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## Using Drama in English Language Teaching

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**Abstract:** For the students of foreign/second languages to acquire knowledge about language and cultural competence in the target language, a large variety of methods and approaches have been proposed such as the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky. The mentioned theory emphasizes meaningful interaction among individuals as the greatest motivating force in human development and learning. In this study, arguments are made in favor of using drama (play) as one of the most life-like interactive tasks to teaching target languages and cultures. By reviewing important roles of drama in education in general and its benefits in second language learning in particular, the different advantages and misconceptions of using drama in language classes are numerated. Moreover, various techniques of utilizing drama in teaching foreign languages are elaborated on.

**Key words:** drama, English language teaching

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### Theoretical Background

Interculturality is a well-known concept for language teachers since it is very difficult to separate language from culture (Hinkel, 1999). However, for students to acquire knowledge about cultural sensitivity to a language, it is essential that teachers use an appropriate methodology to foster learning in an authentic context (Anderson, 2004) which links what is learned in the classroom and what is needed in the real world. From this perspective, drama, which often involves the entire class in improvised roles within an imagined context, seems to be an effective teaching method for the “acquisition of appropriate knowledge and attitudes towards other cultures” (Bournot-Trites, Belliveau, Spiliotopoulos, & Seror, 2007, p.1).

Historically, drama is one of the oldest known activities (Landy, 1982; Zafeiriadou, 2009). In old times, as Landy (1982) asserts, drama occurred when a community would gather for a ceremonial purpose: to assure a good hunt, an ample rainfall, or a long life to a new leader. The dramatic elements included chanting, dancing, storytelling, and dressing up in the costumes and masks of gods, animals, or elements. However, in the developmental history of a human being, drama becomes a natural means of learning (Landy, 1982). “Its elements-imitation, imagination, roleplaying, and interpretation-account for much of a child’s learning of language, movement, and social behavior” (p.5). It is believed that drama is a valuable means for developing language skills, encouraging social interaction, cooperation and collaboration, and teaching children how to listen and respond properly (Thompson & Evans, 2005). “It is a multi-sensory tool, which combines listening, speaking, thinking, exploration and use of the immediate environment, and the development of physical control” (p.14).

Psychologically speaking, Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2007) give a useful summary of the role of drama in the writing of the three most influential psychologists of our time. They state that Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory, Erickson's psychosocial theory, and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory have significant contributions for understanding the relationship between play and social-cognitive development. Piaget (as cited in Frost et al., 2007) believed that peer interactions within play leads to social-cognitive development. More specifically, play interactions help children to understand that other players have perspectives that are different from their own perspectives. For Piaget, play provides children with opportunities to develop social competence through ongoing interactions. Erikson (1963) maintained there was a relationship between make-believe play and wider society. Make-believe play permits children to learn about their social world, try new social skills, understand cultural roles, and integrate accepted social norms into their own personalities. Erikson, like Piaget, believed that play promotes a child who is socially competent.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has a significant role for play since he believed that make-believe play is vital for the acquisition of social and cognitive competence in the preschool years. Vygotsky suggested that play makes children build an imaginary situation and follow a set of rules to play out the situation; therefore, the child is able to act separately from reality. This type of play helps children choose between courses of action (Creasey et al., as cited in Frost et al., 2007). Make-believe play also makes young children control their impulses and subject themselves to the rules of play. Moreover, Vygotsky believed that all young children's imaginary situations follow social rules. That is why through make-believe play, children understand social norms (Berk, as cited in Frost, 2007).

### **Drama in Education**

Drama for educational purposes have been defined in many different ways (Davies, 1990). Terms such as drama education, theatre education, educational drama or creative drama, and drama teaching can be found in books and papers. Traditionally, 'drama' has been associated with the work designed for stage representation (Elam, 1980). However, in the context of drama teaching, the term has been used differently- it was mostly concerned with participants, regardless of any function of communication to an audience (Way, 1967).

In the 1980s and 1990s in England and many other countries there was a fairly pronounced division between writers and practitioners who advocated different approaches to teaching drama (Zafeiriadou, 2009). The method of drama teaching with its theoretical perspectives was drawn from writings on child play and the Humanistic School of psychology (Erikson, 1963). It was developed in the 1950s and included more free forms of dramatic play which can be seen as a reaction to the uncreative approaches which involved children acting out the words of others in a rather formal way rather than developing their own ideas (Slade, as cited in Zafeiriadou, 2009). Traditionally, personal growth of individuals through creative self-expression was emphasized; however, there has been a change in the way drama has been conceptualized (Zafeiriadou, 2009). In recent years, the goals of social skills and personal growth have given way to an understanding of drama as a cognitive, social, and aesthetic process that is concerned with the negotiation of meaning (Kao & O'Neill, 1998)

### **Benefits of Using Drama**

According to Fleming (2006), drama approach is learner-centered, so learners are active participants in teaching and learning processes. Even learners with limited vocabulary (Aldavero, 2008) or low proficiency and confidence (Moghaddas & Ghafariniae, 2012) can benefit from it since they can communicate in a foreign language using drama activities (Aldavero, 2008).

Desiatova (2009) outlined some of the benefits of using drama in the language classrooms as follows:

- It causes the learners to use the language for genuine communication and real life purposes.
- It makes language learning an active, motivating experience.
- It gives confidence and self-esteem to learners in using the language spontaneously.
- It brings the real world into the classroom (problem solving, research, consulting dictionaries, real time and space, and cross-curricular content).
- It helps the students in acquiring the language through play, make-believe, and meaningful interaction.

- It makes the learning items memorable through direct experience and affects emotions with different learning styles.
- When dramatizing, students make use of all the appropriate channels (sight, hearing, and physical bodies) for the active involvement in the language learning.
- It stimulates learners' intellect and imagination.
- It develops students' ability to empathize with others and become better communicators.
- It helps learners in acquiring the language by focusing on the message not the form of their utterance.

Maley (as cited in Zyoud, 2010) also listed many points to support the use of drama in classrooms:

- It integrates language skills in a natural way. Careful and spontaneous verbal expressions are integral to most of the activities. Also, many of these activities require reading and writing.
- It integrates verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, thus bringing together both mind and body, and restoring the balance between physical and intellectual aspects of learning.
- It draws upon both cognitive and affective domains, thus restoring the importance of feeling as well as thinking.
- By fully contextualizing the language, it brings the classroom interaction to life through an intensive focus on meaning.
- The emphasis on the whole-person learning and multi-sensory inputs helps learners to capitalize on their strength and to extend their range. In doing so, it offers unequalled opportunities for catering to learner differences.
- It fosters self-awareness (and awareness of others), self-esteem and confidence, and through this, motivation is developed.
- Motivation is likewise fostered and sustained through the variety and sense of expectancy generated by the activities.
- There is a transfer of responsibility for learning from teacher to learners which is where it belongs.
- It encourages an open, exploratory style of learning where creativity and the imagination are given scope to develop.
- It has a positive effect on classroom dynamics and atmosphere, thus facilitating the formation of a joint group, which learns together.
- It is an enjoyable experience.
- It is low-resource.

Regarding the benefits of using drama approach in language teaching, Heldenbrand (2003) referred to several advantages. To him it is a funny, relaxed, and informal way of learning English. Moreover, as Heldenbrand (2003) stated, drama helps in learning new vocabulary, proper pronunciation and intonation, and better understanding of culture. It motivates language learners, removes the focus from English textbook, and involves the whole person as a total physical activity.

Katz (2000) stated that drama can help students to enter into the reality of imaginary situations and characters that will enable them to explore emotions, attitudes, opinions and relationships. According to Katz (2000), a learner involved in a drama activity will practice several thinking skills, such as inventing, generating, speculating, assimilating, clarifying, inducing, deducing, analyzing, accommodating, selecting, refining, sequencing, and judging. Therefore, it is obvious that drama has a significant role in the development of higher order thinking skills.

Stern (1993) believed that drama in language teaching reduces inhibition, increases spontaneity, and enhances motivation, self-esteem, and empathy. Catterall (2002) saw drama as a beneficial approach to learning for students of different ages and within diverse contexts. According to Athimoolam (2004) different scholars stated that drama develops almost all

aspects of the individuals' personality and leads them to greater self-discovery and realization that they are capable of achieving in learning of a second or foreign language.

### **Misconception Regarding the Use of Drama**

Athimoolam (2004) believed that the mere mention of the word drama to teachers makes them think of scriptwriting, directing, and producing plays for an audience. Most of the time when teachers are requested to use drama in the classroom, they react negatively and claim that they have no skill in producing plays. They also believe that since they need to complete their syllabus, there is no time to play games in the classroom. Likewise, Kalidas (2014) asserts that many teachers are cautious about using drama. They are concerned about losing control in their classroom, loud noise level, and true achievement of their learning objectives, and learning outcomes. These teachers fail to realize that with clearly structured activities, students will enjoy and learn reasoning, creativity, and interpersonal skills. Athimoolam (2004) believed that the reasons for negative reaction of teachers are their lack the knowledge, skills, and understanding of what drama in education entails.

Hoetker (as cited in Dervishaj, 2009) cautions that development through drama is a gradual process that has no determined developmental timetable, especially if drama is only an occasional activity. However, Dervishaj (2009) believed that, with practice, teachers of English will discover the use of drama techniques in the classroom which can become an essential part of their teaching repertoire.

### **Drama in Foreign Language Classrooms**

Eun and Lin (2009) believed that the process of second-language teaching is grounded in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky "which emphasizes meaningful interaction among individuals as the greatest motivating force in human development and learning" (p.13). Vygotsky also emphasized the importance of "learning diverse speech modes and genres in the course of language learning and early literacy experiences in the acquisition of literacy skills" (Gupta, 2008, p.8). In this regard, Bournot-Trites, Belliveau, Spiliotopoulos, and Seror (2007) considered drama approach to be one of the ways through which one could enhance literacy and motivation, as well as helping the development of intercultural sensitivity in second language classes. In Vygotsky's empirical and theoretical research, strong arguments in favor of literacy instruction based on drama techniques come from various levels of speech development analyses (Eun & Lin, 2009).

Moreover, from a task-based approach to language teaching, a recently dominant framework to teaching English to second/foreign language learners, playing roles, or using drama has been found to be one of the most natural tasks to be easily used in language classes and school settings. With regard to drama and second language learning, recent studies suggest how drama has been successfully used in English as a second language learning environments (Elgar, 2002; Liu, 2000; Miccoli, 2003). These research studies have shown that drama within an ESL context can increase written and communicative skills, motivation to learn, and socio-cultural understanding of the target language. The studies suggest that drama creates a positive learning environment, which promotes peer collaboration and encourages students to participate linguistically, emotionally, and intellectually.

### **Various Techniques of Drama**

In first language settings, the use of drama can be seen in all aspects of curriculum since it creates opportunities for active involvement in learning. In this setting "subjects such as language art, social studies, history, and literature incorporate drama techniques" (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p.3). In line with that, Wagner (1988) documented the effect of drama in education in the development of oral language, literacy, motivation, positive attitudes, and social and cognitive skills.

In second language teaching, according to Kao and O'Neill (1998), the use of drama strategies has closely paralleled the growth of drama in education. In various second language classrooms, different types of drama approaches- from totally controlled language exercises and scripted role-plays through the semi-controlled approach of the scenario to the kind of open communication of process drama- are utilized. According to Thompson and Evans (2005), there are a variety of drama techniques that can be used to develop language skills: role-play, hot-seating, puppetry, improvisation, freeze frames, circle games, memory games, storytelling, debating, and mime. Davies (1990) considered mime, simulation, role-play, scripted

play, creating one's own script, and improvisation without a script as dramatic activities. He further stated exploiting the course book for dramatic purposes, song, plays, painting, making things, and playing games are other drama activities that can be utilized in the classroom. To Zafeiriadou (2009), dramatic play and improvisations, story enactment, imagination journeys, theatre games, music, dance, and using puppets are examples of drama activities. Likewise, Zyoud (2010) referred to mime, role-play, simulation, and improvisation as drama techniques. Davies (1990) believed that the greatest advantage of using drama activities is that "students become more confident in their use of English by experiencing the language in operation" (p. 97). According to Thompson and Evans (2005), these drama techniques lead to creative thinking and developing language skills. They further continued:

These techniques can be used as units in their own right or as a part of the curriculum to help reinforce specific areas of a lesson, to explore an aspect of learning or to enhance and enrich the quality of learning about historical, social or moral issues... Through drama, the teacher can encourage children to contribute their own ideas, thoughts and feelings based on experience or a willingness to explore further. Children who find the writing and recording of lessons difficult often find that they can achieve well in the less restrictive environment of a drama session and can recall facts and events through having experienced them or having watched others recreating a scene. (pp. 14-15)

### Final Remarks

Nowadays, as Eun and Lin (2009) assert, the process of second-language teaching is grounded in the sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (as cited in Eun & Lim, 2009) emphasizes meaningful interaction among individuals as the greatest motivating force in human development and learning. He also emphasized the importance of learning diverse speech modes and genres in the course of language learning. Therefore Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has a significant role for play/drama as an interactive task in the acquisition of social and cognitive competence in the first language and socio-cognitive linguistic competence in the second language.

Taking all mentioned above into consideration, it can be stated that using drama not only enhances the linguistic abilities of the language learners, but also makes them familiar with different modes, genres, and varieties of both spoken and written language. In addition, by taking advantage of drama, students can have life-like experience in the process of learning a foreign language and its culture; therefore, utilizing drama in language classes is perhaps one of the best ways to integrate language learners into the life and culture of the target language.

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