

## APPLYING DRAMA TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN IRAN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on the teaching of drama, its advantages to language teaching and learning, and how to utilize drama in English classrooms. It concludes with some diverse activities for contributing English learners in India. Drama here means any practical and educational activity which stimulates the use of language in everyday life and involves some amount of imaginary situation(Holden,1981).Some benefits of using drama in language learning are enhancing learner's autonomy and responsibility over their own learning, providing a stress free atmosphere to learn the language, putting new vocabularies and expressions in context, helping to get acceptable pronunciation and intonation, proper understanding of foreign language culture and building up learners' confidence to speak in public.

These drama techniques have been utilized by some English teachers at two different high schools in Ilam Province in Iran which amazingly turned the English classrooms to active participants, reduced the academic stress and provided natural context for learning. Although text books prepared the learners with language, drama activities prepared the learners to participate with real communication and paved the way for the learners to experiment personal language learning.

**KEYWORDS:** Drama, Drama techniques, language teaching, Communication.

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### INTRODUCTION

Students or learners are supposed to catch learning materials through experience. Such experimental learning is one of the most promising traits of educational drama. It is a learning chance to utilize the language in operation which was not present in traditional language classes. This involves using the language to learn it, which is the central goal of communicative language teaching, the strong version (Howat, 1984, P.297). Charlyn Wessels (1987), author of Drama

begins her book by putting “drama is doing [something or an action]”. Admittedly drama is giving the learner an opportunity to take personal trip through kinetic experimental learning. A well-known Chinese proverb says “tell me and I will forget; teach me and I will remember; involve me and I will learn”. Many reasons have been mentioned referring the use of drama activities and techniques in the language classroom. It can create entertaining, fun and motivation and can provide different opportunities for the use of language in a context and is also useful in teaching and learning cross-curricular content, etc. (Phillips, 2003; Hillyard, 2010). Via drama activities the student learns by developing practical “hands-on” skills for applying meaning into real-life situations. This is in perfect agreement with the communicative principles of languages teaching.

There are several studies in favor of benefits of drama in foreign language learning, such as Maley and Duff (2001), Brumfit (1991) and Phillips (2003), and a great deal of materials to teach languages through drama techniques like Di Pietro (1987), Holden (1981), Kao & O’Neill (1984) and Phillips (2003). As Miller (2008) states learning English through drama will be an elective in Hong Kong by the year 2012 which provides new avenues for language teaching and results in real communication, involving emotions, ideas, adaptability and appropriateness (Barbu,2007).

According to Fleming (2006) “drama is a learner-centered approach”, so it allows learners to become active participants in the learning/teaching process. Some research studies (Maley and Duff 2001, Phillips, 2003) show that drama activities can motivate language learners and teachers. Drama activities let students to communicate in the foreign language including those with limited vocabulary (Aldavero, 2008). Carkin et al. (2008) studied the effects of three genres of drama in Taiwan and found what the students themselves felt:

Students with low proficiency and low confidence can benefit greatly from drama, just like the “good” students. Students can benefit from participating in group work as well as in pairs. Drama provides them with a broad range of opportunities in learning English, and Drama motivates them to learn English and gives them more confidence to learn English( p.23).

### **HOW COME UTILIZING DRAMA TECHNIQUES?**

Even though texts and conversations share vocabularies and expressions necessary for learning, they are lifeless words on a page that can neutralize a learner. Wessel’s believes that using drama activities brings the text books to life by putting imaginations, emotions and feelings of the learners into the process of learning (Wessels 1987).

Providing learners the chance to put themselves directly in the learning experience gives them a good feeling of performing something helpful and hence brings more enthusiasm to the classroom which finally improves their chances of better comprehension. Maley and Duff (1982; P15), in *Drama Techniques in Language Learning*, relate drama to “the naughty child who climbs the high walls and ignores the no trespassing sign”. Wan Yee Sam (1990; P87) agrees by stating “drama activities can be used to provide opportunities for students to be involved actively. The activities involve the students’ whole personality and not only his mental processes”. In fact the small stage in the classroom is a nice preparation for the pupils to face the larger stage known as life.

Desiatova (2009) outlined some of the benefits of using drama in the language classrooms as follows:

1. It causes learners in using the language for genuine communication and real life purposes.
2. It makes language learning an active, motivating experience.
3. It gives confidence and self-esteem to learners in using the language spontaneously.
4. It brings the real world into the classroom (problem solving, research, consulting dictionaries, real time and space, cross-curricular content).
5. It helps the students in acquiring the language through play, make-believe and meaningful interaction.
6. It makes the learning items memorable through direct experience and affects emotions with different learning styles.
7. When dramatizing, students make use of all the appropriate channels (sight, hearing, and physical bodies) for the active involvement in the language learning.
8. It stimulates learners' intellect and imagination.
9. It develops students' ability to empathize with others and become better communicators.
10. It Helps learners in acquiring the language by focusing on the message not the form of their utterance.

Heldenbrand (2003) highlights several advantages of teaching language through drama. He considers it as a funny, relaxed and informal way to learn English. Moreover, he states that drama helps in learning new vocabulary and proper pronunciation and intonation, builds confidence for the learner to speak English, creates atmosphere in the better understanding of culture, motivates the language learner, removes the focus from English textbook and involves the whole person as a total physical activity.

Based on the findings regarding the Indian students studying in Hyderabad, there exist some valuable benefits for bringing drama to English language learner.

### **1. DRAMA PUTS NEW VOCABULARY AND EXPRESSIONS IN THEIR PROPER CONTEXT AND ENVIRONMENT**

Drama activities help to boost language previously learnt (Mordecai, 1985; Fernandez and Coil, 1986; Sam, 1990). Sam concludes that "Drama helps to extend, retain and reinforce vocabulary and sentence structure through role play and communication games" (Sam, 1990; P.86). Particularly at young learner's classes when the teacher brings in a scenario, some props and costumes, certain words and expressions take on a new cognitive meaning in context. Maley and Duff strongly asset that drama vents personal

creativity and energy and this is splendid aim of learning. In fact drama encourages student sensitivity and imagination and thus makes learning more realistic and meaningful (Fernandez and coil, 1986; Sam, 1990).

## **2. DRAMA HELPS IN GETTING ACCEPTABLE PRONUNCIATION AND INTONATION IN ENGLISH**

Wrong stress position and incorrect pronunciation were the most repeated drawbacks of the students in the two investigated institutes. Goodwin writes (2001, P.126) “drama is a particularly effective tool for pronunciation teaching since various components of communicative competence (discourse intonation, pragmatic awareness, non verbal communications) can be practiced in an integrated way”. The inflection of certain words, expressions and sentences tend to result in producing a different meaning in the language learning the suitable way to speak sentence or question forms will add another element to communicating in English. As supplements, Carolyn Graham’s small talk (1986) and Jazz Chants (2001) are best language resources to assist learners with intonation patterns.

## **3. DRAMA HELPS STUDENTS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN LEARNING**

Learning is in fact partnership between teachers and students but Jeremy Harmer (1998; P.9) stresses that “good learners do not wait to be taught”. That is students should be responsible for their own learning not for the teacher’s teaching. A competent English teacher never lets the students decide for him, yet he gives them a chance to make decisions about their own way of learning. Autonomy of language learners over their own learning is what we need to inspire in most of English classes in India. Drama techniques surely will provide students with this sense of responsibility and involvement.

## **4. DRAMA SETS A STRESS FREE ATMOSPHERE TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE**

In an attempt to find some emotional problems Iranian language learners may encounter in their English classes, we asked a variety of students at two different high schools in Ilam Province in Iran, the question “What makes you feel better in the class?” The following is a representative of the many similar answers that were given. “I like to enjoy more freedom, to step out of the formal boundaries of teaching and learning process. It makes me psychologically ill at ease when the class is too formal” (Arash, 17 years old, intermediate level). Mehrdad, 1999, asserts that “students should feel that they are investigating, discovering around with the language in question without having too much riding on the outcome”. Maley and Duff, (1982; P.14) also concur by stating “every student needs periods in which to practice what he or she knows without restraint, without fear of being wrong. “Drama is in fact a fun enriching and yet purposeful experience which thoughtfully produces a relaxed informal way to learn English.

## 5. DRAMA ENCOURAGES LEARNERS AND BUILDS UP THEIR CONFIDENCE TO SPEAK IN PUBLIC

Speaking is an important means of communication among human beings and the key to successful communication in individual and social life (Ulas, 2008). A large portion of Middle East language learners, especially Iranian students lacked enough confidence in speaking. This may be due to the limited chance for speaking in the classroom, combined with the false cultural ideology of not making mistakes.

Gill (1996) writes that many Asian students, because of social factors like culture and face, and blocks to communication like affective filters and monitors, initially lacked the confidence to take part in. However, once their affective filters had been lowered and they had overcome the temptation to monitor their language output at every turn, they found that it was possible to have fun and still learn. They could experiment with the new language, and not fear the threat of an imposing teacher – figure constantly supervising and correcting them (Gill, 1996).

## 6. DRAMA HELPS STUDENTS TO BUILD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CULTURE

While there is a strong connection between language and culture, the social distance and also recent political clashes between the Governments of Iran and America, has affected how well Iranian students learn English. Although a hundred percent assimilation to the foreign language culture may not be the goal, proper amount of acculturation is a duty for learning English (Jack, C. Richards, et al. 1985). Miccoli (2003, P.123) also goes so to say that language and culture are married and learning a language cannot be divorced from cultural learning. Brain Heldenbarnd also asserts that “within short skits and drama activities, cultural elements can be described and better understood. Being able to include familiarity with these cultural learning points helps bring a stronger relationship between the language and its meaning. This cultural awareness is easily communicated through drama” (2005, P.31).

As drama takes the burden of language correctness off the students minds, while emphasizing on acceptable communication, their personal outlook on the language and their speaking confidence become greatly enhanced. As Sa’di, an intermediate level student mentioned her small role as a rabbit in a drama gave her more personal confidence so far as to encourage her to play an important role in an English drama of upper level classes.

## MANIFOLD WAYS TO USE DRAMA IN THE CLASSROOM

In our over 18 years of English teaching experience in Iran, We have come up with various techniques to include drama in the classroom curriculum. Drama techniques can be employed at different levels and within any time span from 5 minutes to an entire course term. It may be a simulated T.V. show, a lecture or simply talking with some friends. As for young language learners in Iran, elements of mime and pantomime helped the students participate in

English learning process. Regardless of whether they were speaking or not, they joyfully used lots of gestures and body movements in completing the task asked for.

There are a few examples of diverse drama activities for teachers to incorporate into their teaching repertoire. These techniques turned out to be of great fruition in the two aforementioned institutes in India. By having a taste of creativity and imagination, teachers can adjust these activities to their students' level or come up with some other forms of drama activities.

1. Body talk, no words or sounds, (elementary levels). The teacher can show some basic actions or expressions (such as I am happy / sad/ strong/ cold/ hungry/ etc.) for students and then have students respond by imitating the teacher (Heldenbrand, 2005, p.33)

## 2. GOING A TRIP (INTERMEDIATE –UP)

A group of students are taking a trip to somewhere. They use miming to share what items they need to take and each one is deputized for a position like the bus driver, the paramedic doctor, the tour guide, etc. (ibid, p.34)

## 3. PUTTING A STORY INTO PLAY (INTERMEDIATE)

There are many stories that are perfect for this type of activity. Considering the proficiency level of the students, the teacher chooses a short story and assigns each student a role to play. Some pre-teaching may be necessary but if students know the story or have listened to it in prior lessons they can reach a better preparation level (Sam, W.Y. 1990, P.10).

## 4. CITY OFFICIAL'S ROUND TABLE (UPPER – INTERMEDIATE)

Every and each student is given a role to play, say the head of the police department, the mayor, representative of the school staff, etc. Students by different professional tags discuss problems of their neighbourhood, city or country (Vani Chuhan, 2004).

Teachers can create their own activities to match the themes or topics being learned in their classes. One particular text that gives some clues for further drama activities is operation in English by Gayle Nelson and Thomas Winters (1993).

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The application of drama in English language classrooms in the two Iranian language centers provided to enhance language retention and greatly assisted language development. Drama techniques can be easily employed to imitate neighborhood organizations that reflect the fullest possible range of linguistic competence (Headthorn, 1993; Elgar, 2002).

Although applying drama techniques has been found to highly account for differences between effective and ineffective instruction, among many Iranian EFL teachers, whom we interviewed, the majority approached the issue with hesitancy. They believed that introducing drama into conventional classes would require radical changes in student teacher relationships

would pose a number of organizational problems in an externally strict timetable and would need many teacher training sessions. A word of caution is well in order here; don't let these complications prevent you from realizing the value of drama and applying it especially in teaching English conversation in India. As Gavin Bolton (in Dougil,J. 1987, p.114) affirms that "drama is a unique tool, vital for language development."

Richard Amato also supports the infusion of drama into language learning process by stating that "because students can loose themselves in the characters, plots and situations, they are more apt to receive the benefits of reduced anxiety levels, increased self-confidence and self-esteem and heightened awareness" (Richard Amato 1988, P.145).

Although these authors' study of language teaching and learning through drama have been limited to the two previously mentioned language centers in India, they strongly believe that these techniques can be readily implemented at different levels by other language teachers.

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