

# Motivating English-Language Learners through Drama Techniques

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**Abstract:** The focus of this paper is on the use of drama in English-language learning. It discusses the writer's use of drama techniques in teaching his language-learners at Bond University, Australia. The writer presents the advantages of drama over traditional teaching methodology and discusses the characteristics of learners and teachers involved in the application of such techniques. Throughout the paper, reference is made of the findings and philosophies of researchers and practitioners associated with the use of drama strategies. It concludes with the suggestion that the relevant authorities should recognise drama as an innovative strategy and consider raising its profile

## Introduction

My personal experiences with the use of drama in English-language teaching, both in Malaysia and in Australia, suggest that there are certain psychological, social and linguistic benefits to target language learners. Drama techniques, within the scope of this paper, involve long-term activities comprising work associated with end-of-semester performances. In addition, these techniques include impromptu activities that revolve around on-the-spot preparation and presentation. Skits based on role-play, simulation and improvisation, games, story-telling, play-reading, and choral-reading represent such activities. I apply such techniques in an English language elective at Bond University called "Language and Drama" which is conducted over a four-hour period each week, for twelve weeks. This course is unique in the sense that the entire learning process is drama-based (While the main objective of this course is to help non-native speakers of English enhance their speaking and listening skills, native speakers and those with native-like proficiency are also welcome to register, to learn about the basics of theatre. One advantage of their presence is that the non-native speakers use them as language role-models during the various activities). The course consists of three stages:

**stage one**, where written plays are made available;

**stage two**, which includes the process of production (e.g., designing sets/lights/costumes, rehearsals);

**stage three**, which involves the final staging of the plays.

Throughout the three stages, participants are expected to interact productively with one another in the target language.

## Stage 1

In groups, the students either write plays or locate existing ones from relevant sources. If writing is involved, they are provided with themes and/or plots and given a set period of time during which to write them. Themes and/or plots also figures are used in the play-selection process, although the time-frame for this procedure is not as long as the one involving play-creation. Both avenues require regular group meetings in class during which extensive discussion occurs among

group members. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator and participant. The students are advised to keep things simple to ensure that the plays are not too complicated or elaborate.

## Stage 2

The duration for stage 2 is almost the same as Stage 1. The members of each group rehearse the play or plays to be staged. Once they have decided who plays which role, and have shared out backstage responsibilities (sets and props, costumes, make-up). Again, this occurs during class hours, although they are also encouraged to make time outside class hours for rehearsal purposes.

## Stage 3

This is implemented on a selected day at the end of the course. The learners invite their friends and other teachers to their performance. At the end of this stage, they are asked to submit short essays on either their impressions of a play by another group or their involvement during the course.

Stages 1 and 2 incorporate drama-based impromptu activities of the type mentioned in the second paragraph above, to ensure that the participants familiarise themselves with the rudiments of performing before an audience. This is crucial because most of them tend to exhibit varying levels of diffidence and a lack of motivation, and their need to be encouraged.

With reference to my Asian learners of English, it could be said that they subscribe to what could be generalised as eastern values (often referred to in the West as 'Confucian' values), based on a high-context culture of respect and not being outspoken where older or 'superior' persons are concerned. My Middle-eastern and African students tend to have similar characteristics. They are part of a relational philosophy, which differs from a transactional or individualistic one (Goh, 1996, 2002) commonly found in western cultures. Adherence to high-context cultural traits generally results in the average learner of a foreign language exhibiting some or all of the following traits (Gill, 2005):

He/She

- is shy and inhibited;
- is quiet and introverted;
- lacks animation;
- avoids taking risks in the target language for fear of making grammar and pronunciation errors that might make her/him lose face;
- will not respond voluntarily or spontaneously;
- avoids eye-contact;
- lacks motivation, self-esteem and confidence;
- exhibits anxiety;
- is discouraged by the enormity of the task;
- lacks enthusiasm;
- has limited rapport with the teacher;
- finds the culture of the target language alien.

Naturally, given such characteristics, the already onerous task of learning a target language becomes even more difficult, but I have found drama to be an effective way of addressing the above-mentioned problems.

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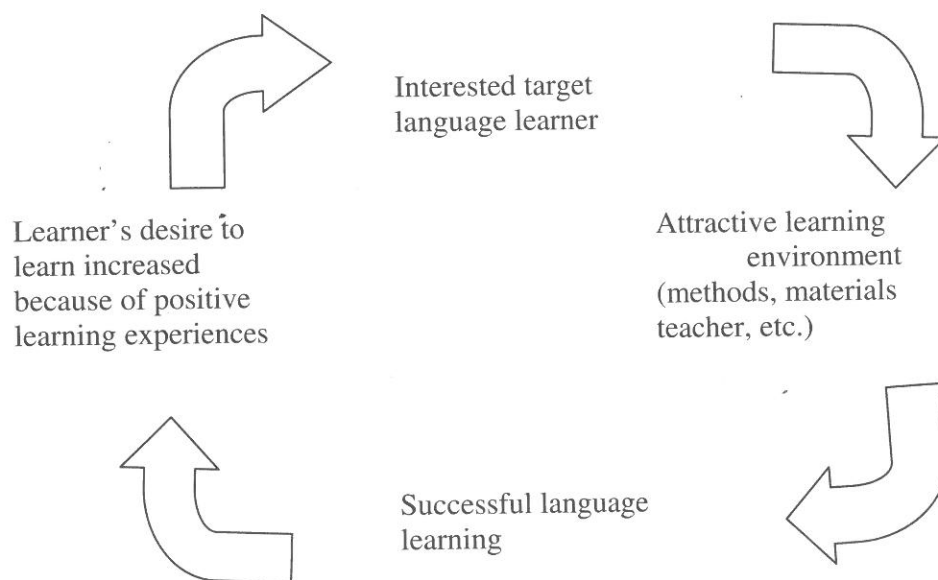
The relevance of drama techniques to present-day target language learning and teaching can perhaps best be established by contrasting them with traditional ones. To this end, the views expressed by Quinn (1984) in relation to traditional and communicative approaches, echoed in Stern's (1992) summary of analytic and experiential strategies, appear most applicable. Their most salient characteristics can be adapted and summarised in the following self-explanatory table:

	Traditional	Drama
1	Objective	Subjective
2	Focus on grammar	Focus on communication
3	Sequenced language items(formal)	Meaningful activities with appropriate real-life language (informal)
4	Observation-based work	Participation-based activities
5	Skill-getting	Skill-using
6	Language practice	Language use
7	Emphasis on accuracy	Emphasis on fluency
8	Predictability of response	Information gap
9	Teacher-centred	Learner-centred
10	Errors must be corrected	Accept errors
11	Learning	Acquisition

From the above, it can be surmised that theatre helps generate a greater output of authentic language through interactive, hands-on activities that are of greater relevance to learners, with the teacher as a guide and an observer rather than a controller. I have found target language learners to benefit from theatre in the following ways (Ballantyne et al, 1997; Gill, 1995, 1996, 2000 a, b, c, d, 2001 a, b):

- (1) their motivation, self-esteem, spontaneity and empathy increase, while their sensitivity to rejection is reduced (Stern, 1980, 1983);
- (2) they become more creative with the target language;
- (3) class activities are learner-centred;
- (4) their participation in and experimentation and risk-taking with the target language during discussions and rehearsals increase;
- (5) their fear of embarrassment and 'loss of face' decrease because theatre provides them with 'masks';
- (6) they have better group-dynamics and time-management skills;
- (7) learning is less threatening and become more enjoyable;
- (8) there are increased opportunities to use the target language through greater interpersonal interaction;
- (9) the language used is more global in nature;
- (10) speaking and listening skills, in particular, are enhanced;
- (11) subconscious language learning occurs;
- (12) different ability levels can exist in the same group;
- (13) vocabulary and grammar can be internalised in an integrated and contextualized manner (Wessels, 1987)
- (14) learners' strengths and weaknesses can be identified through the language corpus produced.

From personal experience, dating back to my schooldays, I have discovered the value of play performances in the language learning process. Rather than see language learning as an entity that resides outside of its organic self, to be dealt with in an artificially sequential and systematic manner, learners are immersed in the language in question. While in the former the target language is an end in itself, the latter revolves around a long-term task (a play) that has, as its central outcome, the production of authentic language *without the learners feeling that they are consciously undergoing a language-learning process*. This is alike the way children learn their native tongues; theatre games help create a mother language environment (Pross, 1986). Many traditionalists may express horror at the thought of such seemingly unprofessional, unscientific teaching techniques. Where is the teaching? Why are the students being distracted instead of being taught? These will be the obvious questions they might ask. However, if they give theatre a chance, they may realise how intrinsically motivated learners become, and that a positive language-learning cycle can be created (see Diagram below).



#### **A positive language-learning cycle**

(Adapted from Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 47)

Intrinsic motivation is part of any activity that is undertaken for its own sake, is enjoyable and which promotes learning and a sense of accomplishment (Lepper, 1988; cited by Lumsden, 1994). Theatre, effectively applied, can be viewed as one such activity in target language learning.

Over the years I have used this technique, I have consciously encouraged my students to focus on the task (play-production) rather than on the tool (the target language). In other words, they are encouraged to participate in discussions without worrying about having to produce grammatically accurate sentences. This, of course, does not mean that grammar is totally ignored. I do make time for language structure when glaring errors occur or when my students



covered the value of play, ask for clarification. However, the main focus is on an active, free-wheeling, unfettered use of the target language. They inevitably enjoy participating in the work associated with the play, which they view as challenging yet achievable. Again, there still exist among us teachers who believe that it is sinful to have fun while learning. To them, learning is a serious business involving well-coordinated procedures that do not lend themselves to a relaxed, informal environment. Thankfully, there is increasing evidence that learning *can* occur in a fun-filled environment. Such an environment can help alleviate the learners' embarrassment and uncertainty associated with having to perform, particularly because everyone is in the same boat. Many of my students show signs of being more fluent speakers and better listeners of the target language by the time they are ready to stage their plays. It is necessary to point out here that their productive language skills (speaking and writing) still exhibit errors, but, particularly where speaking is concerned, there appears to be less hesitation or aversion to risk-taking with the language, and greater voluntary participation in oral interaction, than when they first join the programme. There is also a sense of having achieved success at the end of the course. The following are some of the comments from my students (Ballantyne et al, 1997: 1-12; Tangpijaikul, 1999: 110-111):

*I found I could get rid of panic when I talk in front of people ... Now I can make a speech in front of anyone.*

*It was so embarrassing but it also gave me benefits for my experiences.*

*The drama subjects, compared with other English subjects, are more challenging and interesting because they bring students to real life ...*

*It improved my English as well as my result for the course.*

*... not only my pronunciation has improved but also I am more confidence with public speech.*

*I learned a lot of English expressions...*

One factor that is normally associated with such task-based, experiential learning is that the language associated with the activities is ever-evolving. There is a dynamic production of the target language as the learner's group-write, produce, rehearse, and perform the plays. The language that they use is not pedantically grammar-based but one they use in various ways, for a variety of purposes (Long and Porter, 1985; Jones, 1982). In other words, they are using the language of the real world, where the main idea is to get the message across without necessarily worrying about the whys and wherefores. Instead of grammatically rigid language, there is a potpourri of language elements, with the target language being used in an integrated and holistic fashion. Smith (1984), referring to rehearsals and performances, comments that diverse language elements are focussed upon simultaneously, in an integrated fashion.

Particularly where speech is concerned, the common experience of many learners in some Asian countries has been the lack of speaking opportunities in class (Klinger, 2000; Kim, 2004). In many traditional foreign language classrooms, teachers tend to take over and do most of the

talking, thus limiting learners' speaking time. When they do get to speak, learners often find themselves facing the dual problems of making sense of certain target language words while having difficulty pronouncing them (Dickson, 1989). I find that this hinders their ability to communicate in that language. They stammer and stutter as they struggle through a morass of alien sounds, trying to make them understood. There is often an embarrassing gap between wanting to say something in a target language and actually vocalising it. Inevitably, what is produced is riddled with errors. The more errors they make, the more diffident and unmotivated they become, and the less likely they are to speak. There is the possibility that, if they shut shop, they will never get the sort of practice that is so crucial to the development of fluency. An environment has to be created which encourages spontaneity. Creating such spontaneity will help eliminate the gap that exists between thought and expression in the foreign language (Stern, 1980). This can be achieved through constant participation in oral interaction via theatre techniques. Such regular participation can result in more speaking time, particularly by means of informal conversation practice. Consequently, there is the likelihood of a greater opportunity to practise using the target language. In fact, there is evidence of greater language output in an interactive classroom in two minutes than there is in one hour in a traditional classroom (Kagan, 1995). The more they speak, the better the possibility that they can overcome their target-language problems. A study in Boston, USA, indicates that ESL learners can overcome speaking problems through performance-based strategies (Ressler, 1990). Simpkins (1993) reports that theatre techniques made a group of individuals learning French in Canada feel that they had become more fluent in that language. Furthermore, acting helps learners to articulate better (Smith, 1984). Through exposure to theatre, they can experience a foreign language spoken the way native or native-like speakers would use it. Gassin (1990) indicates that learners can communicate more effectively in a foreign language if they are able to approximate the speech and body rhythms of a native speaker of that language. Their 'speech muscles' get the sort of exercise that helps them handle previously unwieldy words. In addition, there appears to be evidence of experimentation with the grammar patterns of the language in question. The lines that they memorise in their plays may reappear at later dates, with a variety of modifications. For example, English-speaking children of various ages learning Spanish through theatre were able not only to remember their own and their co-actors' lines months after a performance, but also use in new ways what they had learned by taking

*"... idiomatic pieces of their spoken lines and (recombining) them into new sentences that contained the same essential grammatical structure but different vocabulary."*

(Erdman, 1991:13)

All of the aforesaid would require a teacher to be one who motivates his or her students by

- (a) being creative and willing to experiment;
- (b) having a 'modern' outlook to teaching and learning;
- (c) going beyond textbook items and dramatising them;
- (d) creating a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom;
- (e) accepting 'noise' and activity in the classroom;
- (f) making learners like him or her and, thereby, like what he or she teaches;
- (g) encouraging learners to 'open up', e.g., through role-modeling;
- (h) facilitating learning rather than just imparting information;
- (i) welcoming learner-centeredness;

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- (j) not consistently interrupting learners' speech in order to correct them, but noting the errors for subsequent discussion;
- (k) being sensitive to each learner's psychology;
- (l) using his or her voice and body-language effectively;
- (m) exhibiting infectious enthusiasm.

A teacher with such characteristics would be able to utilise a play-script to the hilt, extracting much more from the learners than would be possible with a traditional textbook. He or she could alternate from being a guide by the side, encouraging the learners to act out the scene, articulate difficult words, discuss the excerpt, and so on, to assuming the role of a sage on stage, clarifying vocabulary items, explaining the grammar elements, or just role-modelling the characters. The possibilities are enormous.

I have often been asked whether it is necessary for a teacher, who wishes to use theatre as a target-language learning tool, to possess a drama background. My response has always been that it is not essential. Rather, we should arouse the actor who resides within each of us and use this actor positively and effectively, for the benefit of the learners. If we recognize the fact that the act of teaching in itself is a performance, with the teacher the 'actor' and the learners the audience, it could be easier to condition ourselves psychologically for classroom theatricals. However, one has to concede that not every teacher is enamoured by such a technique,

*"... probably because of a conviction that the nature of language learning did not permit a shift towards a more unstructured, more democratic, and more flexible group organization."* (Stern 1983: 426).

In addition, what are the chances of amendments being made to existing policies in relation to English language teaching? Will education authorities see any value in introducing innovative strategies like theatre techniques into the classroom?

Perhaps now is the time to take stock. I believe that the authorities could do worse than introduce elements of theatre into English language learning, at least. For example, performance-based, do-it-yourself language learning components could be incorporated into lessons. Thus, fifty per cent of each session could be reserved for theatre purposes, for example, while the rest of the lesson could stick to traditional teaching materials. A short play or play-excerpt could be used for a variety of purposes (articulation, interaction, discourse-generating discussion, structure). We could take the Di Pietro (1987) route, going from drama to grammar. This would help create a relaxed and fun-filled atmosphere in class, thus increasing learners' motivation and, in turn, creating a fertile language acquisition environment. While this may go some way towards creating an acceptance of theatre techniques in language learning, the ideal, I believe, would be to introduce a theatre-based subject in which target-language learners work on a play in the language in question. In other words, the activities are not to be seen as 'fillers' or incidental appendages to traditional teaching, but complete formal lessons in themselves. Such an innovative move would see the learners enjoy language immersion, resulting in language acquisition through osmosis, as it were. It has been known to work, e.g., French in Canada (Genesee, 1987, 1994). Before all this can happen, however, those at the top have to reassess the situation and recognize the value of such a strategy. Once this becomes acceptable, and the

proper mindset achieved, changes can be implemented, with finances being arranged for training, resources and facilities.

More and more experts are now starting to accept the fact that traditional language teaching methodology has failed to deliver. Stern (1992: 313) probably sums it up best when he states:

*"A great deal of time has been wasted on routine exercises which have little purpose and which do not translate into real proficiency and application in language use."*

By allowing for an experiential learning and teaching strategy, such as the one that theatre allows for, purposeful language is produced. The learners see meaning in what they are learning, and this can only mean greater motivation to acquire the language.

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