

Drama as a Teaching Technique in the Second Language Classroom

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What we learn is influenced and organized by emotions and mind-sets involving expectancy, personal biases and prejudices, self-esteem, and the need for social interaction. The brain ceaselessly performs many functions simultaneously (Omstein & Thompson, 1984). Thoughts, emotions, imagination, and predisposition operate concurrently. Thus, emotions and cognition cannot be separated (Omstein & Sobel, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; McGuinness & Pribram, 1980; Halgren, 1983).

As a pedagogical process, drama can provide the means for connecting students' emotions and cognition. With drama as a teaching technique in the classroom, students' own concerns, interests, and needs are recognized.

Through drama, an instructor can challenge students to expand their knowledge. Verriour says "the teacher structures the drama to expand students' current spheres of reference and increase their understanding, so that each drama provides them with new experiences and fresh perspectives from which to reflect on these experiences" (1985b, p. 150).

Drama allows students to take risks with language and experience the connection between thought and action. According to Verriour: "The teacher's primary aim is to devise dramatic situations which encourage students to engage in independent thinking in order to gain fresh insights about themselves and their world" (1985b, p. 150).

Each of us learns our native language through multiple interactive experiences involving vocabulary and grammar. It is shaped both by internal processes and by social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Drama provides active communication among students and between students and instructors. Verriour argues that "Drama can also provide both teacher and students opportunities for actively negotiating meanings in situations which require abstract, reflective thought and language" (1985a, p. 186).

This article discusses a proficiency problem of some graduates of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC). The author discusses a simple study which was conducted in a DLIFLC classroom. The author presents the results of the study and discusses them. At the end of the article the author offers recommendations and a proposed lesson plan.

Statement of the Problem

Some who graduate from DLIFLC with high scores in standardized proficiency tests cannot express themselves or communicate effectively in their

second language. These graduates use the second language only in short, simple conversations based on dialogs they learned. It becomes evident that what they learned of the second language was not for communication, but for performing on a test. When they need to communicate, particularly in a serious matter, they switch back to their native language.

In some programs at DLIFLC, students are trained to behave according to new cultural rules without understanding these rules or even discussing them. These students are required to memorize sets of dialogs and vocabulary items which may not reflect their own personalities or styles of communication. This approach isolates students from the new language and makes the language acceptable only in the classroom. It may be acceptable to tell children what they are to do and say, but for adults this is not acceptable. Both Paribakht (1985) and Bialystok (1990) note that strategic communication competence is not something that develops in a second language but is an ability that develops first in a child's acquisition of a first language.

In some DLIFLC classrooms the author has observed lack of:

1. connection between what students learn and their personal interests;
2. opportunities for new learning experiences;
3. consideration for learners' personal experiences and knowledge;
4. encouragement to take risks when learning the second language. Some instructors provide quick correction or translation of virtually anything a student might say. Students are not encouraged to search for vocabulary or to negotiate meanings.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is:

1. To test the effectiveness of drama as a teaching technique.
2. To discuss the technique and introduce some of its applications for DLIFLC classrooms.

The Study

Two groups of DLIFLC students were formed, each group comprised of 10 students. The students were in the 22nd week of DLIFLC's 63-week Arabic Basic Course. Before they began the course, none had knowledge of Arabic.

Two days before conducting the study, the students were tested in listening, reading, and speaking. The tests administered were the assessment tests the students usually take every four or five weeks to diagnose their learning problems and to assess their language skills. The average scores for each group were as follows.

<i>Test</i>	<i>Group A</i>	<i>Group B</i>
Listening	C+	C+
Reading	B	B-
Speaking	B+	B

Two lesson plans were developed to cover 100 minutes of instruction (two 50-minute classes). The first plan was used with Groups A and B; the second plan was used with Group B.

First Plan

1. The students engaged in brainstorming and the instructor wrote 10 new vocabulary items on the board.
2. The students listened to a dialog about a birthday party.
3. The students were asked questions about the dialog.
4. The students engaged in role-playing and practiced memorizing and rehearsing the dialog.

Second Plan

1. The students were asked to develop a short play about a birthday party. Each group was divided into smaller groups. Each of these smaller groups was asked to develop one part of the play (buying gifts, arranging for the party, inviting guests). Then the whole group participated in a dramatized birthday party.
2. The students rehearsed and asked the instructor for any new vocabulary items they needed.
3. The students performed the play.
4. The students listened to a recording of the play and discussed the linguistic and cultural differences between their performance and a prerecorded dialog.

After a week, both Group A and Group B were tested on vocabulary retention and on speaking. The tests are described below.

Vocabulary Retention Test

The test included completion questions that included the 10 new vocabulary items. It also included other new vocabulary about the birthday party.

Speaking Test

Students were evaluated on four criteria: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. They received a score of 0 to 5 points on each. Six instructors conducted the speaking tests. The topic addressed was “The Birthday Party.”

	<i>Group A</i>	<i>Group B</i>
Average new vocabulary retained	5	8
General vocabulary about birthday	3	10
Average scores on speaking	12	14

Discussion

If the objectives of a course are to promote long-term retention of information, to motivate students toward further learning, to allow students to apply information in new settings, or to develop students’ thinking—then interaction is preferable to lecture or memorization. The results show that Group B achieved better results than Group A and that drama can be an effective teaching technique for the following reasons.

1. Drama as a teaching technique creates supportive intellectual and emotional environments that encourage students to think. It allows students to apply their communication skills and encourages them to take risks.
2. Drama as a teaching technique promotes long-term retention of vocabulary. Vocabulary the instructor wants to teach may not fit with students’ personalities and may conflict with their needs. Students learn a new language to attain communication skills and express themselves. They do not learn the

language to represent their instructor, but to express themselves as individuals.

3. Drama as a teaching technique motivates students toward further learning and use of the new language as a means of communication. Adult students of a second language, particularly those who learn the language for professional purposes, need to know the culture of the people who use it. They need to know how to use the language with native speakers according to native social behavior patterns and cultural standards. They need to do that while keeping their own cultures, identities, and personalities. Second language learners do not need to forget or ignore their values, beliefs, or social interaction styles while they are communicating in the second language.

Recommendations

Based on the author's experience in using drama as a teaching technique in DLIFLC classrooms, and based on the results of the study above, the author offers the following recommendations. Some recommendations relate to textbooks, curricula, and course materials. Others relate to instructors' performance, preparation, and responsibility.

Instead of textbooks and curricula based on setting or place ("At the Post Office," "At the Doctor's Office," "In the Market," etc.), textbooks and curricula should be based on personal expression (to greet, thank, request, negotiate, criticize, express sarcasm, joke, offer support, offer sympathy, narrate, debate, etc.). Life is too complex to be summarized in a few situations. There are many foreign language course and curricula developers who produce books and curricula on so-called "real-life situations." However, what people really communicate in doctors' offices or any of the other standard settings is often limited (and sometimes nonverbal). Also, what really occurs in these settings can differ greatly from country to country. For example, in the United States a receptionist in a doctor's office may ask about health insurance, but in a country where health service is free there is no place for that kind of conversation.

Foreign language proficiency means ability to express one's feelings, desires, and opinions in appropriate verbal and body language. One should not assume another personality when using a second language. In second language instruction, the focus should be on the student, not on setting. The objective of instruction should be to develop communicative skills which the student can use effectively without sacrificing his or her personality.

Authentic drama presentations should be used. Dramatic films and television shows are excellent audiovisual materials. Billions of dollars are spent in their production. They can be used to instruct students in culture as well as in

Mamdouh El-Nady

listening comprehension.

The following learning activities plan can be used for a class in English as a second language.

First hour (warm-up):

Students present what they found on the Internet (homework).

Students watch a movie in English with subtitles.

Students perform reading, listening, and speaking activities.

Second hour:

Students are provided with detailed descriptions of characters in a movie.

They are asked to read the descriptions and match them with the characters.

Third hour:

In the computer lab, students listen to short statements from characters in the movie. The students translate these statements into their native language. To check answers, the computer provides relevant segments of the movie with subtitles.

Fourth hour:

Students discuss the movie and its characters.

Fifth hour:

The instructor chooses a topic based on a scene from the movie.

Students form groups, develop a dialog, and perform role-playing.

Sixth hour:

Students watch the relevant scene from the movie and compare it with their performance, discussing linguistic and cultural differences.

Seventh hour:

Students watch the movie without subtitles and ask questions.

Homework:

Students are assigned to use the Internet to find additional information in English about the movie or about the actors and actresses who appeared in it.

Instructors should take on the responsibility of enhancing students' communication skills. Instructors should help students overcome their communication problems, even if these are problems in the students' native language. Instructors should be trained in teaching drama and public speaking. Instructors should be able to provide basic voice training and to teach voice physiology and phonetics. Instructors should conduct voice drills and

provide instruction in reading prose and poetry aloud. The instructor should be able to conduct exercises in gesturing and body movement, pantomime, and improvisation. Some universities have begun to provide drama training for foreign language instructors. The Institute for Applied Language Studies at the University of Edinburgh offers a course in "Active Learning Through Drama" for instructors who wish to use drama activities in foreign language teaching.

Instructors should encourage students to take risks in using the second language. Instructors should help students select vocabulary which matches their needs. With this help from instructors, students learn to use the new language as a means of communication outside the classroom.

For role-playing activities, the instructor may select the topic but the students should develop the dialogue. The instructor can present an issue and ask students to form a panel of experts, with each student expressing an opinion or making an observation.

For example, the instructor can ask students to research a social or political issue and to join in a debate. After the debate they can watch others debate the same issues. It is very important that students discuss the issues before seeing others debate because this will encourage them to think and to take risks in using the second language. After the students have watched a debate they can discuss the linguistic and cultural differences between their performance and that of the debaters they watched.

Role-play activities should begin on the first day of classes. Those who do not know a language sometimes use gestures and body language to fill communication gaps. This can be done in the classroom. After attempting to communicate in this manner, students can ask the instructor for five words they need to help fill communication gaps. Students then can continue to ask for words until they are able to communicate verbally.

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Mamdouh El-Nady

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