Using drama to motivate EFL students: Building classroom communities and student identities

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Drama motivates EFL students, develops a classroom community, and helps students become aware of identities. This paper aims to introduce EFL teachers to a series of drama activities that can be used with dialogues typically found in language textbooks. These activities demonstrate the goals and benefits of the drama approach in language education. It is also hoped that this paper will assist language teachers in employing drama activities in their own teaching.

　ドラマは、教室コミュニティを促進し、英語学習者の学習動機の向上とアイデンティティの意識化を助ける。本稿は、教科書に多く見られる典型的なダイアローグを用いたドラマ活動の一つを紹介する。本稿は、言語教育におけるドラマ・アプローチの目標と利点を示し、教師がそれぞれの教育において、どのようにドラマ活動を含めることが出来るかを考える一助になるであろう。

Many English teachers in Japan encounter the challenge of teaching classes with shy and reserved students. Not all Japanese students are quiet, but typically a great number do not want to stand out in the classroom. Unfortunately, this limits opportunities to use English and communicate with each other. How can teachers help these students become more confident and motivated when communicating in English? Introducing drama is one approach to overcome this challenge.

This paper aims to introduce EFL teachers to the benefits of the drama approach in language education, and help them adapt the approach to their own teaching situations by presenting an outline of our workshop. The paper includes a brief review of the background to drama in language education, descriptions of drama activities presented at the workshop, and a pedagogical discussion of how to further develop the use of drama in language teaching.

Background

Drama can be defined in different ways. We adopt Holden's (1981) definition of drama: Drama is any activity that requires a student to be in an imaginary situation or be another person in an imaginary situation. By introducing drama-based activities, EFL teachers can provide a *genuine* context for communication and make the target language more real.

Drama differs from theatre. Drama is a process rather than a product. With this educational approach, we do not expect students to perform a stage play, but we would rather expect them to utilize their learned knowledge to communicate in meaningful ways. Holden (1981) says, "The students have the opportunity to experiment with the language they have learnt, and the teacher has a chance to see how each person operates in a relatively unguided piece of interaction" (p. 8).

Drama in language education has developed from drama in education, which emerged in the 1950s and 60s in the U.K. (see Yoshida, 1996 for a review). English courses with this approach typically begin with physical activities and then progress to improvisation using drama conventions.

For some students, improvisation is easier than working with scripts because improvisation does not require memorizing lines. Students are free from texts, so they can use their own words and present more natural nonverbal cues. They can also create a context with their imagination. For these reasons, improvisation is successful with students in an English course with a drama theme (Kusanagi, 2006). However, we have found that students in regular English classes tend to feel uneasy with such activities due to their lower expectations of learning English in a progressive way. In these cases, teachers should use scripts because students consider role play to be a normal classroom activity.

Holden (1981) states that "a play reading exercise often remains at a very superficial level and does not really achieve much more than a silent reading can, unless it is approached systematically" (p.59). However, Holden also claims that using texts:

- increases awareness of the extent to which words and gestures are closely linked

- prepares students for the sudden shifts in subjects and theme which occur in normal speech

- provides a focus for variations in register and the interplay of character and personal relationships

- accustoms students to interpreting the meaning of written language which should, in turn, be extended to their understanding of non-dialogue types (p. 59)

To maximize benefits for students' learning, selection of materials is critical. According to Holden (1981), the text must:

- be short

- contain language which is controlled in some way and yet not arid

- focus on topics of genuine interest to foreign language learners

- be conceived in terms of communication through both words and movement (p. 60)

Ladousse (1987) argues the benefits of using a script as follows:

> Role plays that are practiced, learnt by heart, and performed to other students are no longer role plays, but have become dramatic performance. Role play should be concerned with the process of playing a part, rather than the finished product (p. 10)

Whichever direction teachers take, the drama approach offers many benefits in language education. Drama directs students' awareness of how people communicate in different communication modes and improves communicative behaviors (Via, 1976). Drama also helps students develop their English abilities: speech acts (Via, 1976), pronunciation and intonation (Stern, 1983), and discourse strategies (Scacella, 1978). Students improve their language and communication skills because drama provides a *genuine* context for communication and makes the target language more real (Dougill, 1987).

Another key point is that students' identities and the identities of the persons in the drama co-exist. Students are able to observe themselves as they work. Identity, in terms of role, allows students to lower their anxiety (Stern, 1980, 1983; Via, 1976). Errors, therefore, are not made by students but by the identity of the roles they are playing. Nevertheless, students can claim successful performances as their own.

Non-threatening classroom environments affect students' attitudes about and motivation toward learning; they build self-confidence. All of these positive psychological effects help create good classroom communities. Students work together to complete tasks, and this creates a bond between them (Kusanagi, 2006). In addition, they become aware of other communities or cultures (i.e., the English speaking community) and can compare and contrast these communities with their own.

Workshop

The workshop began with a series of activities for scripted performance acted by participants. We designed the workshop as an actual lesson, with short feedback times between the activities, so that participants could experience firsthand how to approach drama in the classroom. The workshop closed with a discussion about the purposes of the activities, how they tapped into learning, and the possible outcomes in participants' own teaching situations.

Warm-up

We began with participants reading through simple dialogues (see Appendix) and used the script during the rest of the workshop. The situations in the dialogues were easy to work out, and the language used was very basic. One of

the workshop leaders read the dialogues aloud, asking the participants to repeat. Then the call-response was varied until participants were more comfortable and relaxed with the text.

In drama sessions, we feel it is always important to provide as much security for learners as possible. Drama can demand real-time responses to situations, and learners are being asked to give a lot of energy and commitment to the activity. For these reasons, it is very important learners are reassured that they will not be pushed beyond their capabilities, and that their efforts will be respected. The introductory activity establishes a safe environment and provides students with a normal classroom activity.

English script

After the warm-up activity, a few context questions were asked to clarify the meaning and structure of the text. Understanding the context encourages participants to express the characters' feelings in a confident manner. Participants were divided into groups and given roles. Assigning groups and roles is important because in our experience, no matter the age of the participants, if groups and roles are not assigned, too much time is spent negotiating which roles will be played by whom and who will be in which group. This is time that can be more productively spent negotiating the texts, and so the groups and roles are assigned by the instructor. This is done, for example, by asking the learners to stand in a line and telling them the group member nearest to the window/door/curtains will play a certain role and that the person next to them will play a certain role.

Adjectives

When participants had read through and got comfortable with their roles, we elicited and wrote on the board a list of adjectives to describe personalities. We then asked each participant to choose an adjective. When they had selected an adjective, we asked them to exchange adjectives with their group members. The reasoning behind this is that often participants choose adjectives that they can easily do. By asking participants to exchange adjectives, we give them a little more of a challenge. We chose adjectives as an entry point because though they can be fairly basic lexis, they can powerfully impact interpretation of the drama.

Preparation

The groups were then asked to rehearse a presentation of the text. They were given a clear time limit and the rule that at no time during the preparation of the text were they to sit. The time limit pushes learners to take risks and leads to greater creativity. It is important to judge carefully whether it will be more fruitful to push learners, and the necessary information can be gleaned by monitoring the progress of their preparation. The prohibition against sitting is to make sure that any discussion of the text has a physical element to it. When learners are sitting they are more likely to discuss verbally. When they are standing they are more likely to demonstrate and discuss physically, and that is the essence of drama.

Presentation

When the workshop groups had completed their preparation, they were asked to watch other groups' presentations and to guess which adjective each group member had chosen. The resulting presentations were enjoyable, and the adjectives were easily guessed by the other groups. A discussion followed on how interpretations of the roles were changed enormously by choosing the adjectives. Consequently, the slant of the story was also altered significantly. Everyone agreed the presentations improved the stilted nature of the original texts.

Spatial relationships

Selecting adjectives for the roles had altered the physical and verbal expressions of participants, and we now moved on to explore spatial relationships. We asked one of the groups to go through their presentation again. At certain points we asked them to freeze-frame the action. We then asked the other participants to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships between the characters and how those were expressed through spatial relationships. Consciousness-raising of spatial relationships gives learners a strong way to explore the structure of their communication.

Fast forward

Groups were then asked to imagine their characters 1 year into the future. What would happen to their relationships? Would they still all be in the same place, or would they be coming back together? The participants threw themselves into this activity with a lot of invention and enthusiasm. With this activity learners slowly move away from the platform of scripted interaction towards a freer form of presentation.

Discussion and conclusion

The workshop focused on one simple technique for using drama in the language classroom. The technique is to supply students with adjectives to present while delivering a text. When this technique is used, the actors in a language classroom usually focus much more on the presentation of the adjective than on the language. The focus is placed on the presentation of the adjective because it is often perceived as the easier option.

The focus on the adjective can mean that the interpretation of the text is fairly rough. However, because of the change of focus, students are distracted from some of the anxieties they may have about speaking English. Consequently, students' confidence in their spoken English fluency increases, as in "I spoke English and I didn't even have to think about it." The positive feedback loop that ensues increases students' motivation. Later work can be done to focus on accuracy.

Simply by putting the text on its feet there is a leveling of the playing field for students. Those who prefer to express themselves verbally in English can bring their skills to the drama, and those who are more kinetically aware can bring those skills to the task. Everyone can contribute, whether they are in only one of those groups or straddle them both. The nature of the drama activity helps each student find their level of competence within it. Consequently, all students are equally competent at drama, and the feeling of competence increases motivation.

This feature of drama in education can have a very positive effect on the identity and motivation of students. It also encourages them to positively review the identities that they have previously given to their fellow students. In this way, the classroom learning community is strengthened.

The technique that we used can help students further develop their understanding of texts. By experimenting with different adjectives, they can discover new meanings and ideas within texts. This is true of any text. The experiment can be used to explore characters' inter-relationships as well as various text settings. As different adjectives are used, the nuances of the language can also be emphasized. Work on meaning and pronunciation can easily and effectively be done using this technique. How this is done and to what level will depend on the age and educational level of the students.

Furthermore, introducing the fast forwarding technique can deepen the interest in and understanding of the characters in the story. By setting the parameters of the story, teachers can introduce various lexical items that may be required by the curriculum they are teaching (e.g., who meets, where they meet, and how they meet).

It is a good idea to set parameters for the story or some students may suggest that the characters now find themselves, a year later, in the midst of an interplanetary war fought with giant sharks. Also, it is a good idea to set parameters on time and stick to them. The groups that have nothing to show because they have wasted time will know better next time. Of course, if the group is experiencing genuine difficulties, times can be surreptitiously extended.

There is a wide range of ways that the adjective technique and fast forward technique can be developed. Written work can be done describing the characters, or scripts can be written and presented based on what happens. Interviews can be recorded in role. Diary entries of different characters can be written and compared. The application of the two techniques and the follow-up work can be done on any text, whether it is a dialogue or a story.

Lastly, the verbal and written feedback that we received indicated that the workshop had been helpful. One participant wrote, "I found it very useful because it's an easy enough exercise to put into practice in any classroom—first or second language!" She added that she would be using the ideas from the workshop with her junior high school class.

Drama is a highly flexible and useful tool that is enjoyable for teachers and students alike. When introduced with care by teachers, drama allows students of various of ages and linguistic abilities to develop their skills in a way that is challenging and fun at the same time.

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Appendix

Dialogues (Adapted from *Genki: An integrated course in elementary Japanese*, p.73) Translated into English by the authors

Scene 1

Mary: Excuse me. Where is McDonald's?

Stranger: It is in front of that department store.

Mary: Thank you.

Scene 2

Mary: I'm home.

Host father: Welcome home. How was the movie?

Mary: I didn't see it. Takeshi didn't come.

Host father: Oh, why?

Mary: I don't know. So, I went to a bookstore and a temple alone.

Host father: Were there a lot of people?

Mary: Yes. I took many pictures at the temple. I also went to a department store. Here's a souvenir.

Host father: Thank you.

Scene 3

Takeshi: This is Kimura.

Mary: Hello, is this Takeshi? This is Mary. Takeshi, you didn't come today, did you?

Takeshi:	I went there. I waited for one hour in front of the Haagen-Dazs place.
Mary:	Not Haagen-Dazs, McDonald's.
Takeshi:	McDonald's…I'm sorry.