

Drama Techniques in English as a Foreign Language Learning

Yuko Ono

Abstract

With increased attention given to the use of drama techniques in EFL classrooms, various techniques have emerged from researchers, teachers, and actors. This paper presents an overview of the types and effects of drama techniques. Examples of drama techniques are role-play, improvisation, and play production. Drama techniques are believed to have positive effects on developing communication skills and psychological conditions conducive to language learning.

英語教授法の一つ、ドラマ的手法の内容と効果の概要紹介。ドラマのアクティビティの多くはロールプレイ、インプロヴィゼーション（即興劇）、そして劇の上演に含まれる。コミュニケーション能力を高めるだけでなく、学習者の積極的な学習態度にも効果があることが示される。

Key words

drama, EFL, communicative skills, affective factors

In English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, the importance of oral interaction in the target language seems obvious. Although some learners may be able to acquire the target language through rote learning or repetition, they are considered exceptional. Most language teachers will probably agree with Widdowson's (1979) view that using the rules of a language through creative and purposeful interaction is the key to successful language acquisition. In his analogy of learning the rules to play chess, he states that we do not merely make moves in accordance to fixed rules, but we use the rules to create new possibilities in engaging an opponent. The point of giving students the opportunity to discover different ways in communicating in the target language is further emphasized by McRae (1985). He points out that a single utterance must be interpreted countless times to eventually reflect appropriateness in its usage. In the EFL classroom, one type of teaching technique that would fulfill this ideal is drama.

Drama, when it is not merely read but performed, involves the learner's active participation. It is certainly not limited to sheer memorization of lines and movements. Learners need to bring the text to

life using their own experiences and imagination. Also, they are expected to respond suitably to their dialogue partner and to the situation in which they are placed. As defined by Heathcote (1971), drama concerns human beings changing accordingly to the challenges they face when confronting different situations. Drama techniques, therefore, point toward natural and appropriate conversation within diverse contexts, and are particularly concerned with expressing ideas and feelings.

Although drama techniques have been highly evaluated by many teachers and researchers, some may not perceive drama activities as an aid to language learning. Students tend to become emotional and excited, producing noise, movements, and chattering. The teacher may thus fear that the class will get out of control. Another consideration is the students' attitude towards the drama activities. The students' personalities, cultural backgrounds, preferences for formal traditional learning styles may create resistance against participation, which is likely to inhibit progress in learning. However, with careful planning, clear instructions, and sensitivity towards the students' voices, drama techniques offer reasons for meaningful communication. Above all, the teacher's enthusiasm towards the use of drama would encourage the students' willingness to participate (Heal and Welker, 2000).

The Effects of Drama Techniques

The effects of drama techniques on EFL learning fall into two categories: (a) effects on developing communication skills and (b) psychological effects. Communication skills consist of (1) speech acts, (2) pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, grammar, (3) non-verbal signals, (4) discourse strategies, and (5) culture. The psychological effects of drama techniques on students are (1) relaxation and low anxiety, (2) self-confidence, and (3) personal motivation.

Effects on Developing Communication Skills

Every part of our speech contains a speech act, in other words, a language function, such as greeting, apologizing, asking a question, or giving commands. Therefore, language learners must learn sentence structures containing these speech acts. Once they have learned some of these sentence structures, drama techniques can help them internalize and apply those structures in various situations.

The linguistic surface of the target language can also be acquired through drama activities. Vitz (1984) reported a study that supported the hypothesis that children participating in creative drama show more language growth than those who do not. A significant finding was that the mean length of utterances by the drama group increased much more after practicing drama activities than the control group. Since a longer utterance indicates greater complexity in a sentence or phrase, Vitz concludes that drama may stimulate syntactic growth among young ESL learners.

Another effect of drama techniques is that students become more conscious of their pronunciation

in the target language and strive to improve. Stern (1983) found that her subjects who participated in scene playing and improvisations felt that drama activities were useful for pronunciation and intonation improvement. Since drama activities involve oral practice among peers, individual feedback is received more often from members of small groups than in traditional EFL classes.

The third effect of drama techniques concerning communication skills involves non-verbal exercises, such as listening, making eye contact, gesturing, or observing. While performing their dialogues, students need to listen intently to respond appropriately and to use proper eye contact and gestures to fully communicate to their audience. Non-verbal drama activities are valued in the classroom to encourage students to heighten their observation skills that will affect their gestures and speech as well (Via, 1976). For example, in an observation-gesturing exercise, a student will observe another doing a task, such as preparing a meal, and then perform that task in front of his peers.

The development of discourse strategies is another effect of drama techniques. Scarcella (1978) points out that strategies for attention-getting, topic initiation, and topic change may be learned. As students perform drama activities, they learn when and how to use expressions, such as “Excuse me,” (attention getter), “How was the Thanksgiving dinner?” (topic initiating), or “You know what else?” (topic changing). Students will use these rules of conversation when practicing interaction in social contexts. This eventually enables them to learn how to participate in conversation smoothly and with more ease.

Finally, drama techniques are effective in teaching culture. It is generally acknowledged that language is a critical part of culture and should not be taught independently of a cultural context. Successful communication will arise only “when the speaker can predict how the hearer will react and the hearer can predict the speakers’ intentions” (Scarcella, 1978, p. 44). This calls for shared cultural knowledge. With drama techniques, the awareness of cultural patterns, values, attitudes, and relationships can be heightened as students communicate in the target language within culture specific situations.

Psychological Effects

While the effects of drama in EFL classes for developing communicative skills is respected, Stern (1983) and Via (1976) have evaluated the psychological effects of drama techniques on language learners. These effects include (1) relaxation and low anxiety, (2) self-confidence, and (3) personal motivation.

Language learners who are overly self-conscious and afraid of making mistakes may restrain themselves from using the target language. With the underlying assumption that high anxiety discourages language learning, Via states that relaxation is perhaps the most important factor in the language

learning process. He introduces some relaxation exercises in his book, English in Three Acts, that encourage students to feel comfortable in the class and free to express themselves with their classmates. Suggested activities range from voice and breathing exercises to movement exercises in pairs that help relieve students of mental as well as physical tensions. These activities are recommended as ice-breakers in the beginning of a new term or as warming-up activities in the beginning of each class. Often the activities are accompanied by laughter among creative and humorous students. With learner-centered drama activities, students speak to their peers rather than the instructor in a non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom.

Yet there may be some threatening components to drama techniques if students are too timid to stand and move about, let alone to speak out loud, in front of an audience. If the reason for this timid behavior lies in lack of self-confidence, researchers, such as Via and Stern believe that drama benefits the building of self-confidence, which in turn helps the development of communicative EFL skills.

Stern (1983) did an exploratory study of the psychological basis for using drama in language teaching. She collected responses from twenty-four advanced-level university students whose target language was English. The drama activities in which the students participated were scenes from plays and improvisations. Stern reports that the students felt the drama activities helped them gain self-confidence in speaking English and were less embarrassed to speak in front of others.

Via (1976), with years of experience in the classroom and on the stage, explains how drama strengthens self-confidence by using an analogy between acting and martial arts of the East. Just as a yell accompanies the strike in order to build confidence and to increase the energy of the attacker, a strong clear voice in performance will give students confidence. Given a chance to demonstrate that they are indeed capable of expressing themselves in the foreign language, students will raise their level of self-esteem.

The last psychological effect of drama is motivation. It is perhaps the most appreciated reason for using drama techniques in EFL classrooms. Yardley (1999) and Kirk (1995) describe success in motivating Japanese college students with the use of original role-play activities. Via (1976) found the performance of a full play production highly raised the level of motivation among Japanese EFL students in Japan. Stern (1983) reports that most of her twenty-four English as a Second Language students in California desired to participate in more drama activities. The students found the activities to be fun and helped them to achieve the objective of the course: to improve pronunciation and intonation. Also, they felt "loosened up" and could express themselves in English with increased confidence. Maley & Duff (1982) believe that drama techniques are motivating for students as they are active in working together to use the target language and imagination without having a teacher "crack the whip in the centre of the ring" (p. 13).

Types of Drama Techniques

The majority of verbal drama techniques can be identified as role play, improvisation, and the play production. Role play is a popular activity in ESL coursebooks as it allows students to practice and retain learned lexis and structures in a meaningful context. It deals with a certain situation in which students assume given roles. Students are given particular information on the background and character of each role. Role play is a flexible type of activity as it can vary from being very controlled to highly unpredictable. In a highly constraining simulation, students are not expected to present their own opinions about the situation, to decide the character's attitude, to determine how the situation will develop, or the eventual outcome (Livingstone, 1983). On the other hand, open-ended role-play allows students to use their imagination (Ladousse, 1987). For example, students may be given an open-ended situation containing one clear conflict that they need to solve.

Improvisation is an even less-controlled drama technique that relies on students' spontaneous actions and imagination. In a basic activity, the instructor describes a situation to the students and gives them just a few minutes to consult with one another before acting it out. In a popular style of improvisation today, the performers create short, entertaining scenes by relying on suggestions from the audience (Heal & Welker, 2000). McNeece (1983) clarifies the core concept of improvisation: "Improvisation operates by invention rather than by simple imitation: in any situation, no two individuals will ever respond the same way, just as one person may respond differently at different times" (p. 80). Within a structured framework, students are permitted to imagine many possibilities for their individual expressions, and to test them in concrete immediate situations.

The play production is the most extensive of all the drama activities. It requires considerable planning, preparation, time, and energy from both students and teachers in and outside of the classroom. The reward is a great sense of accomplishment in EFL learning. In preparing to perform an entire play in the presence of an audience, students are involved in various exercises. Wessels (1987) and Smith (1984) offer excellent suggestions on how to go about starting and describe exercises for physical warm-ups, voice training, pronunciation practice, improvisations, and rehearsals. The objective for performing a play is to improve one's ability to use oral English in an appropriate and "believable" way. In addition, the author finds development in affective qualities as students work in cooperation with enthusiasm and a strong sense of responsibility to do one's part. The play production also offers a chance for students to display their multiple talents to the school community-not only in language, but in acting, art, and music as well. Indeed, Saeki (1994) has emphasized the benefits of combining drama, music, and dancing in her detailed report of Japanese women college students successfully performing English musicals.

Some Practical Considerations

Some precautions need to be addressed for the use of drama techniques. Generally, drama techniques can be adapted to suit all levels of proficiency. However, for activities that require spontaneity and interpretation of scripts, students would need basic knowledge of the language. Secondly, the student-teacher relationship should no doubt be a relaxed one. Teachers should have a less-controlled teaching style since students should feel free to interact spontaneously without fear of making mistakes (Maley & Duff, 1982). Another consideration is space. Ideally, teachers should use classrooms that allow desks and chairs to be rearranged freely to create ample space for movements and to permit eye contact for everyone during drama sessions.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a brief overview of drama techniques as an instructional approach in teaching communicative skills in EFL. Drama techniques have been highly evaluated by researchers as being effective for developing communication skills and producing beneficial psychological factors among students. Several types of drama techniques have been described and discussed, along with some practical considerations for the use of drama techniques in the classroom. There is no attempt to conclude that drama techniques are the end-all solution to teaching EFL. However, the advantages of the drama approach suggest that it may be an effective approach to motivate students and to enhance EFL instruction.

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