Modulating the mosaic: Drama and oral language

With special thanks to Morag Morrison, Cambridge University, UK, who has agreed to deliver this paper on our behalf.

This paper reports on research-in-progress currently being undertaken under the auspices of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. The aim of the research project is to investigate the impact of process drama pedagogy on the learning of oral language. In brief, the research involved students at four schools participating in a series of ten drama lessons. The students were pre- and post-tested to determine the impact of the drama learning on their oral communication skills.

At this stage of the project the intervention with students has concluded and the data has been collected. While analysis of the full data collection is still underway, initial examination suggests that the use of drama in this context has produced significantly enhanced test scores for the students in the trial. Recorded interviews with students, teachers and facilitators, and facilitator journals will be analyzed to identify other outcomes relating to correctness, responsiveness and agency.

Spoken English in Singapore

Singapore offers a unique opportunity to investigate this area as English is the language of instruction at all stages of schooling. From school entry all classes (except those for Mother Tongue) are taught in English. However, in multicultural Singapore, English is a second, or even third, language for most of the students. The speaking of ‘good English’ is important in the Singapore context. The ‘Speak Good English Movement’ was acknowledged in the Prime Minister’s address to the nation (17 Aug, 2003) when he reinforced the importance of this to Singapore’s future economic growth and significance in the region. The strong emphasis on English language proficiency is further indicated by the fact that all aspiring teacher-education students at NIE, the only teacher-preparation institution in Singapore, must sit for an English Language Proficiency Test (including an oral component) to secure a place in the program. For the purpose of this study we will consider previous research into the use of drama and second language (L2) learning as pertinent to the local context.

Drama and oral language acquisition

While it is generally accepted that drama contributes to the development of oral language, there is little research to substantiate such beliefs in this area. Similarly, the intersection of second language (L2) acquisition, oral language and drama is under-researched with the notable exception of Kao & O’Neill’s Words into Worlds: learning a second language through process drama. (Kao & O’Neill, 1998).

Studies into student participation in the L2 classroom have shown that teachers do about 70% of talking and perform twice as many ‘interactional acts’ as students. Coyle and Bisgher’s 1984 study (Kao & O’Neill, 1998) found that, in general, students:
1) seldom address questions to the teacher
2) almost never address questions to other students
3) almost never initiate new topics; and
4) seldom react.

The issue of students’ limited participation is amplified in bilingual contexts, and countries with English-medium schooling such as Singapore because, not only are students expected to learn the grammatical structure and correct usage of the English language, they are also expected to learn through English as well (Gibbons, 1998).

A continuing concern within L2 acquisition research emphasizes the need for students to experience ‘real-life’ language. It is inevitable that students with a language other than the medium language will encounter unfamiliar vocabulary during interactions both in and out of the classroom. Students need to be aware of how to deal with this while also maintaining the flow of communication and comprehension (Newton, 2001). One of the obstacles in conducting real-life language is the asymmetric and contrived relationship between the teacher and students (Kao & O’Neill, 1998). If the teacher controls the new vocabulary and flow of talk too comprehensively in the classroom, students will not have instigated such interactions and thus will not be equipped to deal with unstructured and unexpected encounters. As long as the teacher and students are willing to talk only through contexts available in the classroom, the talk will remain narrow and restricted. The proposition here is that, if the teacher and students are able to use process drama to create roles and situations, then there is the possibility for a wide and unpredicted variety of different contexts for talk (Neelands, 1992). Involving students in the negotiating and constructing of a process drama allows them insights into the relationship between context and language, and allows them to link the language they are learning with the world around them (Maley, 1978).

Participating in dialogue can facilitate learning. Process drama allows students to use their language knowledge to create, and to respond to dialogue in varying contexts and for varying purposes. The fact that process drama is a collaborative experience under the control of the entire group, not just the teacher, allows the possibility of student ownership of the learning situation and assists students to become ‘intrinsically involved in developing dialogue so that the social interaction of the drama may continue’ (Kao & O’Neill, 1998).

Neelands (1992, p. 22) provides a model of language learning through drama (adapted from Bretton Language Development Unit) that emphasizes the significance of working in role in the development of dialogue and language skills. By working in role and in the fictional ‘as if’ context of a drama, the following sequence is possible:
This model draws our attention to the scope of opportunities for language development offered through the use of drama in the classroom. The language demands suggested by Neelands, above, may include those of negotiating, feeling, imagining, informing and controlling (Haseman & O'Toole, 1990). All of these are intrinsic to the process of working in role to create a dramatic fiction. Clipson-Boyles (1998, p.56) outlines the benefits of working in role in the following terms:

- It protects the student’s self-esteem by de-personalizing a process which is, in reality, an extremely personal and sensitive part of a child’s self-perception.
- It provides enjoyable reasons for speaking ‘differently’.
- It offers the disguise or mask of someone different in which to experiment.
- It enables the teacher to correct the ‘character’ rather than the child.
- It helps children to understand diversity as opposed to one ‘wrong way’ of speaking and one ‘correct way’ of speaking.
- It provides a context for repetition, practice and preparation.

Indeed, one of the main purposes of having students work in role is to provide them with new and different language possibilities in a safe environment. If the roles and the contexts are chosen well, the structured drama process can lead students ‘to ask and answer questions, to solve problems, to offer both information and opinions, to argue and persuade, and generally to fulfill the widest range of language functions’ (Kao & O’Neill, 1998). Taking on role also provides students with the opportunity to experiment with
vocabulary, register, and speech patterns (Wagner, 1998). Using drama in the classroom can provide for various types of interaction and provides opportunities for many of the language functions (Halliday, 1978) to come into play. Drama allows participants to use language purposefully in a variety of situations and to accomplish a variety of tasks. As O’Neill and Lambert state, ‘language is the cornerstone of the drama process’ (O’Neill & Lambert, 1982, p. 18).

**The Study**

The study took the form of a design experiment to test whether the use of drama as a learning process produced better, or different, results for students’ in their Secondary 4 Normal Technical Oral examination. The experiment included the planning of the dramas, the training of facilitators, and the implementation of the ten lessons. Data was collected via pre-tests and post-tests for randomly selected students from the intervention and the control groups (the same students were tested on both occasions), facilitators’ journals, and the interviewing of facilitators, the students’ regular English teachers and randomly selected students.

The expectation that students communicate effectively in English, despite the lack of direct teaching of oral communication skills or support materials in this area, intrigued us. The Ministry of Education (MOE) expects that, by the end of their secondary education, students will be able to:

- speak, write and make presentations in internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture. (MOE, 2001)

As drama educators, we believe that the structured use of drama forms and conventions within the teaching/learning process is an ideal vehicle for learning oral language and wished to investigate this assumption by designing this project. Our focus was to teach drama as an art form in its own right, anticipating that the language demands intrinsic to working in role within a process drama framework would develop the participants’ communicative skills. While we constructed dramas that allowed diverse opportunities for talk we emphasized the heuristic, imaginative and informative functions (Halliday, 1978). Our major question, therefore, was: what impact (if any) will a short series of drama lessons have on the communication skills of the participating students?

We planned and implemented a sequence of ten lessons which lasted for an hour each. Rather than simply using drama games and exercises that promote oral communication we chose to contextualise the activities within four dramas, some of which ran for two or more lessons. These were:

- **The Missing Girl Drama** – where students investigated the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a girl and built up a picture of the events that lead to her disappearance;
- **Journey to the Centre of the Earth** – based on computer games. The students have to rescue a missing scientist who has left a recorded message;
- **Spy Drama** – where the students have to work undercover to find out what lead to the assassination of the Chief Minister; and
The Legend of Bukit Merah – a local myth. Students explored issues of power and its misuse while in role as the villagers of Bukit Merah.

In these dramas the students worked in and out of role, in small and large groups and collaborated to solve the tasks they were set. Specific language activities included: interviewing, collaboratively creating roles and relationships, explaining, describing, persuading, sequencing ideas, questioning and reporting.

The participants

All Secondary 4 students (approx. 16 years old) in Singapore sit for the Normal Level Oral English examination which has an oral component. This standardised testing procedure provided an opportunity to gain comparative data from a range of schools. Although further investigation into the usefulness and validity of the examination as a measure of effective oral communication is warranted, this is not the focus of the project.

All classes are ‘streamed’ according to ability in Singapore. They are described as Secondary Express (the highest level), Normal Academic, and Normal Technical. This project focused on Normal Technical classes. Class sizes were approximately forty students each.

Four schools expressed interest in participating in the research and nominated one group of students each. These became the intervention classes. Two of the schools also allowed us access to another group of students at the same level of schooling, which we used as a control group for pre-and post-testing. The teachers of the control groups agreed to continue their regular teaching program, including the oral communication component, as usual. Our trained facilitators worked with the intervention groups. The students worked in their regular English classes (around 40 in each class) and the schools allowed us to use in-school curriculum time. None of the students participating in the trial had prior experience of drama lessons.

In mid-March of this year we ran a week-long training program for the facilitators of the school workshops. The facilitators were trained teachers who had volunteered to be involved in the research and were familiar with basic drama teaching methods. From the week following the training program, our facilitators worked with each school group at the time most suitable to them. Some offered two lessons per week for five weeks, while others implemented one lesson per week for ten weeks. All facilitators were asked to keep a reflective journal during the implementation phase of the project.

A pre- and post- speaking examination, similar to the MOE ‘N’ level exam was administered to 70 students chosen randomly from both the intervention and control groups, 140 students in all. The pre- and post-tests were held under conditions that modeled the MOE examination process as closely as possible, using the same criteria and examiners unfamiliar to the students. While we have concerns about the criteria and implementation of this examination, we felt it necessary to apply the established MOE guidelines and processes. Owing to the nature and focus of this research, the speaking assessment incorporated only the conversational component of the N level exam. The assessment was marked according to the N level speaking exam mark scheme devised by the MOE. Students were able to achieve up to 3 marks each (to a possible total of 15) for speaking clearly, using appropriate vocabulary and structures, offering ideas and opinions.
relevant to the topic, interacting effectively, and needing no or little prompting by the examiner.

Within the Speaking assessment for this project, the conversation questions were drawn from a picture stimulus, with the examiner asking preliminary, non-assessed, descriptive and interpretative questions to orientate the student with the themes in the picture. The questions were based on audio examples of similar student examinations provided by the MOE. They are open-ended in nature addressing issues of citizenship, morality, personal opinion, and personal experience. Examiners may prompt students in order to develop their answers, using either ‘Tell me about…’ statements or ‘wh’ questions (who, what, when, where, why, how). The oral assessment takes approximately 5 minutes per student.

Findings to date
A statistical analysis of student results has been completed and shows a noted improvement in examination results for those students who participated in the drama intervention while the students in the control groups, who were taught as usual in their English classes, showed no change.

The following table shows means and standard deviations for all measures, including the composite “total” score, on the pre- and post-tests for both the control and intervention groups. The Table indicates that, for the pre-test, the control and intervention groups scored similarly, while for the post-test, the intervention group performed consistently better.

Table 1: Means and SDs for each of the individual measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre-test Total</th>
<th>CLEARLY</th>
<th>VOCAB</th>
<th>RELEV</th>
<th>INTERAC</th>
<th>PROMPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.33</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.50</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.42</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.87</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Post-test Total</th>
<th>CLEARLY</th>
<th>VOCAB</th>
<th>RELEV</th>
<th>INTERAC</th>
<th>PROMPT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.71</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>6.88</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.52</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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mstinson@nie.edu.sg
There are two other important observations that can be made about the values shown in this table. Firstly, the means for the Control group showed little difference from pre-test to post-test. Secondly, in contrast, the Intervention group showed improvement on all assessment measures, not just in one particular area. However, the critical test for the study is the test for differences on the post-test measures residualized on pre-test levels, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: ANOVA results for Group on Residualized Post-test Total scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sums of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Squares</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tr>
<td>Between Groups (effect)</td>
<td>64.992</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>64.992</td>
<td>17.117</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups (error)</td>
<td>235.415</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3.797</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300.407</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the individual measures are highly correlated. A principal component analysis showed that the use of a composite score was appropriate. The effect of the Process Drama intervention on the total scores, controlled for different Pre-test levels, was highly significant (eta-squared = 0.216). The effect of the intervention on single measures was significant in all cases, while no group differences, or any near-significant trends, were observed on the individual Pre-test measures. That is, the groups were effectively comparable in performance on all measures including the composite total measure at the commencement of the program, and the intervention produced a substantial and highly reliable positive effect across the board.

Interviews with the students’ regular English teachers and the facilitators themselves are still being transcribed, and we have begun analyzing the facilitators’ journals.

We are still to complete analysis of the student interviews, recorded at the completion of the drama lessons, but all student groups responded unanimously with, ‘Yes, definitely!’ when asked if they would be interested in continuing with a similar program. They also commented on improved self-confidence, an awareness that they are speaking better and more fluently and, interestingly, that working in this way has helped break down barriers across ethnic groups within their classes.

In 2005 we are hoping to extend this research by replicating the project with a larger sample group at Secondary 4 level. We also hope to create a similar design experiment at Primary 6 level, where students also sit for an oral communication examination. Updates relating to this research can be accessed via www.crpp.nie.edu.sg/
REFERENCES:


