Speaking in class: drama, talk and literacy.
Madonna Stinson

Teachers can use drama to work with their students and help them participate fluently, effectively and critically in society. Drama can be used to help develop other aspects of student's everyday literacy practices in an engaging way. As students break and form social and linguistic codes in drama it is evident that making meaning for self and others is enhanced by using past experiences to create new understanding. Drama, as a method of teaching and learning, requires both students and teachers working both in and out of role. Drama can be used to explore a problem, situation, a theme or a series of related ideas or themes through the use of unscripted drama and written text. This chapter draws on recent research that shows a causal link between learning in drama and students' capacity to communicate orally. It proposes that language learning can be enhanced through the drama process. The author’s investigations into oracy in Singapore schools has implications, in particular, for teachers of English language who support learners for whom English is not the only or first language.

Language and oral communication

We are living in a world where language and language use is constantly changing. There is no need to point out the increased emphasis on the learning of the grammatical and structural aspects of English language, the ‘back to basics’ movements worldwide will do that for us. What is interesting, however, is an emerging focus on the development of oral communication, something that may have been sidelined or de-emphasised with the increased focus on reading and writing. In part this is a response to innovations in technology: voice recognition software packages such as Dragon Naturally Speaking™ and ViaVoice™ are increasingly applied to the tasks of dictation and transcription; Internet communication is no longer the province of email and document transmission, with individuals and corporations instead meeting ‘face-to-face’ via computer screens, tiny cameras and USB phones. Concurrently the rise in the tourism and service industries has led to an acknowledgement that literate persons in the 21st century must be able to decode, understand and create meaning in written, visual and oral modes.

In 1998 A.C. Nielson reported that Australian employers ranked oral communication skills third out of seven skills sought by employers. A similar employer concern about the importance of spoken English in Singapore influenced the English Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee to increase the oral component for English Language assessment from 20 per cent to 25 percent, the second 5 per cent increase in consecutive 6-yearly reviews (Ministry of Education 2006). Also significantly the Ministry
has endorsed Drama as an elective programme in schools to assist in oral language development.

Oral communication requires many less words than written and we can gain the most complete sense of the meaning of the text when we are participants or observers in that communicative process. Look at the short interaction below:

A  Jess.
B  Yeah.
A  Lunch?
B  Yes.

As a written text it has little intrinsic meaning, relying on significant input from the reader. We can add the context that the speakers are about to go to lunch and the reader is then given more information which helps interpret the text. But we still know very little. Try to read it aloud in as many different ways as you can. Perhaps A is impatient and B preoccupied; or vice versa; perhaps they are lunching with someone they don’t like and are reluctant to go; or they are both looking forward to the event. In each case the meaning is communicated through much more than the words alone. Tone, inflection, pace, pause and volume assist us to make meaning of the text. If we physicalise the text by adding gesture, proemkics and facial expression, then much more information is added for the listener/observer/participant to decode.

It is important to note that discussions around ‘oracy’, ‘oral communication’ or ‘spoken language’ include both speaking and listening. In spoken communication, it is impossible for one to exist without the other and the ‘liveness’ of the interaction assists in the conveying and interpreting of meaning as the speaker and listener each adapt their behaviour in response to each other. Cummins (1981) claims that the development of language proficiency begins with interpersonal communication, which is context-rich and cognitively less demanding and moves along the continuum towards academic language proficiency, which is context-reduced and cognitively demanding though it is the latter that is often the basis for progression and evaluation in schools.

Oral communication is difficult to codify being ephemeral and contextualized in nature, and requiring moment-by-moment apprehension and interpretation by all participants in the process. Meaning making is a shared process between the speaker and the listener. Each requires understanding of the words, language register, grammars, context and physical signings as they engage in the communication partnership. The slippery nature of such communication has, perhaps, led to its absence from curriculum and planning, the assumption being that it will ‘occur naturally and happen implicitly as part of the school day (Hodson & Jones 2006, p. 4). However, to assist students in their progress along the learning trajectory of language development, activities and classroom practices promoting the open and contextual use of spoken language for interpersonal communication are essential steps. It is
through wanting to do something with words, listening and observing the
reactions of others, and revising their own ideas and utterances that students
are able to acquire the non-analytical procedural knowledge of the language.
Dialogic communication helps crystallise ideas (Kempe & Holroyd 2004) and,
of course, active participation in the creation, and moment-by-moment
response and interpretation, of oral communication is embodied learning, the
key to learning in drama.

**Drama and oral communication**

Drama has always had a strong connection to language learning
because both disciplines require the understanding, manipulation and
application of words. However the selection of drama activities must be made
with caution. Short-term, teacher-controlled, and exercise-based 'closed'
activities such as script enactment, readers' theatre and language games
offer access to the formal aspects of language and de-emphasize its
expressive and meaning making possibilities. As long as the teacher and
students are confined to talk only within the types of exercise-based contexts
available in the conventional classroom, their talk will remain narrow and
restricted. Students' involvement in the negotiation and construction of
meaning during participation in a drama allows them insights into the
relationship between context and language, and lets them link the language
they are learning to the world around them (Maley & Duff 1978). The use of
more complex and open forms such as Process Drama (Bowell & Heap 2001,
O'Neill 1995, O'Toole & Dunn 2002) can provide the students with
opportunities to take command of their learning and use 'unrestricted'
language to generate genuine understanding (Coyle & Bisgyer 1984). Such
open activities better prepare students for the 'coughs and hesitations' of the
outside world (Holden 1981, p. 2) and allow for the application of language in
real-life or life-like contexts.

Drama has been credited with the ability to empower students and
allow them some ownership and control over their own learning (Wilburn,
1992). Working in drama allows students to test out various situations,
registers and vocabulary in a real way without having to suffer any real
consequences (Neelands, 1992). When using drama in class, teachers invite
students to experiment with changes of status, attitude, speech style,
vocabulary and physicality in a safe place and without judgments about being
wrong. This is important, especially in spoken language, because as Hodson
and Jones (2006, p. 9) tell us:

> Spoken English is more challenging and 'scary' because it is
instant and public unlike the thoughtful and private mode in
which we operate when we are writing. The written text allows
us to erase, cross out, rephrase and edit. The spoken phrase is
already a public event.

Kao & O'Neill (1998) propose that confidence levels increase when students
have something to talk about and, most importantly, when they know how to
express their ideas. Improvement in the confidence to participate and
communicate is supported during drama processes because the students are working in the ‘safe space’ of drama. Some of the rules of time and permanence are suspended. The flexibility of time and context within the ‘as if’ of the drama event allow us to ‘cross out, rephrase and edit’ without fear of failing, as we shape, rehearse and modify the text to communicate the intended meaning. Students, when working in role, become more comfortable with the taking of risks to participate and express ideas. The drama contract reinforces that they are working as an ‘other’ and not themselves. The ‘role’ protects them and supports language decisions as they access their mental dictionaries, drawing on vocabulary that they may not use in general conversation. The incentive to uncover reasons and make decisions within the drama further prompts examples of risk-taking in language situations. Additionally the participants are not put ‘on show’ via the task of performing to an audience. Instead their audience is themselves, and each other, as they collaborate to create the dramatic text from within the group. The teacher/facilitator too, may be in role and operates as a collaborator and co-creator alongside the students. Such teacher-in-role activities allow the facilitator to model language usage and, in low-status roles, may even require language assistance from the students. This shifts the traditional position of teacher-as-authority within the class.

Participation in dialogue facilitates language learning. 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 Drama is a collaborative experience under the management of the entire group, not just the teacher, allows for the possibility of student ownership of the learning situation and assists students in becoming intrinsically involved in developing dialogue so that the social interaction of the drama may continue (Kao & O’Neill, 1998). Neelands (1992) proposes a model of language learning that emphasises 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 drama, students have opportunities to create new contexts, to create fictional roles and viewpoints, to develop relationships, to respond to the language demands of the dramatic situation while in role, and to practice ‘real-life’ language in the safe space of the dramatic fiction. The language demands suggested by Neelands include those of negotiating, feeling, imagining, informing and controlling described by Haseman and O’Toole (1990). All of these are intrinsic to the process of working in role and collaboratively creating drama.

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 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 fulfil the widest range of language functions” (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 25). Taking on roles also provides students with the opportunity to experiment with vocabulary, register, and speech patterns (Wagner, 1998). The use of drama in the classroom can provide various types of interaction and opportunities for
many of the heuristic, imaginative and formative functions\(^1\) of natural language use (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 and, in addition to the orally delivered and carefully crafted prose of prepared speeches, addresses, stories from print, sermons, and other instrumental forms of communication, drama allows us access to the expressive forms of personal narratives and metaphors, rituals and emergent stories. The stories we do not yet know are our own.

**What research tells us**

An experimental study undertaken in Singapore (Stinson & Freebody 2004, 2006), and discussed in more detail later in this chapter, involved groups of 16-year-old Singaporean students as the participants and asked questions about how the use of Drama might improve students’ oral communication in English. Four schools participated in the study, each providing a class of approximately forty students for the drama intervention programme. Two of the schools provided classes at the same year level and stream for pre-and post-test comparison. The research intervention involved the students participating in ten hours of process drama classes, pre-planned by the researchers and facilitated by local drama teachers, and both the intervention and comparison classes were pre- and post-tested using the standard Ministry of Education Oral Communication examination. All tests were recorded and independently cross-marked by three researchers to enhance inter-rater reliability. The report included statistical analyses of students’ results (see Table 1) and showed a reliable improvement in examination results for students who participated in the drama intervention, while the students in the comparison groups, who were taught as usual in their English classes, showed no change. The table indicates that for the pre-test, the comparison and intervention groups had similar scores while for the post-test, the intervention group performed consistently better in each of the criteria of clarity, vocabulary, relevance to the topic, interaction with the examiner and, the need for prompting.

**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Each Individual Measure (see attached)**

In addition to the test results the students and teachers reported that they noted increased confidence in spoken English communication, greater enjoyment of lessons, and improved racial relationships within the class. The last, may have been due to the practice of regularly changing the groups, with deliberate mixing of race and gender, so that the students did not easily fall back into familiar roles and ‘Mother Tongue’ language. This is supported by similar findings in Tara Goldstein’s *Teaching and Learning in a Multilingual School* (Goldstein, 2003).

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\(^1\) Halliday outlined seven functions of language: instrumental – satisfying material needs; regulatory – controlling the behaviour of others; interactional – getting along with others; personal – expressing the self; heuristic – questioning and exploring the world around and inside the self; imaginative – creating a world of one’s own; informative – communicating new information.
In a noteworthy critical review of a range of research into the impact of drama and following seven meta-analyses\(^2\) of eighty studies focusing on drama and language learning, Ann Podlozny (2000 p. 264), concluded, ‘Drama instruction has a positive, robust effect on a range of outcomes’. In this article she reported a significant causal link between drama and oral language acquisition. Interestingly, she went on to suggest that those studies using ‘unstructured enactment’ rather than reproducing a script, and oral language studies with older\(^3\) participants both tended to have larger effect sizes (p. 259). Other studies support the premise that drama improves oral communication (Kao & O'Neill 1998, Wagner 1998), including several studies focusing specifically on drama in the oral language classroom. Wagner reports on a range of studies which also concluded that drama experiences impacted positively on language learning. The research found that learning in drama showed results including improved spontaneity, fluency, articulation, vocabulary, and use of speech registers. More abstract thinking and expressive language was produced as well as increases in rarely used vocabulary. Importantly the findings of one study emphasized the understanding of language as a powerful tool enabling its user to ‘act upon’ instead of being ‘acted upon’.

**Drama with ESOL students**

Our discussion of drama in language learning is particularly relevant in the second language classroom, though nowadays, with international diasporas, border-crossings, the tragedy of huge numbers of international refugees, the rise in multilingual societies, and globalisation, many classrooms support students who are bi- or multilingual. Classrooms which sustain bi- and multilingual practices can add richness and complexity to the language learning process (Goldstein, 2003).

Many countries in South-East Asia recognise the importance of English in developing social and economic capital. Language education policies in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam connect English knowledge to international relations and international trade (Nunan, 2003). In Singapore, where schooling at all levels is in the English language, English is upheld as an inter-ethnic language fostering ease of communication across Chinese, Malay, Indian and other ethnic groups who share no other common language.

Frequently in second-language classrooms, students do better in reading and writing than they do in speaking and listening. Lam (1997), suggested this may be because less emphasis is placed on speaking and listening in schools and sometimes appropriate distinctions are not made

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\(^2\) Podlozny analysed the eighty studies in terms of the following seven measures: oral measures of story understanding and recall; written measures of story understanding; reading achievement; reading readiness, oral language development; vocabulary; and writing.

\(^3\) Emphasis in original. She suggests that the measured impact being more significant for the older students may be due to the decrease in dramatic play that characterises classroom practice as students progress through schooling. Dramatic play is supported and encouraged in the early years but is a less evident aspect of curriculum and pedagogy as students grow older.
between spoken and written texts, with spoken texts rarely being more than what Holden refers to as ‘spoken prose’. The classroom where the teacher initiates and supervises all language use and relies heavily on drill exercises, often fails to prepare students for the ‘coughs and hesitations’ of the outside world (Holden, 1981, p. 2). The focus on ‘correctness’ for classroom work is not directly matched by the ‘appropriateness’ and ‘comprehensibility’ that operate outside the classroom. Communication involves more than just getting the words right, it is about whether or not the receiver has understood what is being said. It is dependent on language variables such as speed, volume, and pitch. It is also worth noting that the speech of native speakers is usually not grammatically correct and is anything but fluent. Observations show that students trained in controlled and deliberate environments are shocked when they enter a context in which native speakers are talking to each other (Tam, 1997). As David Crystal (1975 p. 3) explains:

People in textbooks do not get all mixed up while they are speaking, forget what they wanted to say, hesitate, make grammatical mistakes, argue erratically or illogically, use words vaguely, get interrupted, talk at the same time, switch speech styles, manipulate the rules of the language to suit themselves, or fail to understand. In a word, they are not real. (1975, p. 3)

A significant obstacle in conducting real-life language in a formal classroom setting is the status-bound relationship between the teacher and students (Kao & O’Neill, 1998). If the teacher controls new vocabulary and flow of talk too overtly and comprehensively in the classroom, students will rarely have opportunities to instigate such interactions. As a result they will be ill-equipped to deal with unstructured and unexpected encounters. One way to combat this in the classroom and ensure language is contextual and ‘real’ is to put students in situations where they must focus on meaning (Hui, 1997) and where the activity encourages natural unrestricted talk that allows students to communicate in a useful, relevant way. When considering the development of English communication for the local classroom, there is a need to acknowledge existing contexts within which students use English, and create contexts within which the students are able to interact with each other and with the teacher in English. Language development for ESOL learners should begin with experiences and activities that engage their social and cultural capital before structuring the learning process along the continuum towards academic language proficiency. Drama is an ideal vehicle for such language learning opportunities.

Creating opportunities for drama and oral communication in bilingual and multilingual classrooms

The remainder of this chapter describes, in part, an attempt to use process drama as a vehicle which provided a balance of instrumental and expressive opportunities for communication. It uses, as an example, a drama developed for the DOL (Drama and Oral Language) project in Singapore and mentioned earlier. One of the main aims of this project was to give students...
'something to talk about' and a safe physical, cognitive and emotional space to figure out the best way to ‘express their ideas’. Students participated in four process dramas and, in each case, the students had to communicate orally in order for the drama to proceed. While participating, the students worked in and out of role, in small and large groups, and collaborated to solve the tasks that were set. There was an insistence on the speaking of English at all times and groups were constructed and re-constructed regularly so that the participants were constantly working with new group members.

Planning of all the dramas which focused on developing oral communication included the following components:

- every student had to have at least one significant dialogue in every lesson;
- students were required to react and respond to questions or situations without any prior preparation;
- every drama incorporated group work, and students worked in diverse groups. This ensured they were not always collaborating with members of the same race or their usual friendship group and gave them opportunities to work with classmates with whom they would not normally work;
- an ‘English only’ rule was imposed for the period of the drama;
- a range of different language registers and purposes were required by the communication contexts within the dramas. Students had the opportunity to be persuasive and evasive; to create their own narratives; to build on the narratives of others; to be angry, happy, sad and scared; to create and solve mysteries; and, hopefully, to have the opportunity to have fun and enjoy speaking in English;
- reflection time was allocated at the end of each of the dramas. During this time the facilitators encouraged the students to vocalise how they felt about the work and what they had learned. A particular focus was on helping the students to identify the varied types of oral communication which they had had the opportunity to practice.

These elements ensured the focus of the lessons stayed on oral communication, but also worked towards building confidence and feelings of security within the group and to increase their skill and confidence in working within the art form of drama.

A local story, The Legend of Bukit Merah, was the impetus for one of the dramas devised for the Singapore research study mentioned earlier. The myth was familiar to the students but this drama attempted to shed new light on the human issues of trust, betrayal and power.

The Legend of Bukit Merah

There was once a Sultan, the most handsome in the land. No one could best him in any way and he grew haughty and proud, always seeking praise. He became jealous and angry if others were praised for cleverness or acts of bravery, and his jealousy would often grow...
One day, schools of swordfish came to the shores of Singapura and began leaping up and attacking the people on the beaches. The swordfish were strong, with hard snouts and razor sharp teeth, and their swords pierced right through their victims' bodies. When the Sultan heard this terrible news, he hurried with his army to the beach where he saw many bodies strewn across the once sandy white beaches, now stained red with blood.

The Sultan immediately ordered his men to kneel and form a line on the beach, creating a wall against the swordfish but this didn't stop the fish from attacking. They continued to leap up and, this time, killed the soldiers. After many of his men were killed, the Sultan called a retreat and ordered that everyone stay away from the coastline.

He gathered all his advisors and tried to work out a way to deal with the problem, as Singapura was dependent on its fishing and seas for trade. While they were meeting a young boy asked for the audience with the Sultan.

'Your Highness, I may have a solution to the swordfish. Why don't we line the beaches with banana stems, so when the swordfish attack them, they will become stuck and we can kill them at our own leisure?'

The Sultan ordered his men to cut banana stems and firmly plant them along the beach at low tide.

When tide rose the schools of swordfish approached once again. This time the Sultan, his men and the boy watched as the swordfish attacked the line of banana stems, getting their swords stuck in the thick stems. Once the last swordfish was stuck, the men killed every one of them. The problem was solved.

The people began to praise the boy for his cleverness, calling him a genius and a blessing from the gods and the Sultan's heart filled with jealousy and rage.

He ordered his soldiers to creep into the boy's home at night and kill him.

In the dark of the night the soldiers went into the boy's home and began to stab him. As the boy began to scream in pain his mattress filled with blood. Even after he was dead the blood continued to flow spread down the hill, covering it. The soil is still red today, and that is why the hill is called Bukit Merah (Red Hill).
Drama learning activities based on ‘The Legend of Bukit Merah’:

1. Students commence walking in the space as the most powerful person in the world. As the T counts backwards from 10 the students modify their body language to change to become the least powerful people in the world.

2. Students work in pairs. A can tell B to do whatever they want and B must do it. Reverse.

3. Game: One student sits in a chair as the most powerful person in the world. Use the first paragraph of the story to introduce that character i.e. the Sultan. Other students must offer something to please them. If they are pleased the ‘offerer’ can live... if the Sultan is displeased he clicks his fingers and the student must die in a dramatic way.

4. Allow time for discussion.

5. Enrole students as historians who are preparing an exhibition of local myths and legends for a local museum.

6. Facilitator reads/tells the ‘Legend of Bukit Merah’. You may wish to give students a copy of the text at this point. They can underline/highlight any key words or phrases that stand out to them. Re-read with the students joining in to say their highlighted words concurrently as you speak them.

7. Small group work: each group of students is given a section of the story. They are to create a freeze frame that shows the essence of that section. Teacher ‘taps in’ to selected students who speak aloud a word or phrase which expresses how they are feeling in the freeze frame.

8. Students create family groups who might have lived at the time of the Sultan. They map out a plan of the village and mark where each family lives. (Research opportunity: to find out village living conditions).

9. Teacher narration as students sit, eyes closed and listen. The narration takes them back in time and they gradually open their eyes and establish the village in the space.

10. In those same groups, students become villagers going about their daily business discussing the Sultan and how indebted they are to the boy.

11. The Teacher-in-role enters as a servant from the Sultan’s palace. The servant was originally from the village and has heard that the Sultan is angry that the villagers have been speaking so well of the boy. He sees it as a personal betrayal and has decided to kill all the young boys in the village as a way of punishing them for their disloyalty. TIR offers to help them try to reason with the Sultan.

12. In small groups, students discuss how they can find a way of saving their sons’ lives.

13. TIR offers to set up meetings with significant people from the palace who may have influence with the Sultan. Either TIR or selected students-in-role as hot-seat candidates from the following (add other suggestions from the students):
   - captain of the guard
   - senior advisor
   - sultan’s chief wife
• sultan’s young son

14. Rotating hot-seat in small groups. Each group is to try and persuade the person of significance to convince the Sultan not to go ahead with the execution.

15. TIR as palace servant reports that the Sultan has agreed not to kill the boys. Each family returns to their home and goes to sleep. Teacher narrates that during the night the Sultan sends the three most trusted members of his guard to kill the boy.


17. The Museum board has organized an exhibition to commemorate the legend of Bukit Merah and has asked the historians to create a ‘living display’ that will highlight an aspect of the story.

18. Students decide on which aspect of the story they will focus and, in small groups, prepare a short sequence for the ‘living display’. These may be monologues by key people, rituals, or re-enactments.

19. Share within the class.

20. Discuss and de-brief.
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