IDEAS

Drama and Oral Communication

Read about how the use of drama has helped to improve the oral communication skills of Secondary 4 Normal (Technical) students from four neighbourhood schools.

It is often assumed that drama activities have a direct impact on oral communication skills and can therefore be used as strategies in English language learning. There has been little research to investigate this, especially in the Singapore context, where English may be the second or even third language in regular classroom interactions.

This project was conceptualised as a case study to investigate the impact of using process drama as pedagogy for teaching oral communication. The investigation focused on Secondary 4 Normal (Technical) [N(T)] students from four schools in Singapore. Students participated in 10 "process drama" lessons led by trained facilitators, and were tested prior to and following the intervention.

Process drama (Haseman, 1991; O'Neill, 1995) is a genre of drama education practice which focuses on collaborative investigation and problem solving in an imaginary world. Process dramas use "pre-texts" (photographs, newspaper articles, music, artefacts, etc.) to "frame" the investigation and raise questions for the students. The process drama approach contextualises and sequences specific drama conventions into a cohesive structure. Such planned dramas provide opportunities for authentic pedagogy which mirrors real-life situations.

Process dramas can be devised for a range of learning contexts and may be invaluable in facilitating interdisciplinary links by using drama to frame learning while drawing on content and concepts from various subject areas. While working through process dramas, the students are learning in and through the art form simultaneously. Teachers who are trained in this area may integrate content, concepts, and processes from a range of disciplines into an extended learning experience.

What we did

Teachers and schools proposed that N(T) students be the focus of this study, as it was felt that they were in need of opportunities for language development and would respond positively to the alternative ways of learning that drama offers.

We constructed a pre-test, modelled after the MOE oral communication examination syllabus for N(T) and tested 36 students from both the control (C) and intervention (I) groups. The students were randomly selected by a computer program. All results were recorded and compared against the results for the same 36 students at the end of the drama interventions.

Ten drama lessons of one hour each were planned and implemented, in most cases during regular curriculum time. Each school was encouraged to choose the most suitable times for implementation and offered combinations that best suited their needs.

In addition, at the end of the interventions, we interviewed the English teachers of the intervention classes, the facilitators of the workshops, and a random selection of students who had participated in the study.

What we have found so far

Statistical analysis of the student results showed that the effect of the process drama intervention on the total scores of students from I groups was highly significant. Not only did the students' overall scores improve, there were also measurable improvements in each of the following areas:

- Clarity (the correct pronunciation of sounds and words)
- Vocabulary (range of words used)
- Relevance (connection to the topic)
- Interaction (engagement with the examiner)
- Prompting (the need for assistance or ideas during the conversation)

Students from C groups showed no change in their pre- and post-test results. In addition, early analysis of interviews with students and teachers indicated: Improvements in confidence and collaborative skills; and increased enjoyment of the learning process.

There were also some indications of improvements in communication across ethnic groups both within and outside
the drama classes. This was commented on by the English teachers who noticed changes in behaviour in their own classes.

**Where we go from here**
Following these positive results, a new intervention project was launched in January 2005 at a local secondary school. The research team is working with all Secondary 1 and 2 English Language and Literature classes and their teachers to develop a model of practice that is transferable to other schools in Singapore.

*To find out more about this project, please click here.*

**References**


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**About the Researchers:**

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*Published in SingTeach, May 2005*