



# Drama in language teaching: a challenge for creative development

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*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*

*Knowledge is limited.*

*Imagination encircles the world.*

*(Albert Einstein)*

## **Abstract:**

My aim in this article is to draw attention to the case of drama in the language context as a creative process and a challenge for creative thought. On one hand, by a brief historical review of drama teaching I attempt to define some misconceptions that drama may entail and on the other by presenting the benefits it offers as a pedagogical technique I aim to alleviate inhibitions several language educators have as to drama integration in the L2 classroom. I argue for drama as a teaching technique that fosters not only students' linguistic and emotional development but also as a challenge for creative thought and a means that contributes to what Fontana (1997) called "education for being."

## **Drama teaching- A historical review.**

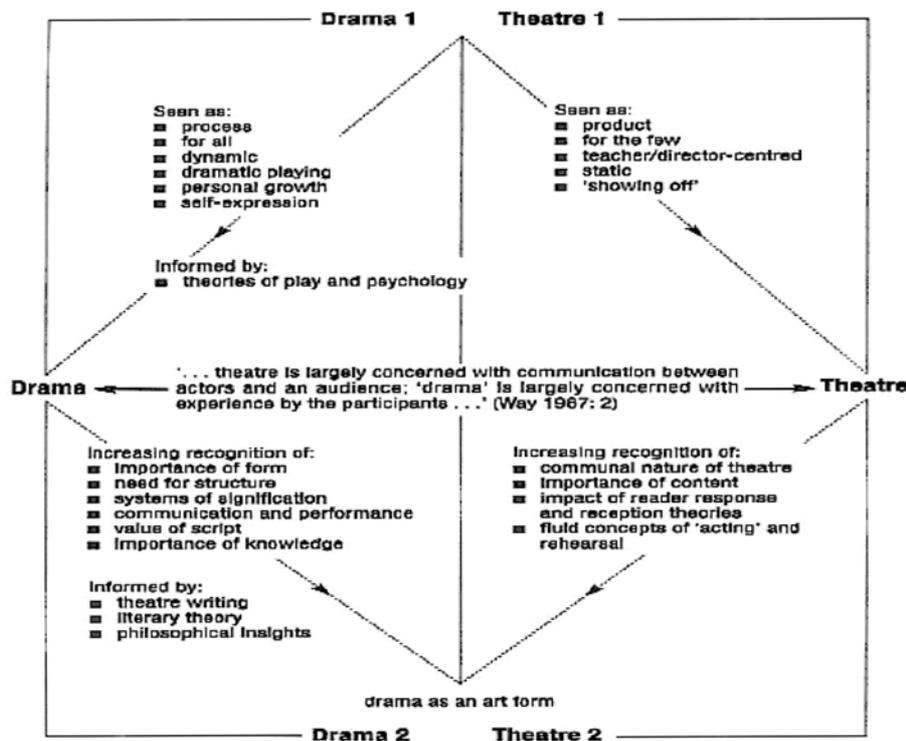
Theatre as a form of Art that communicates feelings and emotions, thoughts and concerns originates since the appearance of communal life in the history of human civilization. Theatre and drama for educational purposes have been defined in many different ways. Methodology books and papers abound in terms such as drama education, theatre education, educational drama or creative drama and drama teaching. Traditionally 'theatre' has been taken to refer to performance whereas 'drama' has referred to the work designed for stage representation, the body of written plays (Elam, 1980). In the context of drama teaching however the terms have been used differently. 'Theatre' was thought to be largely concerned with communication between actors and an audience; whereas 'drama' was largely concerned with experience by the participants, irrespective 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. Teachers who took a theatre approach talked about 'acting', 'rehearsal' and 'performance' whereas teachers with a drama focus referred more to 'experience' or 'living through' improvisations (Hornbrook, 1989). In practice these tended to be more orientations in the work rather than rigid distinctions but the differences are crucial in understanding the way drama teaching developed; legacies of these approaches are found in contemporary practice. (Fleming, 2003)

The method of drama teaching which developed from the 1950s onwards and embraced more free forms of dramatic play and improvisation can be seen as a reaction to the stifling and uncreative approaches at the time which involved children acting out in a rather formal way the words of others rather than developing ideas of their own (Slade, 1954). It was suggested that when participants are engaged in more spontaneous, improvised work (traditionally called 'drama') their level of engagement and feeling will be more intense and 'genuine' than when they are performing on stage (traditionally called 'theatre'). The theoretical perspectives on drama education were at that time drawn from writings on child play and the Humanistic School of psychology (Erikson 1963, 1968; Rogers, 1969) rather than on the theatre. The emphasis was on the personal growth of the individual through creative self expression and the search for personal meaning. The influence of progressive psychology theorists as George Kelly in the 1950s and his 'personal construct theory' that urges people to uncover their own 'constructs' with minimal intervention by the 'therapist' were also apparent in the advocates of drama in education. The recent history of drama teaching being described here is represented in the following diagram by M. Fleming (2003). At the time

when the separation of 'drama' and 'theatre' was happening what was being rejected was the negative aspects of theatre practice (depicted in the upper right side of the diagram) when imposed prematurely on young people. A more contemporary view of theatre practice is represented in the lower right quadrant (Theatre 2). Here the approach is less authoritarian, there is a more fluid concept of what 'acting' and

'rehearsal' involve and there is greater acceptance of non-naturalistic approaches. Similarly there has been a change in the way drama has been conceptualised. The changed conception at Drama 2 in the diagram means that all drama in the classroom can draw on insights provided by the nature of drama as art and writings from theatre practitioners (Bolton, 1992; Heathcote, 1980; Shewe and Shaw, 1993)



Fleming ( 2003)

### Some issues to problematise

In this account of past division and present linking of experience between 'theatre' and 'drama' some issues are raised as to how it informs the implementation of drama in language teaching.

First, the traditional view of theatre represented in the diagram as 'Theatre 1' reminds us that some approaches to drama can be static and lack the kind of creative dynamism that the participants often expect.

Second, it provides a reminder that drama requires structuring and that drama techniques need to be learned by the participants, It is no longer appropriate to see drama entirely as a natural activity which needs little intervention from the teacher.

Third, drama approaches can blend elements traditionally associated with 'drama' and 'theatre', including elements of performance, as long as the teacher is sensitive to learners' potential embarrassment.

Fourth, the use of drama does not have to involve the development of a complex narrative as it was often assumed when drama is seen as 'dramatic playing'.

(Woolland 1996). The performance per se of participating children is irrelevant. An ordinary classroom is sufficient to set up drama activities. A "stage" is not necessary to "present" the "dramatic talents" of students.

A final and important issue is that drama as a teaching technique brings out a number of deeper pedagogic challenges for the L2 teacher. It involves moving away from familiar structures and routines which feel safe into approaches which are more open-ended and unpredictable. With younger learners the enthusiasm and exuberance produced by engaging in drama can turn into problems of discipline. With older learners there may be problems of inhibition and embarrassment. Despite the enormous potential for drama to motivate and engage the participants, in practice the outcome can sometimes be flat and fail to inspire. In the context of teaching a second language, the possibilities are inevitably limited by the fluency and language facility of the learners. Needless to say that a language pedagogy insisting on results instead of process may have a negative effect on students' motivation and involvement. Educational drama



activities should raise positive feelings because they are essentially "play" situations. The above comments are not meant to be negative but to offer a realistic view of the challenges involved in using drama in the language classroom

### **So what justifies drama in the language context?**

Regardless of the above realistic considerations and pedagogical challenges drama teaching raises it also becomes apparent that there are positive arguments in favour of using it.

Drama fosters and sustains learners' motivation as it is fun and entertaining and because it engages feelings it can provide a rich experience of language for the participants. Drama as a process is inevitably learner-centred because it can only operate through active cooperation. As a social activity embodies much of the educational theory that has emphasised the social and communal such as Vygotsky's Social Interactionism in the 1960's as opposed to the purely individual, aspects of learning. Being a collaborative and participatory teaching approach it contributes positively to the development of the learners' self-esteem and self-efficacy (one's beliefs about their capabilities in certain areas) especially to those they have rather low levels (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Transferring acquired skills from educational settings to real life situations has always been a challenging task in education. The value of drama is often attributed to the fact that it allows the creation of contexts for different language uses, thus fostering students' language awareness. In both language teaching and drama, context is often thought to be everything. Children talking and listening to each other in a dramatic play situation use language in a communicative way (taking turns, interacting verbally, using body movements, gestures and facial expression, listening actively). Hutt et al. (1989), found that in a role play children's verbal responses were longer and included more adverbs than in other situations. Because speech has its origin in social action and life (Lantolf 2000, Merleau-Ponty 1962, Vygotsky 1987) dramatic play and improvisation are advantageous to language acquisition as they created situations place the emphasis on social interaction and thus, facilitate knowledge transfer from the classroom to the outside world.

However, what to my view gives drama a unique value as a pedagogic technique is the fact it brings about students' creative thought and asserts language education as a creative process. Moreover, for the reason it points out that creative expression depends not on talent alone, but also on motivation, interest, effort, and opportunity. That creative process, contrary

to popular opinion, is socially supported, culturally influenced, and collaboratively achieved through instruction.

The creative assets of childhood include a tolerance for ambiguity, a propensity for nonlinear thinking, and receptivity to ideas that might be quickly discarded by an adult as too fanciful to merit further consideration. Because children do not have a firm line of demarcation between fantasy and reality, ideas from one realm can slip through into the other. Thus, children may respond in ways that are nonstereotypic, a trait that many adults, particularly those in the arts, find enviable (Kincade, 2002). Despite growing evidence that childhood is the wellspring for later creative pursuits, adults frequently fail to develop those rich resources of imagination, creativity, curiosity, and playfulness (Cobb, 1977; Martindale, 2001). If, as both classic and contemporary studies of talent development suggest, it takes nearly 17 years of training and preparation to contribute to a field, educators are in a unique position to influence creative development in human beings (Duffy, 1998). Consequently, it is unacceptable for creative thought and expression, a resource so valuable to society and vital to the individual, to be misunderstood, squandered, or squelched by flat, trivialized and sometimes oppressing teaching.

### **Drama recourses for creative development**

Drama as a structural aspect of experiential learning (Rogers, 1969) in the L2 context can include *dramatic play* and *improvisations, story enactment, imagination journeys, theatre games, music, and dance*. "Let's pretend" is the norm in a drama class, not just a child's game. Because the emphasis in creative drama is process rather than product, teachers have the freedom to take as much time as needed with their classes.

#### **Role plays**

During a fundamental technique of drama, role play participants empathise with a role either of a person or an object and experience new knowledge in three spatial dimensions (length, width and height) and three psychological dimensions (identification, internalisation, and empathy). In addition three basic mental dimensions (representation, assimilation, imagination), three social dimensions (participating by taking on a role, interaction and acceptance by others) and three personal dimensions (self development, self-esteem and self-actualisation) of role playing combine effectively to enable children to understand and to acquire the necessary skills to cope with reality. All of these dimensions are useful in language acquisition because they can provide a multi dimensional base for stimulating and developing language.

## **Fairy/Folk Tales and Myths**

There are an incredible number of books containing collections of these stories. Some feature tales from a particular country, religion, or ethnic group, while others are grouped by subject (women, animals, nature). When choosing ones to use in class, look for simple plots, dynamic characters, and a straightforward message. Ideally, the tales should be told, rather than read aloud, (besides giving a better sense of the dramatic to the listeners, there are also no pictures that you have to show) so learn them well. Children enjoy acting out stories with humorous people or situations, and usually are willing to play inanimate objects that relate to the plot. Don't be afraid to stretch the boundaries of the story - add in extra family members, duplicate protagonists/antagonists, herds of animals instead of one so that every child in the class has a role to play. With well-known stories (*Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk*), the class can use their familiarity with the plot to create new ideas, by modernizing the story, or placing characters from several different stories into one.

## **Poetry**

Poems provide a unique opportunity for a drama class, as they can be "acted out" instantaneously or after planning. Because poetry is often written in first person, it is easy for the participants to put themselves into the actions or emotions expressed in the poem. When selecting poetry to use in class, look for a variety of styles, but keep in mind that the language should be direct enough for the participants to comprehend. Do not be afraid to use poems that are "silly", most children delight in the absurd.

## **Children's books**

A good children's book can provide enough activities for an entire creative drama class period. You can create a warm-up, a game, and an art project based on the theme of the book in addition to drama experiences. The most important factor in choosing books for this purpose is the teacher's or leader's interest - if a particular book gives you many exciting ideas, then that is the one you should use

## **Plays**

With groups that respond well to drama activities, putting on one scene or a short play can be both enjoyable and rewarding. Many students, especially adolescents love planning costumes, sets, props and so on. When full-scale staging is not feasible, a prepared reading or staging of a scene in front of the class and with a few props can also be motivating and rewarding. Not neglecting that good play reading is not an easy task even in L1 the aim should be working through a whole play in such ways that deepen students' understanding of the text and the dramatic

situation. Modern texts are usually easier to explore in the L2 adolescent context for the opportunities they offer both of useful language transfer and of insights into contemporary, social, political and cultural aspects. Whatever the choice of a play, the underlying teaching principle should be that there are no "wrong" answers - through pretending, animals can talk, kids can travel to outer space or the jungle, and the sky can be green while the grass is blue. Students should be free to explore and experience the texts in ways that foster their creative thinking and personal growth.

## **EPILOGUE**

Educating children and adolescents in ways that foster creative development is consistent with Fontana's (1997) notion of "education for being," which means offering our students the right to express their own feelings, to give their view of events, to explain themselves, to reflect upon their own behavior, to have their fears and their hopes taken seriously, to ask questions, to seek explanations in the natural world, to love and be loved, to have their inner world of dreams and fantasies and imaginings taken seriously, and to take their own engagement with life.

In taking the position that every child has the right to creative development we need as language educators to acknowledge that several challenges have to be addressed. First, we need to redefine creative teaching and confront misconceptions about creative thinking. Second, we need to provide students with role models of motivation and persistence in creative thought, and arrive at more capacious ways of assessing creative processes and products. Third, we need to acknowledge that by their very nature, teaching materials are limited. Coursebooks represent the product of careful planning on the part of textbook writers; they are not the result of any interactive and creative process of classroom events and they can hardly address the specific interactive needs and wants of a given group of learners. Because of these limitations I subscribe to Prabhu's (1987, p. 94 ) position that it is better to treat a *text* as a *pre-text* and *course-books* should rather be treated as *source-books*. The real creative process of language learning lies within the nature of interaction amongst the learners and the teacher whose principle goal should be as Piaget (1974) put it .

*to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done- men who are creative, inventive and discoverers*

For all these reasons and also drawn by my own professional experiences as a language educator and a fledgling researcher I have the view that drama approaches offer the teacher unique opportunities to contribute to the above goal.

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## APPENDIX

Some Web-based Resources for Drama in English Language Teaching

### Articles

#### **Creating Drama with Poetry: Teaching English as a Second Language Through Dramatization and Improvisation**

<http://www.cal.org/ericcll/digest/gaspar01.html>

"Creating drama with poetry is an exciting language learning experience. The technique employs a multi-sensory approach to language acquisition by involving second language learners physically, emotionally, and cognitively in the language learning process."

#### **Encouraging English Expression through Script-based Improvisations**

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Berlinger-ScriptImprov.html>

"Dialogues, scenes and plays that approximate real communication provide a dynamic format in which language skills can be introduced and reinforced. Improvisation greatly enhances this approach."

#### **Using Drama and Theatre To Promote Literacy**

**Development: Some Basic Classroom Applications. ERIC Digest.**

<http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-1/drama.htm>

"Although numerous researchers have emphasized the tremendous effect drama and theatre can have on children's cognitive and affective development as well as provided abundant resources for teachers, there still exists a gap between understanding its value and actually applying it."

**Lesson Plans, Teaching Tips and Interactive Web Sites**

**Creative Drama Lesson Plans**

<http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/Alley/3765/lessons.html>

Lesson plans developed for use in a Creative Drama Classroom.

**Child Drama**

<http://www.childdrama.com/>

Classroom ideas, theatre games, plays for performance, and book list.

**Drama in ELT**

<http://www.dramainelt.org/>

This web site is for all those with an interest in the use of drama in education and theatre techniques in language teaching and learning at primary, secondary and university levels.

**The Drama Teacher's Resource Room**

<http://www3.sk.sympatico.ca/erachi/>

At the Drama Teacher's Resource Room we are striving to make it easier for you to encourage creative and challenging experiences for students in your drama classroom.

**The Dramatic Exchange**

<http://www.dramex.org/>

A site where authors post unpublished scripts. Screen carefully for classroom use.

**Dramatic Storytelling in the English Classroom**

<http://www.aspa.asn.au/Projects/english/help.htm>

Role play, historical theater, and drama ideas.

**Exploring Prejudice in Young Adult Literature through Drama and Role Play**

<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Bontempo.html>

Young adult literature provides rich literary material for exploring issues and dilemmas of the human experience as perceived by the young.

**National Standards for Theater Education**

<http://www.byu.edu/tma/arts-ed/>

Information on Improvisation Situations, Theatre Games and Drama and Theatre Books.

**Reader's Theatre Scripts and Plays**

<http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

For younger learners (primary grades level).

**Reading Lady**

[http://www.readinglady.com/Readers\\_Theater/Scripts/scripts.html](http://www.readinglady.com/Readers_Theater/Scripts/scripts.html)

"Reader's Theater" scripts for younger learners (primary grades level).

**Script Formatting**

<http://www.humboldt.edu/~jmf2/floss/323rt.script.example.html>

An example of a tried and true format for creating scripts from existing stories.

**TEFL.NET ESL Lesson Plans, Improvisations**

<http://www.tefl.net/lessonplans/improvisations.htm>

"Improvisations are not role-plays or simulations (although many of them can be adapted as such). The objective here is total spontaneity and improvisation."

**The Virtual Drama Studio**

<http://www.thevirtualdramastudio.co.uk/>

**Nelly Zafeiriadou - bio data notes**

Nelly Zafeiriadou holds a BA in English Language and Literature from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and an MA in Applied Linguistics and ELT from the University of East Anglia. She's currently pursuing Education Doctoral studies at the University of Exeter. She has been the Chair person of the *Teachers of English Union of Thrace and Eastern Macedonia* association, the *BRIDGES* journal Managing Editor and a KPG multiplier for the area of Thrace. She presented papers at national and international conferences and published articles in the areas of educational psychology, literature and culture in language education, authenticity and creativity, critical issues in TESOL and teacher education. Since 2007 she has been serving at the post of an ELT State School Advisor in Drama Prefecture, Eastern Macedonia.

Drama in Language Teaching. Article Â· January 1994 with 21 Reads. Cite this publication.Â By introducing drama-based activities, EFL teachers can provide a genuine context for communication and make the target language more real. 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). In these cases, teachers s An attractive alternative is teaching language through drama because it gives a context for listening and meaningful language production, forcing the learners to use their language resources and, thus, enhancing their linguistic abilities. It provides situations for reading and writing. It is very useful in teaching literary texts as it helps in analyzing plot, character and style. It also involves learners more positively and actively in the text. As Wilga Rivers (1983) states, "the drama approach enables learners to use what they are learning with pragmatic intent, something that is mos