

English through drama for oral skills development

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This paper presents the results of an investigation into the value of using drama in a Brazilian university classroom. Drawing on Di Pietro (1987) and Via (1976) on the advantages of using drama in language learning, from Mezirow (1990) and Schön (1991) on the importance of reflection for promoting meaningful learning, and from Donato and McCormick (1994) and Lukinsky (1990) on the effectiveness of portfolios as a tool to promote reflection, the paper presents a case study of the use of drama in an oral skill class, describing the course structure and classroom procedures. It includes learners' voices as taken from their portfolios, and evaluates results, presenting setbacks and possible solutions. Finally, it encourages the use of drama and portfolios for transformative and emancipatory learning.

Introduction

As teachers we are always looking for ways to improve our classes and motivate our students. Yet, teaching conditions may not be as ideal as we would like them to be. Sometimes we get too many students; often they have different proficiency levels; sometimes both problems arise in the same class. This was my situation: I had to teach a conversation class where the level of proficiency of the 37 students ranged from basic to advanced.

Knowing that a traditional format would not work, the experiences of interactionists like Di Pietro (1987) and the actor/teacher Via (1976) helped me decide to bring drama and play production into my classroom. For students' individual development, I drew from Mezirow (1990) and Schön (1991), who claim that reflection can change traditional learning into a transformative and emancipatory experience. Thus, the class objectives set out a learning experience where drama was used and reflection was encouraged.

This paper describes the results of an investigation into the effectiveness of this approach, beginning with the rationale for adopting drama and reflection through portfolios. Then, class procedures are presented. Next, learners' voices are revealed through excerpts collected from their portfolios and interviews.¹ Finally, as setbacks and possible solutions are discussed, it evaluates the use of drama and portfolios for transformative learning.

Drama

Learning a language cannot be divorced from culture learning. Yet, in a foreign language-teaching situation, this can be quite difficult, since culture includes aspects such as 'how (native speakers) hold their bodies, how far they stand apart, where they look when they talk, how men shake their hands with each other, how children talk to their parents, and so on' (Via 1976: xiv). In addition, culture involves issues such as how anxiety or excitement are expressed, or how culturally accepted intonation is used to deliver humor or anger. These aspects of language are very subtle for learners to grasp, let alone learn to use. Moreover, they are not commonly addressed in regular conversation courses.

Drama is a way of bringing the issues above naturally into the language classroom (Via *ibid.*). It also allows for making linguistic and cultural analyses of characters (Smith 1984) where participants use English in meaningful contexts. As learners rehearse, they engage in a process that includes the establishment of characters' personalities, motives, and persona, creating a genuine purpose for communication. In other words, drama provides a reason to use language. Finally, it brings motivation and fun to the classroom. No matter how threatened students feel with the prospect of presenting a play, everyone will enjoy acting, since we all wish for glory and fame. Being an actor, even if only through a classroom performance, has a difficult-to-resist seductive power that the less proficient students accept as a challenge (Via 1976, Smith 1984).

Reflection

Reflective learning encourages 'critical reflection in order to precipitate or facilitate transformative learning in adults' (Mezirow 1990: 366). According to Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), describing their classroom experiences is the best way to promote students' reflection. The process includes tapping into feelings and, finally, re-evaluating the experience. By sharing observations and attitudes, and comparing them to those of their classmates, the process—called 'appropriation'—leads to the making of new meanings of experience. For that to happen, I used portfolios.

Portfolios

Well-known among artists, portfolios are a record of best performances or productions. According to Donato and McCormick (1994), portfolios have been used mainly as evaluation tools. Portfolios—a collection of one's best efforts—are very similar to journals, and are used to record learners' experiences, promoting reflection and change. The difference from journals is that portfolios should include the presentation of evidences of learning.

The class

The 'English through Drama' course took place in a Brazilian university. The class met twice a week for 110 minutes over 15 weeks. As an optional class, enrolment required at least 120 hours of previous English instruction.

A very heterogeneous group showed up on the first day. They were surprised to find out they would work towards the presentation of a play, and I wondered how many would continue. To my amazement, in spite of the occasional absences, not one dropped out. All 37 students took part in one of the six one-act classroom plays performed at the end of the term.

The course was structured into the three stages presented below. Portfolios were used for reflection and evaluation. Students received a handout describing how to keep a portfolio.

ACT I Preliminary Stage

The first five weeks were dedicated to the following activities:

- getting to know each other
- relaxing and laughing while doing voice, breathing, and body-language exercises
- talk and listen cards, role plays, and scenarios
- creating an ensemble.

The rationale was to promote a climate of trust that encouraged risk-taking. Knowing that inhibition could be a big obstacle in the process (Smith 1984), activities aimed at making students confront their natural shyness, overcome it or, at least, reduce it. Activities put students in situations where they had to take chances, be wrong, look silly, and—always—try again. Thus, they were being prepared for rehearsals, where inhibitions are reduced and honest emotions start to flow.

The voice, breathing, and body exercises presented by Via (1976) are the groundwork in play development because they can be done without the fear of making mistakes. Confidence is the key for a *tight ensemble*, meaning that student/actors know and trust each other. It is also a ‘must’ in play performance, because it is easier to be open and relaxed in front of friends than strangers.

After developing a climate of trust among students, we moved to short text exercises. We started with talk and listen cards (ibid.), moved to role-plays, and ended this phase with scenarios (Di Pietro 1987).

Talk and listen cards are very short dialogues given to pairs. Their objective is to have the words ‘memorization’ and ‘recitation’ eliminated from learners’ vocabulary. They read lines for meaning, saying them without reading. As partners did not know each other’s lines, they truly listened to one another. Lines were said in different ways: for example, in a very high tone of voice, very fast or very slow, or even as lovers. Since lines were short and dialogues four to six lines long, students did well, and had a lot of fun through this stage.

In the next phase, learners were given role-plays which included creating a situation, their own lines, and working in larger groups. Groups were asked to present role-plays to the classroom. At this point the laughing during the breathing, voice, and the body-language exercises paid off—although some students still felt a bit threatened to be standing in front of the class, they took it as a challenge.

Scenarios came as the last of the language exercises at this stage. Di Pietro (1987) defines them as ‘a strategic interplay of roles functioning to fulfill personal agendas within a shared context’ (p. 41). Scenarios where participants react to experiences without rehearsing require more risk-taking and improvising than role-plays.

After presentations, learners always received feedback. The focus was their use of English, the intended message of their lines and its sociolinguistic and pragmatic appropriateness, as well as their pronunciation, body language, and intonation during delivery; the most important feedback was if they were audible or not.

ACT II Intermediate Stage

At this point, learners were ready to learn more about acting. Following Via (1976), plays were not given right away. The agenda at this stage included handouts² on:

- emotion, action, personalization, and physicalization;
- sense memory, gesture, characters' history;
- stage embrace, fights, and drunkenness;
- crying, laughing, and facial expressions.

The standard procedure at this stage was to begin with reading, followed by a class discussion. Requests for clarification led to conversations about movies and actors. These brought the handouts content closer to reality. Learners were also introduced to the basic theatre jargon used to describe one's position on stage in relation to the audience, as well as the importance of meaningful movement. A video play—Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*—promoted discussion on how actors moved and portrayed their characters. At this point, another four weeks had passed, and students were eager to have Via's plays.

ACT III Production Stage

Students were given the plays (adapted for the 90s) six weeks before presentation. They were read for pronunciation and vocabulary checks. Follow-up discussions brought up cultural issues related to play themes, which ranged from very domestic scenes to mystery and farce.

Since a better classroom performance was influenced by the students' circle of friends (Miccoli 2000), I let them select the play, say who they wanted to work with, and decide on the casting. At this point the noise level increased, but the students realized that all the plays offered potential for development into something that resonated with what they wanted to do. In one class, all of the decisions were made by the students, and every student had a character to play.

Class routine changed immensely after that. Since most groups eventually chose a student to be the director, I left them on their own instead of visiting them for orientation as Via (1976) suggests. Most students developed the habit of showing up in class, greeting me, telling me about developments, and asking for advice on props, or for clarification on the meaning of particular lines. At times, I was apprehensive about some of the groups—especially the potential for conflict. However, the students never brought reports of incidents, and I eagerly awaited presentation days.

Presentation days

The six plays were presented in three classes. The following routine was followed: students arrived about 20 minutes before the start, prepared the 'stage' with props, and the play began. After that, the 'audience' left

the room, and the performers removed their props. Meanwhile, the second group would bring in their props and prepare for the next performance. This worked out very well.

Of course, most students went beyond expectations. A Mrs Green showed up in a green plastic wrap dress, with green shoes and a green purse. The girl who had accidentally broken a museum vase burst into tears and cried through all her other lines, giving us a feel of how helpless one must feel in such a situation. The teacher who encouraged students backstage fainted, after making us all laugh through many disasters in a farce that looked at the last 15 minutes before curtains go up. Family scenes made us identify with familiar situations. Of course, there were those who did not stick to basic directions, such as not turning their back to the audience, and those who momentarily forgot their lines, though none were serious to the point of blemishing any presentation.

Thus, the superficial class goal was achieved. Students worked towards the development of their oral skills; learned to deliver lines at the right time, with an adequate intonation and appropriate body language, capturing characters' feelings and motivations. However, much more than that was learned.

Learners' voices

On the final day of presentations students brought their portfolios. In selecting the excerpts below, I chose those whose content served as evidence of the claims in the literature for the benefits of using drama and reflection. Another criterion for selection was to include excerpts reflective of the range of proficiency in the class. In addition, I did not edit them. The experienced and sensitive teacher will make sense of the important meaning they convey. Finally, they are presented as a collage of the learning and meanings made from taking part in the drama class.

In the beginning I was feeling insecure and nervous. Now I think less insecure . . . Maybe I understand more my colleagues and my teacher. When I'm watching a film, I understand more. I think that semester were very important because I discovered that learning English is need hard work. So, I think this class is very important for us because I speak, I listen and read in English.

When I was portraying in class, I learnt to control my fear. . . . that to train make a difference because the more you train, the more you improve!

I've not learned things only for school, but specially for my life, too. I'm sure that I'm prepared to speak in front of a lot of people and during the presentation . . . I wasn't feeling nervous. Now, I'm more controlled in class than before.

I learned many interesting things, from knowing to speak, to walk, to be another person . . ., to know to hear, and to reconcile the options of the other ones, to know to respect the time of each one, to be attentive to small things and besides, to be me.

To work in groups in the classes is a great form of we relate with our colleagues . . . to be more human and responsible for being part of something that involves other people.

During the semester I improved my English, learning specific vocabulary and helping my friends use it. . . . Now I can control my tone of voice and they can listen to me better.

Some people when they're speaking English they seems so artificial and scared, then the play solve this problem.

It's easy to notice how we're getting better with the language . . . because we can observe the behavior of the other students in the group too. At the beginning of the course, people were terrifying, and now they are very soft and improving the speech step-by-step . . .

All the exercises we did in class helped me to find out . . . my own way of saying the lines. I learned we don't have to say everything, every word to show what we want to say . . . I also found out how important body language is.

In the beginning I was scared. It would be a surprise, but finally there was a lot to learn and still there is—and live. . . . Speaking in front of a lot of people was great, knowing I'm able to act was fantastic, and the challenge of having a heterogeneous group was really worth it.

First the play became real and so did English. Playing, students deal with English in context, in real situations and social relations. . . . Actually this is about life: we're playing some parts, we're all playing some roles and there's always some one to observe us. And guess what? Acting is not as bad as I first believed.

In the beginning I thought it would take me lots of patience to put up with my classmates language limitations. . . . they had to stand my weak points When rehearsing . . . I had problems of my own. I couldn't memorize my lines easily and that's when they taught me a lesson. Instead of losing their patience on me, they started helping me. That was something that really made me think. Everybody has weaknesses, but also lots to teach.

Conclusion

Bringing drama into the classroom was not new for me, but portfolios have only become a part of my teaching practice in more recent years. However, I had never taken an investigative look at the effects drama had on students. The first time I used drama, I wanted to make a change in classroom dynamics. After finding evidence of Holliday's (1994) surface and deep levels of action (Miccoli 1997), I have grown interested in students' meaning making. That was the motivation for this study—investigating the effects of drama both on the teaching and on the learning.

Did everything work just as wonderfully as I present it? I would dare to say, most of the times—yes. However, next time a few things would be done differently.

First, I took too long to give students the play. I felt that as soon as they received it, they would tune out of the classes and focus only on their plays. But, after a class evaluation, probing students with the question 'what would you tell me to do differently if I taught this class again?' I realized that it was foolish to have delayed choosing a play selection. Students were unanimous in saying that if they had had the play in their hands while reading the handouts on emotions, for example, they would have related much better to the content of the handouts. Next time, play selection will take place as we start Act II.

Second, I underestimated the importance of the director in a play. I did not assign to one student the role of a director in each group. Students mentioned they missed that. If I had assigned the role, they would not have spent so much time figuring out what to do during rehearsals. Next time, the director's role will be presented as important for the enacting of the play.

Did the use of drama provide learners with the kind of experience I wanted? Did the class move from traditional to transformative and emancipatory learning? The excerpts answer those questions better than an analysis of my impressions. Portfolios confirm that language comes alive through drama in an oral skills development class. For example, the confrontation of fears, and the taking of risks, led to an improvement in their oral skills, as a consequence of understanding the aspects that underlie oral communication, i.e., that speaking is not only about words and structure and pronunciation, but feelings, motivations, and meanings. In other words, language brings along culture. Drama in a conversation classroom makes room for those issues to emerge. Besides that, the reporting of the different kinds of learning corroborate Coughlan's and Duff's (1994) findings that everyone takes something out of a learning experience. Excerpts reveal students learning vocabulary, pronunciation, and different aspects of what it means to speak English. However, they also mention learning to trust others and to accept limitations in others and themselves. These are examples of transformative learning since they reveal change in learners' perspectives and behavior. Moreover, being able to name changes makes such learning emancipatory.

My students trusted me enough to embark on this experience. I came out of that class as changed as they did. As I reflect, I learned that it was trust that made learning possible. Had I not trusted that they could do it, and had they not trusted themselves, probably the excerpts would contain different testimonies.

For those who are looking for a way to improve their classes and motivate students; for those who are searching for transformative and emancipatory learning experiences; for those who trust that the results will be worth the effort, and are willing to take the risk, drama and portfolios have proved to me they are a good way to start. But do not take my word for it—try it yourself. You and your students will not be the same after such an intense experience.

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Notes

- 1 These were collected as data for a larger investigation on the role of reflection in the language classroom, sponsored by a grant from Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa de Minas Gerais.
- 2 These handouts were prepared by adapting Via (1976).

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