

Actors in ELT. Bring Drama to Your Classroom

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Abstract

In the digital era, it has become simply impossible not to think of school as an integrating part of the changing world. The latest trends in the field of teaching abound in innovative computer-based methods. But still, communication is the very basis of studying a foreign language. Thus, an extremely efficient way to stimulate communication remains the implementation of drama-based activities, an approach that remains successful in terms of language acquisition and practice even today, in the modern world. This article is meant to encourage teachers of English to continue to insert drama in the classes for the numerous benefits it brings to students.

Think about the future classroom. When you imagine it, what do you see? Probably new technologies: more advanced mobile devices, streaming internet, virtual field trips, machine translators. Indeed it is the contemporary trend that teachers have to embrace, to implement a modern teaching approach in their lessons, to correspond to the requirements of the society we and our students live in. Yet, despite all technological advances, there are probably a few constants that stand the test of time. It is the beauty, the emotion generated by students` interaction during the English class. Since the teaching-learning process is about communication, that brings English to life.

William Shakespeare once claimed that

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;*

*They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.
As You Like It Act 2, scene 7, 139–143*

Likewise, the English class is not a rigid, closed space, but a stage that allows mobility, action, where learners are provided opportunities to express themselves, to take on different roles, to speak uninhibitedly, to rehearse, in a word, to practice, assimilate and produce language in a more relaxing, playful and natural way. One alternative to creating such an environment is by designing more drama- based classes.

Using drama in the ESL classroom is not a new concept, but it continues to refresh the all beaten teaching track, add sparkle to the much more modern computer-based classes of the 21st century.

Drama- based classes are still not to be ignored for the range of benefits proved in improving efficiency when studying a foreign language. Here are some of them.

Language skills The improvisation aspect of drama offers students opportunities for developing their communicative skills in authentic and dynamic situations. By using drama in the English classroom, we can use English with our students in intriguing and useful ways. The language can be used in context, and this makes it come to life. It helps to learn new vocabulary, builds confidence, motivates the students and helps shift the focus from teacher to student, thus being highly student-centered. It provides many outlets for self-expression, since playing is an essential part of a child`s development and self-discovery. Students will improve their speaking and listening skills in performing scenes and also their writing skills through such activities as dialogue writing. Drama also teaches the “*pragmatics*” of language, how we appropriately use language to get something done, like make a request.

Lifelong skills The many teamwork activities enable students to develop organizational skills and to think on their feet. These are tools that can be used in all aspects of their lives. These skills will be useful in the future job market when the students need to work with others, or even in the

future job interview – when the potential employer asks an unexpected question and you need to think quickly.

Student-centredness Drama puts the teacher in the role of supporter in the learning process and the students can take more responsibility for their own learning. Ideally, the teacher will take a less dominant role in the language class and let the students explore the language activities. In the student centered classroom, every learner is a potential teacher for the group. Drama is known to generate/ It is known that drama can generate special situations which often make considerable demands on the teacher's flexibility and skills.

Movable class Drama-based activities break the boundaries of a rigid traditional class, turning it into a dynamic, much livelier class that surely avoids monotony. It gets students up and moving around and interacting with each other. It is particularly appealing to kinesthetic learners, but can be used successfully for all learners. Not only does movement bring novelty but also a surge of energy and enthusiasm among even the most reluctant students.

Imagination Drama for second language learners can provide an opportunity to develop imagination

and empathy. The students can go beyond the here and now and even 'walk in the shoes' of another. Furthermore, drama provides an opportunity for independent thinking. Students are encouraged to express their own ideas and contribute to the whole creative process. Creative drama classes will offer exercises in critical thinking and the chance for the students to be inventive. A good example of this is small-group role-plays. The ESL/EFL group will have many situations where students can develop their own ideas as well as collaborative skills when interacting with classmates.

For this reason, the benefits of drama to develop imagination should not be undervalued. In our school routines focused on memorization and compulsory subjects, we sometimes do not spend enough time on encouraging our students to use their imagination, which is the spark that transforms the ordinary into something incredible. Imagination is that magical force that goes beyond facts, figures and techniques and can inspire new ideas. There is a need to cultivate this trait in our students. Imagination is closely linked to dreams and motivates us to get

up every morning. Drama has the ability to keep this alive and/or rekindle that which the routine in our daily lives is burying in ourselves. We need imagination to create a better world. In order to accomplish anything worthwhile, we first need to imagine and dream it. It may seem trivial or unimportant, but dreams without imagination would be like life without colour.

Confidence booster

Beside the gain in language acquisition, drama related activities contribute to the students' self-esteem, help build their confidence in using the target language (English) since the situations created are meaningful and imitate real life. Added to this, it is certain that self-acceptance and acceptance of others can be encouraged in subtle ways, Drama in its purest form gives the student several avenues to self-awareness. It is one of the closest literary forms to life itself. It is a dynamic process that reveals and examines aspects of the complicated lives we lead (Price 1980), and this leads me to believe that there are many subtle benefits to drama in the ESL class.

In this line of thought, drama has the potential to empower the students, give them many opportunities to have pride in their work, it teaches them responsibility, problem solving, management and directing skills .

Team building

Group work builds social awareness and understanding as we walk in the 'shoes of another'. Drama can be an excellent opportunity for studying human nature and working in harmony. The play acting provides the means for a healthy release of emotion in a safe setting which can work to relieve the tension of learning in a second language. Moreover, it promotes class bonding, due to the high level of collaboration that drama involves.

Fun

Drama has the potential of making the learning experience fun and even memorable for the students, because it is interactive and visual.

While drama does have a characteristic of recreation, the element of fun should not be underestimated. When the students are enjoying an activity, they are learning and letting their guard down. It is shyness and fear of using English that very often blocks language acquisition. On the other hand, when the students are submerged in a fun and dynamic activity, they are more open to new concepts and learning will occur. When the students are having fun, they let their second language guard down and become less inhibited. The students will tend to relax and stop blocking out the new language. They will forget how hard it is and start absorbing the ideas presented.

Changing the students' perception of the language learning from negative to positive is a huge plus for the learning process.

Real life situations

We all present ourselves in our everyday life as we want to be perceived. We all act out theatrical performances to present ourselves the way we wish to be seen. When we are in the presence of others, we are, to some extent, on stage. We will act and communicate in our own interests to influence the people around us to act voluntarily in accordance with our individual plans. We are, to some extent, re-creating ourselves all the time, as our social world evolves. In everyday life, first impressions are so very important. Therefore, how we are perceived often depends on a blink of a moment, and this may define us for a long period of time, if not forever. At the same time, our communication skills are essential to the way we are seen by others. Our words and body language project subtle messages to those around us and others respond in accordance to what they perceive as "us". In life, we all play many roles; therefore, we wear many masks.

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves –j the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be (Goffman, p.30).

The more convincing we are in our own roles and the better we are at communicating our ideas, the more likely we are to become the person we want to be. Therefore, it makes sense that dramatic skills can help us become the person we wish to develop into. In this way, drama has a wider reach than simply making us more fluent in a second language. It has the potential of making our lives better, as we will be better understood, and may help us grow into the person we want to be. Drama is all about how we present ourselves. The better a student can communicate, the more likely will the others be to see him as he wishes to be seen. Therefore, the skills drama develops can help the student become the person that he/she wants to be.

In conclusion, role-playing or dramatic approach has proved a powerful tool in the English classroom. It teaches cooperation, empathy for others, decision making skills and encourages an exchange of knowledge between the students. These aspects alone make role-playing beneficial, because the students are learning from each other, yet there are many other advantages of drama-

related activities. Apart from developing communication skills, it encourages leadership, team work, compromise, authentic listening skills and practice with real life savoir-faire. However, it does not stop there. It teaches cooperation, empathy, develops decision making skills, promotes the exchange of knowledge, builds confidence and self-esteem, refines presentation skills, encourages self-acceptance and acceptance of others, features of empowerment, pride in work, responsibility, problem solving, management and organizational skills, and last but not least, it fosters creativity and imagination.

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