The importance of drama in education for oral language proficiency

Clive Scharenguivel

LULTAC '89: Language use, language teaching and the curriculum, 13-15 December 1989, Hong Kong

Copyright © 1989 The Author

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.


This document was archived with permission from the copyright holder.
The importance of drama in education for oral language proficiency

Clive Scharenguivel

Paper presented at the 5th ILE International Conference on "LULTAC '89" (Language Use, Language Teaching & Curriculum)
Hong Kong, 13 - 15 December 1989
THE IMPORTANCE OF DRAMA IN EDUCATION
FOR ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

by Clive Scharenguivel

The use of drama and drama in second language teaching has gained increasing popularity in the West over the past decade. The work of Via (1976), Dixey and Rinvoluer; (1978) Maley and Duff (1982) and Smith (1984) has done much to promote the use of drama in ESL. Via has used improvisations, theatre games and voice exercises to help Japanese university students improve their comprehension and speaking skills in English conversation.

The widespread interest in drama can perhaps be explained because it offers a uniquely integrated approach to the development of both oral communication skills and personal growth.

However, although educational drama was introduced and recommended by the Ministry of Education in Singapore in its Primary schools programme as early as 1971, it has not been readily accepted in the school curriculum. Many teachers and principals who still regard it as a luxury subject, (an educational frill) or at the most an out-of-school activity to be enjoyed by a few, talented pupils.

The distrust or failure to accept educational drama may be attributed to the following reasons -

1. Much confusion and uncertainty over its concepts and practices;

2. In Singapore's examination-oriented education system, in which written language is over-emphasised at the expense of oral expression, drama is regarded by parents, teachers and educationists as a training for the stage or as an ECA activity to be enjoyed by a few talented pupils ("I don't want my child to be an actor/actress.")

3. Possibly because of its intangible aims and processes, the evaluation of progress and achievement remains somewhat elusive and its aims difficult to define and its application within the classroom has therefore not achieved widespread acceptance.

The importance of drama in teaching English in our schools cannot be over emphasized. John Stewig states that "probably one of the strongest contributions drama makes is to oral language proficiency." According to P. Lindsay, "the use of drama, in the
widest sense, reminds teachers and learners that speaking another language involves acting in that language," since speaking a language involves paralinguistic vocal cues and features like gestures, facial expression, and non-verbal sounds.

Drama has three important values for the language teacher. First, drama is "an excellent technique for eliciting autonomous interaction in speech, second, it kindles and arouses in the pupils a sense of awareness and interest, and provides the most effective incentive and motivation to learn; and third, drama by its very nature is not a matter of knowing about, but of doing, and can help pupils to learn to use language in situations where they have to communicate using the whole self and not just the voice.

Psychologists have shown that children learn best through the play-way method. As Nancy E Curry writes, "Play is a multi-purpose tool which assists the child in realizing his effectiveness as the initiator in the learning process." The child brings a strong desire to explore the environment and "symbolize thought and fantasies in dramatic play." It is play-living, in which as Winifred Ward says, "a child 'tries on life' by putting himself in the place of grownups," or, as Dorothy Heathcote points out an "attempt to pre-live these experiences in imagination."

Teachers who have used dramatic activities in the classroom know that the class comes to life at once at the mention of a game, 'a play or a dramatization of any form. Even the uninterested or bored pupils will brighten up and apply themselves with immense enthusiasm to language practice when the teacher takes the full language items or sentence patterns and transfers them into interesting dramatic situations.

Teachers should make maximum use of the child's natural interest and love for dramatic activity and make believe, and the language teacher, in particular, should use drama whenever possible to provide much needed motivation for learning. The language teacher should thus plan and present varied specific, creative drama activities that would provide enjoyment and at the same time reinforce the learning of the language. By creating interesting situations, and by encouraging pupils to use the language in dramatized situations, the teacher will bring language to life, making lessons more meaningful and purposeful to the pupils.

Drama has many other important values for the language teacher which are worth pointing out.

Educational drama improves a range of skills related to language learning. Some of these are thinking, creativity, observation, imagination and verbal accuracy and fluency.
Creative drama activities will provide students with many language experiences which would not ordinarily be available and thereby to increase their linguistic competence and range. Through drama, students may express, needs, feelings, attitudes and opinions. They may argue, persuade, justify, defend, complain, inform, instruct, report, explain, negotiate and mediate. They learn to link language to other forms of communication, that is gesture, facial expressions, body language and they increase their fluency.

Drama is effective as a means of communicating ideas and feelings to other people and of putting ideas across clearly and effectively.

Giving confidence is also the key to improved linguistic competence when teaching English. Most students in our schools may have the verbal and written competency but lack the fluency and confidence to express themselves orally. Apart from literacy problems, the ability to express themselves effectively and increase their word power depends to a large extent on confidence and developing self-esteem.

How do you teach confidence? It is my belief that it can be achieved by placing learning into an active context. It is gained by doing and speaking in front of other people, learning to think on one's feet; taking risks; trusting one's own judgement and finding resources in difficult situations. Language and confidence develop out of first-hand experience. The methods employed by most language teachers today help to develop the learner's confidence to use language effectively and to move from passive learning to active. But for imaginative and creative use of language one should turn to drama.

In my research, I have found that improvised drama in particular can give students scope to express ideas and feelings (the affective domain) and to make fullest use of mind, body and imagination.

Working with the group will help them to develop the self confidence and a deeper awareness and understanding of each other's point of view, and, as their mutual trust and sensitivity increase, the natural barriers to communication shyness, self-consciousness, diffidence etc will be eliminated. Besides, through improvised situations a group can explore character and situations of conflict, probe problems and gain insight into the way human beings are motivated. Individual students can be helped towards maturity of personal expression and fluency of communication.

Through drama the student has the opportunity of using language to cope with and respond to a number of situations. He can become aware of the different linguistic demands placed upon
him when put in various social roles for examples, in communicating with people in different social positions such as (a) an employer, a doctor, or a principal of a school; or responding in various social situations - discussing a friend's personal problems. Acting-out has helped the students in my group experiment with the appropriateness of a number of social registers. And it is possible for the student immediately to modify, correct or develop his use of language as he goes along.

One of the most important aspects of drama is not just the use of words on language but, very important, the effectiveness of voice as a means of expression. My research with both pupils, students and adults in the Extra Mural Studies Dept. of the University has shown the importance and complexity of the use of the projection and modulation of the VOICE and in particular INTONATION. Role-simulation and dialogues have helped the students get the language right in terms of stress, intonation, register and effective communication in order to carry through transactions successfully. Our education system - which is very examination oriented has sadly neglected this vital training.

Through drama situational English can be explored in total context. The text book may give us only the physical setting and the appropriate situational vocabulary and structural phrases. There are other elements which are equally important. The student needs to go behind the words to examine the functions, behaviour and feelings involved in the situation.

In life, roles are constantly changing: we are, in turn, passenger, customer, colleague, friend, husband/wife, teacher, etc., and the way we play these roles and the language we use is coloured by our status, self-image, moods, attitudes and feelings. If roles and personality are ignored we teach language in a vacuum. In any transaction, interaction or relationship the effect of what we say depends not only on the words we use but how we use them, and learners need to learn how to use language appropriately. By subtle alterations of tone and emphasis we can modify or change the meaning of the words and structures we use. The same arrangement of words can be made polite, aggressive, tentative or pleading by changes of tonal quality, timing, stress and intonation and the accompanying facial expressions and body language. Drama techniques can directly engage the learner's feelings and make him aware that meaning is not conveyed just through words alone.

Teachers often find that even though pupils may have performed sentence patterns and drills quite fluently and may give every indication of having mastered the patterns, they usually have problems in transferring their classroom abilities to real-life communication situations. This is because the conditions under which they achieve this mastery and exercise this fluency are highly artificial and quite unlike the conditions of normal
conversation. In class, pupils can probably understand more than they can speak, but outside the classroom they usually find the reverse is true - they may be able to say many things, but can understand very little. Very often pupils may not even understand what they are drilling or repeating, so the drills and patterns practice become a meaningless routine and bear no relationship to the use of English as a means of communication. The drills and sentence patterns have only resulted in pupils speaking in a stilted and artificial manner which is divorced from English spoken by native speakers.

In fact, it has been observed that pupils persist and persevere when they are communicating with their peers in a real situation. In planning a language programme, this should be taken into consideration. Interest must be given high priority, and the programme should provide a means by which the pupils can do more than learn the semantic union between word and object, or word and experience.

Thus the real test of success in language teaching should be whether or not the pupils in our schools are able to use the language in various situations in which they have a real need, a deep desire to say something and to someone to whom they genuinely want to say something.

In other words, steady improvement will come from individual motivation and purpose: that personal desire to perfect one's communicative effectiveness which is stimulated by genuine interest in what one is doing.

Speech is an affective-social process as well as a cognitive one. Some psychologists maintain that the influence of attitudes and feelings in language learning is a greater contributing factor in determining pupil achievement and success than the cognitive. The essential ingredient which injects life into sentence patterns learned in the classroom is being able to express ideas, emotions and feelings in the language. However, these ingredients are generally missing in the language classes.

The goal of the teacher, then, must be to bridge the gap and link the language taught in the classroom with the 'real' English spoken by native speakers. The pupils must be made to see that the way they have learned to talk about tables and books and about themselves in the classroom is extendable and can be applied in real-life situations. Classroom experiences requiring authentic communication in real-life situations which demand the use of informal conversational English will give pupils close contact with the language used by native speakers. To achieve this end, the teacher's task is to devise a wide range of real and imagined situations and dramatic dialogue in which pupils can use and practice the language naturally and appropriately.
Empirical research demonstrates that teachers who use creative drama activities have found that children are more articulate and express themselves more fluently than those who have been deprived of this programme. Charlotte Ludwig showed that a group of kindergarten pupils who were involved in creative drama for a period of three months made significantly greater improvements in articulation than did the group who were given the usual classroom teaching programme.

In another study Earl Blank found that creative drama contributes to the positive development of personality and was effective in developing voice and vocabulary.

All of these studies suggest that the long term and consistent use of creative drama activities can have positive impact on the oral and written language abilities of pupils of widely different ages, with different "academic" abilities, and from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Although there are no significant "accountable" beneficial outcomes there is a foundation of support for the positive impact of creative drama in the classroom on language development, on oral and written fluency on critical thinking on literature comprehension on attitudes towards English and language Arts and on the appreciation of literature.

CONCLUSION

Some Contributions of Educational Drama to Language Teaching

1. Drama provides both teacher and pupils the opportunity of tapping an enormous variety of situations for the teaching of Oracy.

2. Drama is also an excellent technique for eliciting autonomous interaction in speech.

3. Drama kindles and arouses a sense of awareness and interest, normally not encountered in the usual pupil-teacher classroom relationship and thus provides the most effective incentive and motivation to learn.

4. Drama is doing and students learn to use the language in situations where they have to communicate using the total self and not just the voice.

5. Drama helps a person to become (i) confident (ii) fluent in self-expression (iii) self-reliant (iv) creative and imaginative.