

Overcoming the Fear of Using Drama in English Language Teaching

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Just a few drama activities can bring an EFL/ESL classroom to life. The trends in English Language Teaching (ELT) lean heavily toward communicative and authentic language use. Drama provides lots of immediate resources and is fun for teacher and students alike. The fear factor for a new drama user is the hard part to overcome.

At times teachers are reluctant to use 'drama' activities in classrooms for various reasons: they don't know how to use the activities, limited resources, time constraints, a fear of looking and feeling foolish and the list goes on. Generally these feelings are more prevalent when attempting to use drama with adults. Teachers of young children tend to use more play, games and drama type activities since the children are closer to the "play and explore" stage of development. Often children are much more receptive to any kind of "make-believe" or drama type activity. Of course this is not always the case and it would depend on the cultural values, the ability of the children, and varying social factors. This article is concentrating on the reluctance that is observed in language teachers of adults when drama activities are introduced to them.

The following is based on problems brought up by teachers when tackling using drama in ESL/EFL classes for the first time. They come from actual feedback from ELT teachers after I have given a drama workshop. These following "problems" were the most common negative feedback I received from teachers when asked to try drama activities in ELT. Remember, these are only a few complaints that I encountered many times. The majority of EFL teachers I have been in contact with use drama or communicative activities often and regularly. The two books I refer to are excellent resources for drama in ELT.

1) I am not a drama expert.

Many teachers feel that they cannot approach drama activities without being a trained actor. They feel, at times, they just wouldn't know what to do. Even if they have the activities in a book, which explains them clearly, some feel they couldn't do them properly or explain the purpose of the activity.

Suggestions: Very few drama or communications activity books assume that a drama expert is using it. Most books are "user friendly" and explain the activities in a way that anyone could understand and re-explain it and its purpose. Many of the popular drama games books are targeted for teachers of other subjects; to give them some ideas to add or extend lessons; not to teach drama. Charlyn Wessels offers an exclusive view of drama for use in ELT settings. Drama (1987) is a book for ELT teachers specifically but really any teacher interested in using some drama activities in any class could find the material of value. The areas that she includes detailed chapters of are using drama for: teaching the course book, teaching the four skills (reading, writing, speaking/pronunciation and listening), teaching spoken communication skills and the drama project "which leads to the full-scale staging of a play in the target language" (Wessels: 10) The teachers who "don't know what to do with drama" can easily choose a few games and start slow in their own style of teaching.

2) I wouldn't want to risk looking silly in front of a class of students.

This is an extension of the first problem, where teachers feel they are unprepared for "performing"

in front of a group. Risk is a big factor for teachers and students. If teachers have never tried using a drama activity before both students and teacher could be reluctant to take the risk and just try it. Looking and feeling silly is a big barrier for teachers and students. It is not easy to overcome.

Suggestions: The relationship between teacher and students in an ESL/EFL setting is important. If the teacher is introducing drama to the students it is even more important to establish a comfortable and free thought-sharing environment.

"Drama demands enthusiasm- not only for the lesson, but also for the students. And this in turn depends on the formation of a relationship of mutual trust in which neither teacher nor student feels 'at risk', but they willingly change roles and status to achieve the aims of the lesson." (Wessels: 15)

The teacher should not be seen as "performing" the drama to the class but all members creating the experience together.

For a teacher just starting to use drama in ELT it is important to start slow, maybe with a few warm-up games or role play, that everyone accepts and uses comfortably before moving into any kind of intense drama activity. If the teacher is not comfortable with the activity it probably should not be tried.

"Drama attempts to put back some of this forgotten emotional content into language - and to put the body back too. This does not mean that we must suddenly start leaping about the room in an exaggerated fashion, but it does imply that we need to take more account of meaning." (Maley and Duff, 1987: 7)

3) Drama is just playing and is not a serious study method for learning English.

Some traditional style teachers are afraid they will appear unprofessional and even risk being fired if they focus the lesson on 'playing' instead of serious study. Some language teachers feel comfortable only when using the course textbooks and feel that drama activities could take away from their position as the language "role model". Instructors can be wary of focusing too much on "drama" and not the real subject; English. There is also the issue of control here. A class of 25 students who are working in groups on a drama activity can be a nightmare for a leader who wants to control the timing, language use and focus of the unit.

Suggestions:

"If drama can really enrich the language class in all these ways, why are so many teachers reluctant to use it? Many still think of drama as 'theatricals', because this is their only experience of it. Often the fault lies not with the individual teacher, but with the training that he or she has received; a training that presents education as the one-way transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student, rather than the creation of a learning situation in which the student is also the teacher." (Wessels: 14)

For some teachers the mere mentioning of drama brings up ideas of acting, performing and creating school plays. As mentioned above the training that teachers have received may have altered their view of what "education" should be. Perhaps if teachers had a chance to see "drama in action" in an ELT setting the resistance would lessen.

Teachers who feel most comfortable using a textbook as the focus for language learning could use drama in a limited way in order to bring the text more authenticity for the students. Often the text alone is not enough to provide the students with "real life" practice in the target language.

Evaluating a lesson that incorporates drama techniques can be another trigger that sets teachers off using them. The two main objectives when including these types of materials in a class should be overcoming resistance to the foreign language and creating a need for speaking. By looking at these two areas and asking questions about the students reaction and the lesson overall they can be

evaluated by all members involved.

Loss of control is a fear for any teacher in any setting. Using a drama activity with a large class can seem like chaos if all students are not engaged in the lesson. If the relationship between the teacher and students is well established and other communicative games have been used to promote group cohesion the whole class should be able to be involved in a drama activity and explore the second language at the same time.

Large group drama activities are ideal for ELT situations. More students have the chance to engage in some form of language use and interact in different settings that can be created in one space. These kinds of group drama activities can develop better language use and provide the teacher more observation time and less direct teaching time. (In the one way transmission form)

4) I don't have time to prepare the lesson from the student book and come up with some drama games too.

Teachers who are willing to try some drama games and activities are often frustrated with the materials needed for some games and the time it takes to understand a game and be able to lead it well. A lack of drama resources in a staff room, school or library can make the situation even more frustrating. Some drama resources are not appropriate for ELT and others are based on theatre arts or materials for having students put on "plays" in class. It can be very time consuming and fruitless in some cases to look for some kind of 'drama' to put into a class.

Suggestions:

A basic knowledge of communication activities that can be added to a lesson can be a huge help for any teacher. A warm-up that leads into the lesson does not have to be a complicated "drama" lesson but just a way to get the class working together, awake and focused on the topic. Using the course material, teachers can find many drama techniques to make the course book more communicative and 'alive' for the students. Often no extra planning time is needed if the instructor has these techniques in mind while preparing the actual lesson.

'Drama can help the teacher to achieve 'reality' in several ways. It can overcome the students' resistance to learning the new language:

- by making the learning of the new language an enjoyable experience;
- by setting realistic targets for the students to aim for;
- by creative 'slowing down' of real experience;
- by linking the language-learning experience with the student's own experience of life

And drama can create in a students a need to learn the language :

- by the use of 'creative tension' (situations requiring urgent solutions);
- by putting more responsibility on the learner, as opposed to the teacher.'

(Wessel: 53-54)

Conclusion

Very few resources are needed to make the communicative experience more 'real' for the students. Perhaps if teachers think of the drama activities in the terminology of the popular ELT methodology such as 'communication games', or 'tasks' they could better comprehend the goal of using them.

Resources

- Maley, Alan and Duff, Alan 1978. *Drama Techniques in Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wessels, Charlyn, 1987. *Drama* (Resource Books for Teachers) Oxford University Press.

<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Royka-Drama.html>