The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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As an English teacher, I have often been amazed at how effective drama is to capture the attention of the students in the ESL/EFL classroom.  Drama activities would sometimes have surprising and unexpected results.  ESL/EFL professionals need to use this medium more because the artificial world of the classroom can be transformed into a quasi-real language situation and provides an endless amount of opportunities for student’s personal growth.  We cannot only teach grammar and phonetics with drama but also it has the power to transform the actors as well as the audience.  We shouldn’t underestimate this powerful teaching tool to reach our students.

**Introduction**

William Shakespeare claimed that

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.
*As You Like It Act 2, scene 7, 139–143*

If so, then maybe we need to use drama more in the schools.  Using drama in the ESL classroom is not a new concept.  Drama provides an excellent platform for exploring theoretical and practical aspects of the English language (Whiteson,1996).  The improvisation aspect of drama gives students opportunities for developing their communicative skills in authentic and dynamic situations.  By using drama in the English classroom, we can use English with our students in intriguing and useful ways. The language can be used in context and makes it come to life.  Drama has the potential of making the learning experience fun for the students and even memorable because it is interactive and visual.

There are many studies about using drama to learn English. Wan Yee Sam talks about the communicative approach, drama techniques, value of drama in education, advantages and disadvantages (Sam,1990). Alan Maley and Alan Duff are classic sources for the benefits of using drama techniques; how it helps to learn new vocabulary, builds confidence, motivates the students and helps shift the focus from the teacher to the students (Maley,1982). Drama is a special communication situation which makes considerable demands on the flexibility and skills of the teacher (Kao,1998). We have Morrow (1981) who gives some guiding principles behind the use of the communicative activities. Susan Holden (1981) adds some definitions as to what drama is and how it provides opportunities for a person to express themselves. The personal nature of improvisation provides many outlets for self-expression. We even hear that children need to play as an important developmental process.

**Benefits of Using Drama**

This is all very relevant information concerning using drama in the ESL/EFL classroom. We can sum up the benefits of drama in language teaching as follows:

* the acquisition of meaningful, fluent interaction in the target language;
* the assimilation of a whole range of pronunciation and prosodic features in a fully contextualized and interactional manner;
* the fully contextualized acquisition of new vocabulary and structure;
* an improved sense of confidence in the student in his or her ability to learn the target language.” (Wessels, p.10).

Drama puts the teacher in the role of supporter in the learning process and the students can take more responsibility for their own learning.  Ideally, the teacher will take a less dominant role in the language class and let the students explore the language activities.  In the student centered classroom, every student is a potential teacher for the group.

Drama for second language learners can provide an opportunity to develop the imagination of the students. The students can go beyond the here and now and even 'walk in the shoes' of another. It provides an opportunity for independent thinking  (McCaslin 1996). Students are encouraged to express their own ideas and contribute to the whole.  Creative drama will offer exercises in critical thinking and the chance for the students to be creative. A good example of this is role-plays in small groups The ESL/EFL group will have many situations where they can develop their own ideas as well as skills of cooperation when interacting with classmates.  The group work builds social awareness and understanding as we walk in the 'shoes of another'. Drama gives an excellent method for studying human nature and working in harmony.  The play acting provides the opportunity for a healthy release of emotion in a safe setting which can work to relieve the tension of learning in a second language.

**Drama Brings Literature to Life**

Most teachers see the value of drama in offering training in speech. What is not obvious is how even abstract learning is easier when acted or demonstrated. Drama can also be used to bring literature to life for the students. It is more dynamic than simple text and helps the visual learners as well as recycles new vocabulary. While drama does have a characteristic of recreation, the fun aspect should not be under-estimated.  When the students are enjoying an activity, they are learning and letting their guard down.  The shyness and fear of using English very often blocks learning.  When the students are submerged in an active fun activity, they are more open to new concepts and learning will occur. When the students are having fun, they let their second language guard down and become less inhibited.  The student will tend to relax and stop blocking out the new language.  They will forget how hard it is and start absorbing the ideas presented. Changing the students’ perception of the language learning from a negative to a positive is a huge plus for the learning process.

A good example of the attributes of drama being used outside the classroom is the game of theatre sports. Starting out in Loose Moose Theatre Company in Calgary, Canada (Johnstone,1999). This drama activity has grown to become an international endeavour, taken up by practitioners the world over, which involves the audience as much as the actors in creating a very spontaneous event. Theatre sports demonstrates how powerful a motivating force role-playing can become for the actors as well as the audience. There are presently teams in many different countries using different languages who put on an unrehearsed game for countless spectators and the appeal is only growing.

**Drama as a Powerful Teaching Tool**

In the ESL/EFL classroom, role-playing is a powerful tool.  It teaches cooperation, empathy for others, decision making skills and encourages an exchange of knowledge between the students.  These aspects alone make role-playing beneficial because the students are learning from each other.  Yet, there are many other positive aspects to the role-playing.  Apart from the obvious development of communication skills, it encourages leadership, team work, compromise, authentic listening skills and practice with real life savior-faire.  However, it does not stop there.  It teaches cooperation, empathy, develops decision making skills, promotes the exchange of knowledge, builds confidence and self-esteem, refines presentation skills, encourages self-acceptance and acceptance of others, features of empowerment, pride in work, responsibility, problem solving, management and organizational skills, begets creativity and imagination.

A good drama teacher can use the practice with role-playing to contribute to the self-esteem of the students, build their confidence in using the target language (English) as well as develop many of the skills mentioned above which will carry over to real life.  It is certain that self-acceptance can be encouraged in subtle ways and acceptance of others.

Drama has the potential to empower the students, give them many opportunities to have pride in their work, it teaches them responsibility, problem solving, management and directing proficiencies.  The many activities of team work force students to develop organizational skills and to think on their feet.  These are tools that can be used in all aspects of their lives.  These skills will be useful in the future job market when the students need to work with others or even in the future job interview when the potential employer asks an unexpected question and you need to think quickly.

**Drama Reveals Aspects of the Human Condition**

When you think about it, drama is a method to reveal aspects of the human condition, life is nothing more than a grand series of improvisations (Price 1980).  Through the games, the students begin to realize the importance of shared space, time, attention, information and ideas.  The games spark spontaneity and minimize self-consciousness which often inhibits learning.  The games are also good for developing concentration and trust in the classroom.  While the students are having all this fun, they are developing skills of coordination, imitation while focusing on the task at hand.  The improvisation enables the students to flex their emotional, mental as well as physical muscles in a safe and controlled setting. A good example of this was a role-play one group performed where they displayed their displeasure with the school principal. There was no harm done and all the students were feeling the same.

**Final Reflections on Improvisations and Benefits of Drama**

'Improvisation, then, is an organic experience where skills are constantly being refined.  In particular, students develop an increasing facility to meet changing or unknown stimuli with immediate responses.  Ideally, improvisation leads to a blending; the students create the personality traits as he/she simultaneously identifies with the character as it evolves.  Obviously, the teacher-director should never lose sight of the metamorphic and highly personal nature of improvisation; therefore, there must never be the question of success or failure.' (Price, p. 6)

Drama in its purest form gives the student several avenues to self-awareness.  It is one of the closest literary forms to life itself.  It is a dynamic process that reveals and examines aspects of the complicated lives we lead (Price 1980). All of this leads me to believe that there are many subtle benefits to drama in the ESL classroom.

The benefits of drama to develop the imagination should not be undervalued.  In our rote school routines of memorization and compulsory subject matter, we sometimes do not spend enough time on encouraging our students to use their imagination.  It is the spark that makes the ordinary into something incredible.  Imagination is the magic force that is beyond facts, figures and techniques which can inspire new ideas.  It is with imagination that the ordinary is transformed into something significant.  There is a need to cultivate this trait in our students.  Imagination is closely linked to dreams and inspire us to get up every morning.  Drama has the capability to keep this alive and/or rekindle what our routine daily lives are burying in ourselves.  We need imagination to make a better world. In order to accomplish anything worthwhile, we first need to imagine and dream it.  We should not neglect this facet of human sentience. It may seem like a trivial point, but dreams without imagination would be like life without colour.  We would all be worse off without it.

**The Power of Transformation with Drama**

We all present ourselves in everyday life as we want to be perceived. Erving Goffman (1958) talks in detail about how we present ourselves in everyday life from a sociological perspective.  We are all acting out theatrical performances to present ourselves in regard to how we wish to be seen. When we are in the presence of others, we are to some extent on stage. We will act and communicate in our own interests to influence the people around us to act voluntarily in accordance with the individuals plans (Goffman,1959).  We are in essence, recreating ourselves all the time as our social world evolves. In everyday life, first impressions are so very important.  So, how we are perceived often depends on a blink of a moment which may define us for a long period if not forever. Our communication skills are so important in how we are seen by others. Our words and body language project subtle messages to those around us and others respond in accordance to what they perceive as "us".  In life, we are all playing many roles, therefore, we are wearing many masks.

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves- the role we are striving to live up to- this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be (Goffman, p.30).

We know that an individual will attempt to induce the audience to see them in a certain way.  The more convincing we are in our own roles only help to create the persona that we wish for. The better we are at communicating our ideas helps ourselves to become who we want to be.

Therefore, it makes sense that dramatic skills can help us become the person we want to be. In this way, drama has a wider reach than simply making us more fluent in a second language.  It has the potential of making our lives better as we will be better understood and may help us become the people we want to be. Drama is all about how we present ourselves. If the student can communicate better, the more likely others will see him/her as he/she wishes to be seen.  Therefore, the skills of drama can help the student become the person that he/she wants to be.

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