

Using Creative Drama in the Elementary ESL Classroom

Gisela Ernst-Slavit and Kerri J. Wenger

"Grandmother, may I come in?" asks a small girl in a red construction paper cloak.

"Why, certainly, my dear!" smirks the child playing the wolf, dressed in grandma's hat.

On a Friday morning in February, a group of five second and third graders are gathered in a corner of their ESL pullout classroom, talking excitedly. Dressed in simple costumes they have made themselves, they perform *Little Red Riding Hood* to 10 of their ESL peers, 2 adult volunteers, and their ESL teacher.

"What big eyes you have!" says Ji-hae¹, in the role of Little Red Riding Hood, to her friend Bruno, who is playing the wolf. Meanwhile, Misha, a habitually quiet boy, is enthusiastically chopping a construction paper tree with a classroom ruler.

Misha's role as woodcutter is pivotal to the story as he will later rescue Grandma and Little Red Riding Hood. Yet Misha, a native of Russia, has been in the United States for little more than 2 months. When he arrived in Cecilia Thorne's ESL class he spoke no English; because there were no children to speak his L1 (Russian) with him, he seldom spoke at all. Throughout the past 10 weeks Misha had remained very quiet in his Grade 2 and ESL classrooms. Thorne and the other children were quite surprised when, in response to her question, "Who wants to be the woodcutter?" an excited, red-faced boy shouted his own name: "Misha!"

The action continues. His scripted conversation with Ji-hae drawing to a close, Bruno the wolf advances on Little Red Riding Hood, who shrieks, "Help! Help!" and runs

across the makeshift stage. Hearing his cue, Misha stops chopping his tree and chases the wolf, brandishing his ruler and making growling noises. A delighted audience sighs in relief as the wolf is captured by a ferocious but grinning Misha.

To prepare for this performance, Thorne's students have listened to the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Hyman, 1697/1983), discussed characters and plot, outlined their own script, prepared props and costumes, and rehearsed different roles and actions. Throughout these different steps, the children

have worked in groups, read and written together, drafted a script, negotiated decisions, commented on lines and costumes, gestured, argued, used their imaginations—and laughed a lot. In this respect they are not much different from thespians across the centuries who have used their love of language and performance to move, teach, and entertain their peers.

Drama has existed for thousands of years. At first, music, movement, and dance were used exclusively for religious purposes. Gradually these art forms spread to other arenas of community life, including entertainment and exhibition. Early records show that the Egyptian and Japanese Kabuki theaters contributed much to the use of folklore in creative performances. Later the Greeks celebrated drama and incorporated storylines containing perplexing questions that remain major themes of Western literature. Today creative and process-centered drama allowing participants to imagine, enact, and reflect on human experiences is used for many purposes, including entertainment, instruction, and therapy (Heinig, 1993).

In the ESL classroom the use of creative drama techniques such as role-playing, pantomime, tableaux, skits, or puppets has proven extremely beneficial in the acquisition of all language skills (Maley & Duff, 1993; Verriour, 1985).

In addition to the well-known benefits such as the internalization



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of language patterns from the memorization of lines or the enhancement of listening skills as students carefully attend to the words spoken by the narrator, actor, or storyteller, the use of dramatic forms to explore themes relevant to students' experiences can enable them to reach a greater understanding of themselves and their world. This experience benefits all children—especially students like Misha who, in spite of their limited knowledge of English, become active thespians and participate in a joyful and meaningful experience. This article discusses the many benefits of creative drama techniques in the ESL classroom and describes a 5-day plan used in Misha's pullout ESL program for preparing students to enact story events.

Benefits

As Misha's enthusiasm demonstrates, drama can spark children's excitement about learning in new ways. Drama activities allow students to improve their language skills and loosen inhibitions about speaking in front of others. Students develop nonverbal communication skills, such as the use of appropriate gestures and body language, to help them express themselves more vividly across a language barrier. In addition, a number of strong, theoretically based reasons support the use of drama in ESL classrooms.

A Defined Context for Language Use

The learning process that occurs as students hear and produce words while observing actions and gestures can approximate the child's early learning experiences that are heavily dependent on concrete situations with family members. What distinguishes the dramatic learning situation from other academic learning situations is the opportunity for children to engage in face-to-face encounters not normally experienced in the classroom. For example, after the performance of *The Three Little Pigs* (1620/1663), a volunteer teacher overheard a student refuse to help Ji-hae with a writing task. Ji-hae persistently changed her initial polite request for help to a persuasive demand that, if left unfulfilled by her peer, presumably would have led to dire consequences: "You help, yes, or—I'll blow your house down!"

Extended Oral Communication Repertoires

A primary value of creative drama is the opportunity it affords for oral communication. Drama techniques have the singular merit of directly engaging students' emotions, and as a result provide ideal settings for students to learn to express them appro-

priately by using a wide array of communicative devices. When dramatic situations make sense to children in terms of their personal interests and previous experiences, they can extend their understandings and help them embrace fresh ways to express their thoughts (Ernst, 1994). As suggested by Heathcote (1980), children will call upon language to serve their needs for understanding and communication.

Improved Reading

Reading and drama are intimately connected in the learning process. They develop the same personal resources in students, building links between print and experience, dream and reality, and self and other (Booth, 1985). As students review their scripts and learn about their characters, they grow in different ways: They are motivated to read and expect to print, and they take charge of finding meaning. In addition, drama created by students promotes a sense of story. Short stories with a clear beginning, middle, and end and with several characters allow students to follow the plot and participate in the action. For example, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Cauley, 1981) has a clear plot, character roles, and beginning, middle, and end, with the bear family discovering who sat on their chairs, slept on their beds, and tried their porridge.

Enhanced Writing

Drama can provide students with a purpose for writing. When writing is integrated with drama, children can reflect on a problem by expressing their thoughts and feelings in different forms, summarizing the story or adding more familiar variations. For example, in one ESL classroom a group of third and fourth graders wrote their own version of the *Three Little Pigs* (1620/1663) after reading Scieska's (1989) version, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, written from the wolf's perspective. Not only did this encourage students' active involvement in drafting, revising, and editing, but it also allowed them to learn valuable lessons about the use of print for communicative purposes (Ernst & Richard, 1994).

Expanded Listening Skills

Drama can help students acquire language. Listening to a story or performance more than once allows students to internalize language patterns. When stories with repetitive

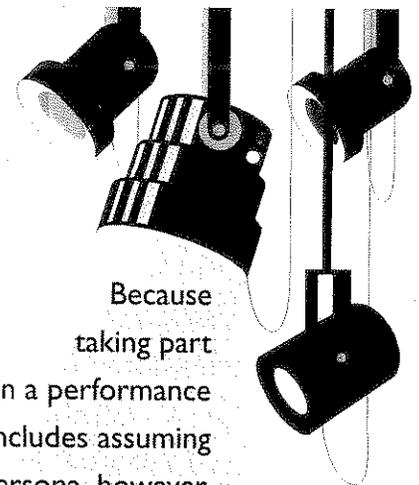
language, such as *The Little Red Hen* (Galdone, 1973), *Caps for Sale* (Slobodkin, 1947), and *The Three Little Pigs* (1620/1663) were performed three or four times in the ESL classroom, students had an opportunity to grasp the content and vocabulary of the story. This allowed less adventurous students to hear the dialogue and observe the actions before they volunteered for a particular role.

Emboldened Risk Taking

Students at the beginning stages of language learning, like Misha, are usually reluctant to become animated participants in performances, as this involves taking risks with language and being very expressive and verbal. Because taking part in a performance includes assuming a persona, however, students become less aware of their mistakes and less inhibited—just as shy children suddenly become outspoken when playing with puppets. Having someone else doing the talking—and making the mistakes—allows students to eliminate their internal censors and lower their affective filter.

Advanced Problem-Solving Skills

Because conflict is the basis for all drama, drama has a strong potential to help students develop problem-solving skills. Students can be encouraged to hypothesize, test possible



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solutions and alternatives, and push for new ideas in the context of dramatic situations. For example, how can students help Andersen's (1843/1986) ugly duckling survive a world that does not accept him? How can they convince the pied piper (1816/1942) to return the children to Hamelin? What advice can they give to the main character in Aesop's fable, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* (Anno, 1989)?

Revised Teacher-Student Relationship

Drama offers teachers the opportunity to negotiate the content of work, alter their relationship with students, and transform the social structure of the classroom (O'Neill, 1989). It was not unusual for Thorne and other adults who volunteered in her classroom to have a role in a play. On those occasions, students and teachers had the same kind of responsibility; that is, they experimented with characters and were immersed in an understandable and meaningful group performance.

Broadened Exploration of Diversity

Many suggest that drama is a rehearsal for living (Heinig, 1993). Drama requires individual and group exploration and participation, and demands initiative and group

eration to create performances. When carefully planned and carried out, drama provides self-validation for group members and a meaningful view of the diversity of experiences among the group. Through creative drama, children can pretend to be the people or things they find interesting and significant. They can relive the experiences of others, including those of characters in their history and social studies books, storybooks, and legends and folktales—as well as the experiences in their everyday lives and fantasy worlds. Assuming different roles allows them to walk in other people's shoes and explore what it is like to be a member of a certain culture, to be tall or short, or to have a parent in another country. Dramatic activities allow children to experiment with different roles and, in the process, identify and empathize with other people.

Heightened Relevancy to Students

Because drama involves the examination of human issues in specific social contexts, the ESL classroom provides an ideal setting for devising learning activities derived from stories that make sense to the child in terms of personal interest and past experiences (Verriour, 1985). For example, as a Grade 3 class prepared to dramatize *Snow White* (Grimm & Grimm, 1812/1974), a child recalled that there was also an awful stepmother in *Cinderella* (Perrault, 1697/1979). At this point several children chimed in and suggested that stepmothers were "mean," "ugly," and "hated children." The teacher helped children move away from these stereotypes by encouraging them to find examples of nice stepmothers and suggest possible solutions for these characters' problems.

Increased Self-Esteem

Students at all levels of language proficiency can successfully participate in drama activities. Beginning ESL students—even those like Misha who are going through the silent period—can use gestures, actions, and body language to perform their roles or act out what is said by the narrator while advanced ESL students function as masters of ceremony, narrators, or prompters.

Students' self-esteem can be enhanced when legends and folktales from their native countries are selected because they represent instances when

their own histories are part of the classroom and they can, for once, function as experts in the culture.

Enriched Humor and Communication

Elementary students, including ESL students, appreciate the silly and the absurd. According to cognitive psychologists (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987), children ages 4 to 6 enjoy and respond to clowning, silly rhyming, slapstick, and riddles—all activities that stimulate language development. Older children also enjoy humor, especially when associated with practical or "knock-knock" jokes and word plays. The use of humor can create an atmosphere for communication and stimulate thinking and learning (O'Day, 1996).

Setting the Stage

The following suggestions for dramatizing a story are applicable to mainstream and ESL classes across different grade levels. Teachers can adapt these suggestions to students' language needs, the program structure, and the classroom format. It is important to note that as children rehearse and perform, they may exchange roles with their peers, increasing their language practice opportunities. By spending an average of 50 minutes a day, a play can be scripted, rehearsed, and performed in 1 week.

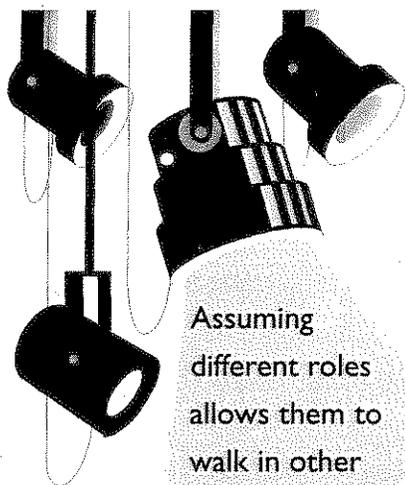
Day 1: Introducing the Story

The teacher narrates a story. The traditional *Cinderella* (Perrault, 1697/1979) tale is a good one to use with beginners because children may have read or heard one of several versions, such as *Yeh-shin* (Louie, 1982), *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Step toe, 1987), *The Egyptian Cinderella* (Climo, 1989), or others (cf., Sierra, 1992).

The teacher shows book covers and allows students to retell the story, talk about the author, and discuss different versions. The teacher prepares questions to help students imagine the feelings of the characters and the characteristics of the surroundings (e.g., How does it feel to be disliked by others? Pretend you are Cinderella. How would you defend yourself against your mean sisters? What might a castle look like?) and reads one or two versions of the story.

Day 2: Scripting the Play

The teacher and students talk about the story, characters, plot, and setting. Students are encouraged to retell the story and add new characters, discard old ones, and redesign the plot. Depending on their proficiency level, students can dictate an outline



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of the story to the teacher or write their own on butcher paper. The students and teacher read scripts to one another.

Day 3: Preparing the Stage

If a script has been written, students read and revise it. Students plan with the teacher what needs to be done and how it will be done. Work on props, the stage, and costumes begins.

Day 4: Getting Ready

Students complete props and costumes. If they are using a script, they read through it with the teacher. The teacher models how different characters will move on stage, where and when they might make their entrance, how the audience will behave, how the actors will end their performances, and what the master of ceremonies will do.

Day 5: The Play Begins

The teacher asks for volunteers to participate in the performance. Having practiced for 4 days, the children know every role. Because the less talkative students generally do not volunteer at first, the teacher may repeat performances so that all students have a chance to participate.

Conclusion

As Dickson (1989) writes, "Both language students and actors are involved in communicating a message to others. In order to be successful both must decide what message is appropriate and how to communicate it" (p. 300). Drama in the ESL classroom, as Dickson suggests, pushes students to use language in ways that differ from ordinary classroom exchanges. In recreating familiar stories, children learn to use language in new ways. This kind of face-to-face interaction maximizes language learning in many ways and creates a classroom atmosphere that allows all students—regardless of their language ability—to actively participate in the performance. Students thoroughly enjoy the learning experience.

Note

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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Drama in the ESL classroom pushes students to use language in ways that differ from ordinary classroom exchanges as they recreate familiar stories. (SM). Discover the world's research. Using creative drama in helping writing skill improve efficiently enabled pupils to better restructure processes like internal, external structure, and language and expression, as it was in the previous studies (Ataman, 2006; Erkan & Ayka, 2014; Sevim & Zdemir Erem, 2013; Susar K, 2009) Accordingly, creative drama may turn the child into a self-confident, successful and a person who takes responsibility for improving his. Tips and strategies for English language learners in elementary school. <http://eslartsadvantage.com/>. Connect with teachers and learn about opportunities in your region with ESL Arts Advantage! <http://esldrama.weebly.com/>. The mandatory drama-ESL class and multiliteracies pedagogy." Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance. Volume 16. Issue 4 (2011). Creative Play Production in the Classroom. Yale, Yale Publishers. Royka, Judith (2002). Overcoming the Fear of Using Drama in English Language Teaching. The Internet TESL Journal, vol.8, #6, June 2002. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Royka-Drama.html>. IMPROV <http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/index.html>. ESL Drama Games. Teach Children English Through Drama. Menu. Skip to content. Welcome. About Me. To use puppets to teach English, you do not need to be a ventriloquist or expert in puppetry, I am definitely not! You may even feel silly imitating voices but by following a few simple tips and a little practice in front of a mirror you will discover how to find your own voice to help your puppets and stories come to life and interact with children successfully. I usually set up my character puppet outside the classroom before the beginning of the lesson so the children don't see the puppet being taken out of an old box or cupboard. I announce that a very special English guest is coming to class, this secures the children's attention and creates some buzz and curiosity.