Building target language oral skills through drama

Chamkaur Gill
BUILDING TARGET LANGUAGE ORAL SKILLS THROUGH DRAMA

Chamkaur Gill
Bond University

I have had the opportunity to compare two methods of instruction, the lockstep method (teacher-centred) and drama (learner-centred), over approximately twenty years of English language teaching, having used both throughout. There is no doubt in my mind that the latter is more beneficial to learners. It is an immersion tool which exposes them to a wider range of English, allows for authentic language use, gives them more speaking time, and helps them gain confidence and be more motivated. Smith (1984: 5) has an even longer list of benefits, including helping learners improve their grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, understand paralanguage, and develop survival or 'coping' strategies. However, despite the fact that drama has existed as a potential language teaching tool for centuries (Smith 1984:2), it has only been in the last thirty years or so that attempts have been made to apply it. Even then, these attempts have been largely tentative. This is because many teachers doubt its efficacy (Wessels 1987: 8), or consider it to be 'peripheral' (Dougill 1987: 146), or feel that there is no teaching going on' (Hawkins 1991: 125), or are unknowledgeable about it. They feel safe in the comfort zone of conventional methods (to which they have become habituated) in which materials are predetermined, put together systematically, and dealt with sequentially. Unfortunately for their students, there is nothing predetermined, systematic or sequential about everyday language. They must remember that they are preparing learners not for a permanent existence in the classroom, but for the real world, where language is untextbook-like in design, and is used mainly to convey meaning. Given the concern shown over the decades about the inability of lockstep methods to have an appreciable effect on learners (Showstack 1982: 179-180), a communication-based technique like drama, which bridges the gap between the classroom and the outside world (Davies 1990: 96), needs to be looked at more seriously by the relevant authorities. Perhaps it is time to formalise its application in class by adding an 'experiential' component to a language syllabus (Sesso 1986: 10), one that will go some way towards addressing learners' problems.

Some problems learner-speakers face
When learners start a target language (TL) course, they are normally "... quite unprepared for the challenge of a foreign language situation, full of self-doubt..." (Dougill 1987: 146). They feel a sense of unease and uncertainty as they wrestle with the new sounds and structures. They find it difficult to convey messages in the same spontaneous fashion that they can in their own languages. As they stutter and stammer in the foreign language (FL), it is natural for them to experience a sense of failure, thus resulting in a loss of confidence. Just as bad would be a feeling of rejection and loss of self-esteem if they feel that they are being ignored by native speakers because of their inability to make themselves understood. A further source of discomfort is the culture of the FL, especially if it is very different from their own. Since they are not able to empathise with the TL culture, their motivation to learn the language can decrease. The possible outcome of all this is that they could lose their motivation to progress. My personal experiences show that drama can play a major role in helping them.

The benefits of drama
Amongst all the students that I have taught, two middle-aged Japanese students are my favourite examples. Coming from a rather conservative background, it was natural for them to be reticent initially. Furthermore, being amongst students somewhat younger, and coming from a culture which required respect from the latter, they were afraid that they would look silly if asked to participate in activities that required physical and emotional displays in public. In addition, they (and quite a number of the younger adults) tended to monitor their language output very carefully, for fear of making mistakes and embarrassing themselves. Naturally, this inhibited their use of English. However, around the time of their end-of-semester stage perfor-
mance, it was gratifying to see how outgoing they had become in English, to the extent that they started making special efforts to converse with their native-speaking classmates (who provided comprehensible input). They even enquired as to whether they could attend more such courses! The main reason for such a dramatic change appeared to be that the taboo against fun-filled learning had been removed. To quote another example, an informal study conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles, in which English language lessons were conducted using drama techniques (Stern 1980: 77), revealed that

... drama encourages the operation of certain psychological factors in the participant which improve communication: heightened self-esteem, motivation, and spontaneity; increased capacity for empathy; and lowered sensitivity to rejection.

Di Pietro (1987: 3-4), too, found that his students of Italian showed more enthusiasm and motivation as a result of dramatisation. And DiLaura Morris (1983, 1987) found that both students and teachers reacted positively to language activities which were creative and imaginative. Once learners' affective filters are lowered, they start expressing themselves more purposefully (Pross 1986: 37). They find that it is possible to have fun and still learn. They can experiment with the new language in a learner-centred atmosphere, without the threat of an imposing teacher-figure constantly listening in and demanding correct output at every turn.

Drama is particularly relevant when it comes to developing listening and speaking skills. Both these macro skills are considered natural, everyday activities which must function simultaneously for normal interaction between interlocutors to occur. At the same time, paralinguistic or non-verbal cues are employed to further enhance communication. In the case of native and first languages, this is a given. However, when it is a TL in question, the picture changes somewhat. Learners hear perplexing, new sounds and struggle to use their 'vocal apparatus' in new ways (Dickson 1989: 301) while trying to come to terms with body language never witnessed before. Gassin (1986: 58) points out problems which include lack of both voice control and speech-body synchrony, and inappropriate paralinguistic features. She goes on to suggest in a later article (1990: 437) that learners can improve their communication in the TL by approximating that language's speech and body rhythms. Drama techniques, which give learners the opportunity to participate actively in language output and input, seem to go some way towards addressing the issues satisfactorily. Smith (1984: 17-21, 70-86) suggests numerous ways in which drama can be employed to help a learner, including doing breathing, articulation, pacing, and rhythm exercises which train the voice and the ear. While exercises undoubtedly help, there is no substitute for actually immersing oneself in the language through hands-on drama activities. For example, by working on a task like preparing for a performance and then presenting it in a TL, learners get to hear and produce the sounds of that language more authentically and in a more wholesome fashion than they would in a regular class, and benefit in the process through the immersion naturally associated with such activities. Dunkel (1986: 103) certainly seems to believe that this is true in relation to listening, and Smith (1984: 40) states that drama helps learners articulate better.

Group dynamics is another area that TL learners benefit from. By working on drama projects in groups, they get on-going practice in the use of the language through constant communication with each other. Lower level learners especially benefit from being part of a drama-based group because they can learn from their better-placed classmates, by, for example, imitating them, as has been the case with my Bond students (The fact that drama caters for various levels, thus promoting individualised learning, is indeed one of its strengths). White (1984: 598) refers to Jakobovits' 'huddle buddy' system in immersion classes in which more proficient students help those who have not yet reached their levels of skill. In return, the latter assist the former on various aspects of a given project resulting in what Anzilotti (1982: 68) refers to as a 'mutual-aid society'. All the while, the learners experience immersion in the TL through a humanistic process of caring and sharing.

Drama also helps increase the quantity of the TL that learners are exposed to. Through
group discussions in preparation for role play, for example, learners are able to produce more spoken TL (Davies 1990: 90, Hawkins 1990: 124) than they can ever hope to in a conventional, teacher-fronted lesson. Long and Porter (1985: 208) suggest that group-work in drama can increase learner-talk substantially, by more than 500 percent, when compared with lockstep-based lessons where factors like daily administrative duties, class size and restricted class time combine to limit an individual learner's opportunities to speak, such that, in a class of 30 students, he or she might average only one hour of speaking time in a year.

In addition to the quantity of language use, drama also improves the quality of the language that learners experience, when compared with lockstep methodology. Mechanical and non-contextual language which is grammatically-structured is replaced by authentic, everyday language with all its false starts and mid-speech adjustments, and, given that it is learners' language in question, with its developmental errors and elements of interlanguage. Developmental errors and interlanguage are, after all, part and parcel of the language learning continuum (Khanji 1987: 152). This is not to suggest that grammar is unimportant, but if it hinders the transmission of a message, a strict adherence to it would be unwise. After all, in the world outside the classroom, "...one rarely encounters situations that would illustrate isolated grammatical points..." (Anzilotti 1982:68). The situations one encounters are functional in nature, incorporating "... the language of discourse, transaction, negotiation, explanation and inquiry (Jones 1982: 7). In other words, drama encourages learners to produce utterances which are wide-ranging and diverse in nature, making language learning an integrated process, in which language is acquired holistically (This can be contrasted with conventional teaching in which language elements are disintegrated bits and pieces artificially put together with little importance attached to context). It allows learners to participate naturally in oral communication with their interlocutors, giving free rein to thoughts and feelings in verbal and non-verbal interaction, and acquiring the language subconsciously.

The greater the participation, the better the chances of the learner's 'language muscles' being developed, the same way one's bodily muscles are strengthened through physical exercise. It can be argued that through such participation, learners internalise a TL or second language (L2), including the colloquialisms, 'culturalisms' and emotion-related vocabulary, in a manner not unlike the way they did their first languages or mother tongues in their formative years. To quote White (1984: 595-596):

*Like the mother tongue, communicative competence in an L2/FL is acquired through use and active participation in behavioural situations which trigger off speech.*

One final point worth making is that learners can learn as much with drama as they can in conventional classes, but in a shorter time. Genesee (1987: 73-74) mentions a Canadian language immersion study in which a comparison was made between regular immersion (teacher-centred) and activity-based (learner-centred) immersion programmes. The study, which involved grade 7 students who were learning French, found that although the activity-centred immersion sessions were only one-half the length of the regular ones (40% compared to 80% of class time), students in the former programme developed the same level of speaking and listening skills as the latter. This was because they were able to experience diverse 'speech acts' and 'speech events' which gave them broader speaking and listening practice than in the regular sessions.

**Conclusion**

Drama is certainly not a panacea for all the ills existing in the language teaching world, but it would seem to have strengths in the oral skills area that conservative teaching methods do not. It is now a question of harnessing those strengths for the benefit of learners. To do this, we must rid ourselves of the paranoia about techniques that are perceived as 'risky', 'disorganised', 'frivolous', and so on. For too long, we have been shackled to the belief that language should be taught like other subjects: in an organised, step-by-step fashion. While subjects like mathematics and history, which are generally taught in this fashion, are applied only occasionally in our everyday existence, language outside the classroom is a tool of life, unpredictable and
unrestricted by rigid structural accuracy or difficulty-indexed sequencing. It is made up of 'raw speech acts' with which we resolve conflicts and problems and convince and 'influence others' (White 1984: 59). Drama can help us prepare learners for the real world (Davies 1990: 97), purely by immersing them in authentic communication in which there is integrated rather than disintegrated language. It can create the right learning environment to help develop the learner's communicative competence (Hymes 1972: 269, 293) and point the learner in the direction of future proficiency in the target language.

REFERENCES


Davies, P. (1990)

*The Use of Drama in English Language Teaching*. TESL Canada Journal 8,1: 87-99.

Dickson, P. S. (1989)


DiLaura Morris, S. (1983)

*Teaching Without Grammar: Title XII Experience at the University of Delaware*, Foreign Language Annals 16,5: 339-342.

DiLaura Morris, S. (1987)


*Strategic Interaction: Learning languages through scenarios*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dougill, J. (1987)

*Drama Activities for Language Learning*. Essential Language Teaching Series.


Gassin, J. (1986)


Gassin, J. (1990)


Genesee, F. (1987)

Hawkins, B. (1991)

Hymes, D. (1972)

Simulations in Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khanji, R. (1987)

Group Work, Interlanguage Talk and second Language Acquisition. TESOL Quarterly 19,2: 207-228.


Sesso, A. (1986)

Showstack, R. (1982)


Drama in Second Language Learning from a Psycholinguistic Perspective. Language Learning 30,1: 77-100.


END OF DOCUMENT