Speaking Out: process drama and its contribution to oracy.

Madonna Stinson

Abstract

The *Drama and Oral Language* research project (2004) with Normal Technical Secondary 4 classes at four schools in Singapore produced data indicating that a program of process drama interventions produced enhanced results in participating students' oral communication scores. Furthermore students and teachers identified improvements in the motivation and self-confidence of participants, as well as indications of enhanced inter-group relationships and communication across ethnicities. In January 2005 an extensive and ongoing research project commenced with 17 classes of Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 students at a neighbourhood high school. This design experiment aims to investigate the transferability of the previous research as well as the requirements of teacher professional development for such innovative pedagogy. This paper reports on the findings of the 2004 Drama and Oral Language (DOL) research, the ongoing research to date, and considers the implications for the application of process drama pedagogy in the local context.

Introduction

> *A class of Secondary 4 Normal Technical students are working in a large computer lab. In this instance the computers are turned off and pushed to the walls. The room is the only available space in the school which is a suitable size for drama work and, as a bonus, is air conditioned. The students sit in groups of about six, clustered on the floor and are intent on their discussion. They are working in role, in a* process drama *about the legend of Bukit Merah (Red Hill).*

> *The Legend of Bukit Merah tells the story of the problem of swordfish which were attacking and killing the people of the village. The Sultan and his advisors were stumped by the problem but a young boy suggested placing banana trees on the shore so that, when the swordfish attacked, their swords would become stuck in the soft trunks of the trees and they could be easily slain. As the boy's cleverness in finding a solution became known he became more and more of a hero and the Sultan's jealousy of the lad grew to a dangerous level.*

For the purpose of the drama, the students are enroled as the villagers and each group comprises a family unit with just one son. They have been in role for some time (this is the second lesson of three in the process drama sequence) and have had opportunities to work through activities which have deepened their belief in the dramatic fiction. The group discussion centres around some gossip spreading through the village, which suggests that the Sultan is now so jealous of the boy that he is planning to send his guards that very night, to murder him. Each group is trying to come up with the definitive argument that will persuade the Sultan (teacher-in-role) to let the boy live. The discussion is focused and intent on creating a convincing argument.

Later in the drama, after the students have presented their arguments to the Sultan and he has agreed to spare the boy, the 'villagers' settle down for the night secure in the knowledge that they have saved the life of their young hero. The teacher then employs the convention of *teacher narration* and relates the remainder of the story, which is that the Sultan orders his guards to creep to the house of the sleeping boy and execute him. When they did so the boy's blood flowed and flowed until the hill was stained permanently red, and hence came to be called Bukit Merah. During the reflection phase at the end of this lesson, the students were incensed: 'We feel betrayed' said one; 'How could he do that when he had promised us he wouldn't?' said another.

The lesson described, in part, above was one of four process dramas which were taught as part of a research project under the auspices of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore in 2004. The aim of the research was to investigate the impact of process drama on oral communication skills and four schools agreed to participate in the study. The research involved trained facilitators implementing four planned process dramas over a series of ten, one-

hour, lessons and collecting data to measure the impact of these lessons on student results in oral communication.

What is Process Drama?

Process drama is a relatively new term in drama education (B. Haseman, 1991; C. O'Neill, 1995; O'Toole, 1992) and has developed from the extended roleplay work of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton. Process Dramas involve **all** the students **all** of the time, rather than being a learning experience where some students demonstrate, model or perform to others. They are collaboratively co-created texts, which draw on the lived experiences of the participants in the drama to add veracity to the dramatic text. Described as a negotiated and improvised form where an *external* audience is absent but an *internal* audience is essential (Bowell & Heap, 2001), the starting point for all process dramas is a 'pre-text' i.e. a text that **precedes** the collaboratively developed dramatic text which comprises the drama. A pre-text may be a story, a newspaper article, a picture or image, an advertisement, the lyrics of a song, a piece of music, an object or artefact, or combinations of any of the above. In short a pre-text may be anything at all, but it must establish possibilities for the dramatic world to be encountered, developed and explored. A pre-text should contain a puzzlement or an enticement that challenges the participants to investigate the possibilities it offers. The process drama, itself, is a structured problem-solving experience where the students and the teacher operate in a state of metaxis (Boal, 1979; O'Toole, 1992), of 'knowing' in both the fictional and the real world. By agreeing to employ the conventions of drama (Neelands & Goode, 2000) students contract to explore the pre-text and the imaginary-world possibilities it offers. The drama contract offers both constraints and support to the students and teacher. It means that they must agree to take the 'pretending' seriously and it also allows emotional distance for the participants ('this is happening to them, not me'). While each process drama structure is carefully pre-planned, the structure offers many opportunities for negotiation and input by the participants. In essence, each drama is an ephemeral and unrepeatable event, the product of a collaborative meaning-making process through the medium of role. Process dramas are designed to offer opportunities for individual and groups to contribute to the dramatic action, to solve problems and to employ higher-order thinking processes. They do not lead to performances or presentations of the devised material to audiences who have remained outside the drama.

Spoken English in Singapore

Singapore offers a unique opportunity for researchers to investigate the enhancement of English, because it is the language of instruction at all stages of schooling, and all classes (except Mother Tongue lessons) are taught in English. In multicultural Singapore however, English is a second or even third language for most students. The speaking of 'good English' is important in Singapore's 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 English 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 the English Language Proficiency Test (which includes an oral component) to secure a place in the programme.

Drama and Oral Language Acquisition

While it is generally accepted that drama contributes to the development of oral communication, there is little research to substantiate such beliefs. Similarly, the intersection of second-language 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 of student participation in the second-language classroom have shown that **teachers** account for more than 70% of the total classroom talk and they perform twice as many interactional acts as their students. Coyle and Bisgner's 1984 study (Kao & O'Neill, 1998) found that in general, students:

- ? seldom address questions to the teacher;
- ? almost never address questions to other students;
- ? almost never initiate new topics;
- ? 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 second-language acquisition research emphasises the need for students to experience 'real-life' language. It is inevitable that students with a first language other than the language that is the medium of instruction 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 asymmetrical 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 rarely have opportunities to instigate such interactions. As a result they will be ill-equipped to deal with unstructured and unexpected encounters. As long as the teacher and students are willing to talk only within contexts available in the conventional classroom, their 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, there is the possibility for a wide and unpredicted variety of different contexts for talk (Neelands, 1992). Students' involvement in the negotiation and construction of meaning during participation in a process 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).

Participation 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 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) posits 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 may include those of negotiating, feeling, imagining, informing and controlling (B. Haseman & O'Toole, 1990). All of these are intrinsic to the process of working in role and collaboratively creating drama. Clipson-Boyles (1998, p. 56) outlined the benefits of working in role in the following terms:

? It protects the student's self-esteem by de-personalising 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 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). 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 functions 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. As O'Neill and Lambert state, "language is the cornerstone of the drama process" (C. O'Neill & Lambert, 1982).

The Participants

The majority of Secondary Four students in Singapore sit for the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education examinations at either the Ordinary or Normal level — the GCE 'O'/'N' levels. The English language and Mother Tongue examinations include an oral component. This standardised testing procedure provided an opportunity for us 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 project focus.

All classes are streamed according to ability in Singapore. They are described as Secondary Special (the highest level), Express, 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 each nominated one group of students. 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. Teachers of the control groups agreed to continue their regular teaching programme, including the oral communication component. Our 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 in drama lessons.

The Study

The study took the form of a case study intervention that investigated whether the use of drama as a learning process produces better or different results for students in their Secondary Four Normal Technical oral examination. The students were in their tenth year of schooling (approximately 16 years of age) and had been placed in the lowest school stream (comparable to a 'D' stream). The intervention included the planning of dramas, the training of facilitators, and the implementation of ten lessons. Data was collected via pre-tests and post-tests for randomly selected students from the intervention and 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.

It is worth pointing out that the emphasis of this research was on the teaching of drama and not oral communication. While activities which encouraged the students to initiate talk and construct a variety of verbal texts were included in the lessons, the focus was on the learning in drama and not the employment of drama strategies as 'tools' for language learning. Consequently facilitators who were experienced teachers of drama (graduates of the NIE Advanced Post-graduate Diploma in Drama and Drama Education) were employed to teach the lesson series.

In mid-March 2004, the facilitators attended a week-long training programme to experience, critique and modify the planned workshops. From the week following the training programme onwards, the facilitators worked with each school group in a variety of formats: 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 which is similar to the GCE 'N' level examination was administered to 140 students who were chosen randomly — 70 each from both the intervention and control groups. The pre- and post-tests were held under conditions that model the GCE examination process closely, such as having the same criteria and using examiners with whom students are unfamiliar. 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 took place according to the 'N' level oral examination marking scheme devised by the MOE. Students were able to achieve up to 3 marks each (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 to 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 to develop their answers, using either "Tell me about…" statements or 'wh' questions *(who, what, when, where, why, how)*. Each oral assessment took approximately 5 minutes per student.

The expectation that students should communicate effectively in English, despite the apparent lack of direct teaching of oral communication skills or support materials in this area, is intriguing. 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). Despite this statement interviews with a number of teachers in the service indicated that oral forms of communication are rarely explicitly taught, and emphasis in the classroom context is placed almost completely on written and visual texts.

The focus of this study 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 emphasised the heuristic, imaginative, and informative functions (Halliday, 1978). Our major question, therefore, was; what is the impact, if any, of a short series of drama lessons on the communication skills of participating students?

The facilitators implemented a series of ten pre-planned lessons which lasted for an hour each. Rather than 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* – The pre-text for this was a newspaper article reporting on the disappearance of a young girl who turned up safe and unharmed a few days later but refused, or was unable to, recount the story of her disappearance. The students were enroled as journalists who were set with the task of investigating the circumstances surrounding the girl's disappearance. During this drama they made lists of facts from the story and inferences that could be drawn, interviewed individuals who were familiar with the girl and her family, reported to the editor of the newspaper, and re-enacted events prior to her disappearance;

? *The Journey to the Centre of the Earth Drama* – The inspiration for this came from computer games. In this case, as the pre-text, the students heard a garbled distress message left behind by a scientist who was gathering rock samples. On the tape she asks to be rescued and the students entered into the contracted drama by agreeing to enrole as her colleagues, retrace her steps and discover what happened to her. In the process they discover a 'lost' society, the members of which are distrustful of 'overlanders', and must negotiate their colleague's release.

? *The Spy Drama* – Each student receives a slip of paper which says, 'Sleeping Spy made active. Report for duty at ___ hrs (the time of their drama lesson) to ____ (the location of the lesson)'. When they arrived in class they were met by 'M' the head of the agency who told them they were called in to help their country. This drama drew on the canon of spy fiction. The students were asked to go undercover to a secret location and uncover the series of events that lead to the assassination of the Chief Minister of a remote country. They were charged with the task of discovering whether the politics of the country were stable or there was danger of a coup. The oral language demands included: collaboratively creating a 'back' story for their group, being 'interviewed' by immigration officials, interviewing the people who had been close to the assassinated minister, and reporting back to 'M' whenever called to do so;

? *The Legend of Bukit Merah Drama* – Based on a local myth familiar to the students in the written form, this drama attempted to shed new light on the human issues of trust, betrayal and power. The students operated in the 'blanket' role of the villagers of Bukit Merah and created roles and relationships within that context. They participated in rituals which demonstrated their respect for the Sultan and other conventions as described in the introduction to this paper. The final lesson required them to create 'living displays' for a contemporary museum which was curating an exhibition of local legends.

While participating in these dramas 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.

Findings

Statistical analyses of students' results show a reliable improvement in examination results for students who participated in the drama intervention, while the students in the control groups — those who were taught as usual in their English classes — show no change.

The following table shows the 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. (All individual measures were highly correlated. A Principal Component analysis showed that the use of a composite score was appropriate.) The table indicates that for the pre-test, the control and intervention groups had similar scores while for the post-test, the intervention group performed consistently better.

Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations for Each Individual Measures*

Group		Pre-test Total	CLEAR	VOCAB	RELEV	INTERAC	PROMPT
Control	Mean	6.13	.97	1.07	1.70	1.33	1.07
	SD	3.24	.67	.69	.79	.80	.74
Intervention	Mean	6.62	1.21	1.03	1.59	1.50	1.29
	SD	3.90	.91	.76	.82	.93	1.03
Total	Mean	6.39	1.09	1.05	1.64	1.42	1.19
	SD	3.58	.81	.72	.80	.87	.91

Group		Post-test Total	CLEAR	VOCAB	RELEV	INTERAC	PROMPT
Control	Mean	5.63	1.00	.87	1.40	1.30	1.07
	SD	2.65	.59	.68	.62	.65	.69
Intervention	Mean	7.97	1.56	1.24	1.85	1.71	1.62
	SD	3.30	.75	.78	.70	.72	.78
Total	Mean	6.88	1.30	1.06	1.64	1.52	1.36
	SD	3.21	.73	.75	.70	.71	.78

There are two other important observations that can be made from the values in Table 1. First, the means for the control group show little difference from pre-test to post-test. Second, 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 residualised on pre-test levels; that is, on the post-test performance over and above what is statistically predicted from the pre-test levels of performance. These results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *ANOVA Results for Group on Residualised Post-Test Total Scores*

	Sums of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	P
Between Groups (effect)	64.992	1	64.992	17.12	<.001
Within Groups (error)	235.415	62	3.797		
Total	300.407	63			

The effect of 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 for 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 programme. The intervention produced a substantial and highly reliable positive effect across the board.

Directions for 2005

In October 2004, the author was approached by the Principal of one of the schools that had participated in the Drama and Oral Language Research Project. The Principal had been impressed by reports from the teachers and students who had participated in the earlier research and wondered whether there was a possibility to continue in a similar vein. It was agreed that the research would involve all

teachers of English or Literature and all students at Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 levels at the school and that the research team would design interventions and collect data for the entire school year during 2005.

The intention is to both broaden and narrow the focus of the previous research. The 'narrowing' of focus is by way of working with one school only, but more intensively and for a longer period of time. The 'broader' focus will investigate the transferability of the approach, the essential requirements for professional development of teachers, the development of more contextualised learning support materials, and the development of authenticated oral language test instruments. Specifically the objectives and intended outcomes are as follows:

Objectives	Intended Outcomes
1. to provide professional development in the teaching of process drama for the teachers who elect to participate in this research	1. a number of mentor teachers, empowered to continue developing process drama innovations as required by the school context
2. to investigate the impact of drama strategies on the development of oral language proficiency for all Sec 1 and Sec 2 classes at Fajar Secondary School	2. development of a transferable model of practice
3. to co-develop a structured process drama program for oral language instruction with the English language teachers at Fajar Secondary School	3. development of teaching materials based on current syllabus and set texts
4. to investigate the needs for teacher preparation for this approach	4. responsive teacher professional development model

The research project offers an invaluable opportunity to access a neighbourhood school and investigate the constraints and implications of the approach as a long-term pedagogy used more generally in the curriculum. There is potential that the research may be extended in 2006 to Secondary 3 students. This has already been broached by the Principal as a possibility. It is also worth considering the value of parallel research in primary school in future years.

Speaking Out, 2005

The Speaking Out Research Project has been planned as a design experiment (Kelly, 2004) which seeks to determine:

- ? transferability and scalability of the approach
- ? the staff development requirements
- ? what constitutes a critical mass of expertise within this schools for ongoing development once the intervention is concluded.
- ? effective measures of proficiency in oral communication

In this research model, the teachers and the researchers work in partnership to devise programs and practices which aim to enhance student learning. By using a master-trainer model the research team provides professional development for the teachers embarking on the research so that the quality of the experience for the students is of the highest possible order. At this stage 10 teachers and 17 classes (of approx. 40 students) are participating in the research.

Since January, 2005, the research team has worked continuously with the focus intervention school. Three four-hour practical workshop sessions have introduced the teachers to basic drama conventions and to some simple process dramas. The Principal Investigator and the Research Assistants have co-planned lessons, modelled teaching practice with all classes at Sec. 1 and Sec. levels in the school

and, when requested, participated as a co-teacher in lessons planned by the class English teachers. This ongoing connection allows for constant monitoring and modification of the research practice.

Data collected thus far has included:
- ? pre-tests and Stage 2 tests of the students oral language proficiency. These tests take place once a term and the same tests have been administered to students at a nearby school of comparable ranking;
- ? video recordings of each of the teachers as they conduct an English lesson. This data is also collected once per term;
- ? journals recorded by the teachers and the research team;
- ? interviews with participating students, teachers, Heads of Department, the Principal, and selected parents;
- ? a developing bank of lessons and support materials co-devised by the research team and the teachers at the school.

It is too early to make any claims about the Speaking Out research as data collection and analysis is still in the preliminary stages, but the first set of interviews indicate that all participants are enjoying being part of the research project and can identify the value-addedness that process drama as a pedagogy adds to the school community.

Conclusion

Appropriately, in a research project about oral communication, the final words will be those of the participants in the research. The following comments were taken from interviews with students who participated in the *Drama and Oral Language Research Project* in 2004.

What have you learned?
'Drama, Teamwork, how do we prepare ourselves for something that is we have to do – or present ourselves – so we just learn how to present ourselves.'
'Learn to have more confidence in speaking English and expressing ourselves.'
'Taking part in each and every activity and communicating with each other.'
'Not to be shy, to be open-minded.'

What will you remember?'
'The missing girl. I did the expression of the father and everybody laughed.'
'I feel I don't want to leave there [the class].'

How do you feel about working in this way with your classmates?
'Like never communicate with the Malay students more often.'
'Some people are very often at the class very quiet but through the course they speak very loud and very much.'

What would you tell others?
'I'd say that if you're going to attend the course, you're really going to enjoy it. You're going to improve your English., You can really talk if you – after the lesson you can really talk fluently, nicely and it will be really smooth going and I'd say just enjoy the class.'
'It's good, lah. It's very interesting. You can learn more.'
'You won't be sitting, just sitting, at the class – ah – so straight and boring. You move around but you've gotta learn things.'

Updates relating to these research projects can be accessed via
http://www.crpp.nie.edu.sg/CurrentProjects/

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