilitate emotional and social development in addition to language development of students while it points out that the number of studies on the issue is limited.

Keywords: Grammar instruction, teachers' attitude towards grammar, foreign language teaching.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Nuriye Degirmenci Uysal**, PhD Student, Graduate School of Educational Sciences, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Canakkale, Turkey. E-mail address: nuriyedeirmenci@balikesir.edu.tr Tel.: +90 286 218 0018

1. Introduction

A language is barely comprised of sounds and letters but it also embodies ethos and cultural elements. These features of language push us to teach or learn the language in the social milieu. New technological developments make interactive learning possible by creating a virtual environment to only a little extent. Therefore, one of the most convenient ways of practicing in the target language is using drama activities in language classrooms. Drama can be defined as the activities which students portray themselves or act out as another person in an imaginary scenario. In other words, 'drama is concerned with the world of 'let's pretend'; it asks the learner to project himself imaginatively into another situation, outside the classroom, or into the skin and persona of another person' (Holden, 1982, p. 1).

Learners are encouraged to engage in a conversation in improvisational dramas. Drama also makes it possible for learners to express their ideas and emotions through gesture and facial expressions. Drama gives learners a purpose to exchange language and provides them an imaginary scene in which they feel free to act and impersonate by experimenting a wider range of language rather than repeated drilling of decontextualised language patterns (Brauer, 2002). In addition, drama includes 'a wide range of oral activities that have an element of creativity present' (Hubbard et al., 1986, p. 317). Therefore, drama contributes to the development of thinking (Barnes, 1968; Britton, 1970; Moffett & Wagner, 1992). As Langer (1957, p. 57) puts it, 'Imagination is the primary talent of the human mind, the activity in whose service language has evolved'.

It is significant to incorporate drama into the language learning process as it promotes contextualised and authentic language use in a low stress and positive environment. Therefore, drama cultivates the development of learner's emotions, social skills and participation in the community by providing a more holistic view of foreign language learning. It boosts communicative competence and emotional and social growth. Learners tend to appreciate and understand the target language's culture and feel more motivated and enthusiastic. The drama-oriented verbal and nonverbal exercises encourage the learner to speak spontaneously, think in a more complex way and use body language since this kind of exercises offer language in a meaningful context and comprise vocal, physical and cultural, as well as intellectual components of communicative competence. It combines verbal and nonverbal elements by correlating speech with the actions (Ronke, 2005).

Drama frees the students from time and place and makes it possible to 'walk in the shoes' of another (McCaslin, 1996). Therefore, it is a great opportunity to develop empathy and build social awareness. Drama is dynamic in nature; it recycles new vocabulary constantly and appeals to different intelligences, including visual/spatial and bodily/kinaesthetic intelligence. The learners show empathy, take turns, make decisions and work in a team. It encourages taking responsibility and leadership roles (Boudreault, 2010). It also improves their self-confidence in learning the target language and in the classroom activities (Wessels, 1987). In classrooms where the teachers do not create a repressive atmosphere, the learners feel that they are respected and valued and that they can contribute to the whole (Barnes, 1968). 'Drama demands enthusiasm not only for the lesson but also for the students. And this, in turn, depends on the formation of a relationship of mutual trust in which neither teacher nor student feel 'at risk', but they willingly change roles and status to achieve the aims of the lesson' (Wessels, 1987, p. 15).

Considering the pedagogical and linguistic aspects of using drama in the language classroom, teachers may use certain types of drama techniques such as improvised language games, mime, role play and simulations. These activities can be organised around four main skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, pronunciation and articulation games are best to teach the sounds as well as the correct rhythm and intonation (Dubrac, 2013). Besides, vocabulary exercises make words and phrases more memorable accompanied with gestures in drama-oriented activities (Sambanis, 2013; Schiffler, 2012) and grammar can also be integrated into the drama by using movements to illustrate grammatical aspects (Lapaire, 2006). Furthermore, drama helps the learners

cope with linguistic deficiencies by promoting their nonverbal communication strategies. They tend to utilise their body language when they feel inadequate in expressing themselves linguistically. Linguistic incompetence in the target language restrains their thoughts and ideas, so drama goes beyond the bounds of linguistic expressions (Liu, 2002).

Drama improves the students' cognitive growth and develops thinking, oral language, reading and writing. It also improves the role taking which leads learners to steer away from an egocentric stage of development in Piaget's terms (Brauer, 2002). In her book *Educational Drama and Language Arts*, Wagner (1998) points out the requisite of using drama in language classrooms and presents the compilations of studies of drama. She suggests that drama has an effect on reading, by improving story recall, comprehension and vocabulary. It also improves thinking and correlates with the improvement of speaking. Moreover, Parks and Rose (1997) have conducted a number of research studies with 20 drama lessons within the Whirlwind Program in Chicago. They have found that portraying the characters and acting out the stories help the students in grades K-8 to improve their drama skills and more significantly their reading skills (Beeler, 1999).

As for the role of the teacher, while the students are working in groups for their roles, the teacher moves around the classroom and encourage the students to take risks, express their ideas and feelings, and use their gestures and body language. The teacher guides the students and helps if necessary without interrupting them. The teacher should welcome mistakes during the process and correct them after the drama-oriented exercises (Ronke, 2005). 'There is no value in interrupting an activity to correct mistakes when they can be corrected afterwards' (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, p. 100). In drama-oriented exercises, students should feel free to express themselves in a positive classroom ambiance. The teacher is not supposed to interfere with the flow of speech so that the students can be comfortable in communicating in the target language. In addition, the teacher should be facilitative, constructive and flexible with new ideas in drama-oriented activities. S/he should take the students' needs into consideration, embrace challenges and organise the activities so as to include every student. Although the students participate in the drama-oriented activities voluntarily, the teacher may encourage the students, especially the shy ones, to take part in by presenting a good warm-up or adjusting the roles for them (Ronke, 2005).

All in all, a number of studies support the effectiveness of drama in facilitating the learning of a foreign language (Blanch, 1974; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Erdman, 1991; Gaudart, 1990; Geffen, 1998; Kishimoto, 1992; Masson, 1994; Miller, 1986; Ralph, 1997; Welkner, 1999; Wilburn, 1992) and some articles overview the benefits of drama in language teaching, including Sam (1990), Boudreault (2010) and Royka (2002). However, there are a limited number of empirical studies on the effects of drama in language teaching. One of the studies analysed drama from a psycholinguistic perspective (Stern, 1983), while another study compared various dimensions in the different educational environment (Gaudart, 1990). Moreover, O'Gara (2008) investigated the effect of drama activities on the acquisition of verbs and Kao and O'Neill (1998) analysed the development of oral competency in relation with the drama-oriented activities (Giebert, 2014).

As this paper has outlined, the drama is efficacious in acquiring both linguistic and non-linguistic competences in language learning. While it highlights the listening and speaking skills, drama-oriented exercises can also be designed to teach grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and the culture of the target language. The role of the teacher in the drama activities is different from the traditional one. The teacher collaborates with the students and guides them without interrupting too much before and during the activities. The teacher is facilitator and counsellor and encourages them to express their ideas and emotions beyond their linguistic boundaries. Lastly, many studies show the benefits of drama in language learning and show different aspects of using drama in language classrooms. However, it is found that there is still a lack of empirical studies on the effect of drama exercises on foreign language learning.

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