
Educational Drama to Make Language Learning Meaningful, Memorable and Motivating

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In second-/foreign-language classrooms, there are generally two ways of approaching teaching: either using traditional teacher centred methods which focus on grammar, functions and vocabulary usually graded by difficulty or using more communicative methods which conceive second-/foreign-language learning as essentially similar to first-language acquisition and where the focus is on interaction and on meaning rather than on form.

However, neither of these options seem to be altogether effective for different reasons and neither do they render the desired results.

In traditional classrooms teachers often resort to textbooks to work on grammar and vocabulary and they give students workbooks with lots of written practice to consolidate those contents. They assign a lot of importance to reading, writing, accuracy and standardised testing and often neglect listening and oral skills on account of the large number of students they have or lack of time. Generally, teachers adhere to these types of methodologies because they feel more in control of the situation, they can handle discipline better and they can keep students busy doing lots of mechanical exercises. Lessons are often boring and result in declines in motivation, attention and interest.

On the other hand, communicative methods which seek communicative competence, that is to say the ability to use language appropriately in a variety of contexts, mastering its social rules, and handling verbal and non-verbal language, sometimes fail in that they do not provide learners with enough opportunities and relevant real-life tasks so that they can use the language meaningfully in real interaction and face some kind of challenge.

There is need for teaching methods with concrete techniques and strategies that engage language learners in a variety of communicative activities through which learners' communicative competence is acquired (Savignon, 1983; Ellis, 1985, 1994). Among those methods and activities, Educational Drama has proved to be, through many years of research and practice, a useful tool in engaging learners in constructing their own language growth and providing multiple opportunities for them to do it within meaningful contexts and in a natural way.

Many people associate Drama with Theatre. They think that drama only has to do with developing theatrical skills for performance, learning lines, acting, rehearsing and staging plays at school. Educational Drama, however, is something quite different. Even though it makes use of theatrical conventions and elements it does not concentrate upon the product but on the process. It is not meant to be shared with an audience. It is meant to be used as a learning medium.

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SUPLEMENTO *Ideas*, II, 5 (2021), pp. 45-48

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Educational Drama is concerned with the development of a dramatic world created by both the teacher and the students working together to help them build their language skills, experience with the target language in diverse meaningful contexts as well as to actively learn across the curriculum. It is also known as Drama in Education, Process Drama or drama for learning. It is an “active, interactive, reflective, shared, creative learning experience based on working in role” (Baldwin, 2004).

Susan Hillyard (2016) refers to Educational Drama as the SPICE of ELT for it covers the necessary developmental processes of the growing learner.

S for Social development

P for Physical development

I for Intellectual development (cognitive growth)

C Creative development

E Emotional development

It works on social development by encouraging different kinds of interaction and collaboration, on physical development by having participants use their body, gesture and action, on intellectual development by having learners apply higher order thinking skills, on creative development by challenging students to imagine fictional worlds and to figure out multiple answers to problems or conflicts and, finally, on emotional development because it gives them the chance to explore, express and control their feelings, something often excluded from traditional classrooms.

Educational drama usually starts with a pre-text like an image, a video, a song, a poem to set a theme or situation related to learners’ interests. This is a starting point for students to unfold the dramatic world. The pre-text triggers the initial moments of action. It also establishes location, atmosphere, roles, and situations. It calls for students’ knowledge of the world and playfulness. The contexts vary from realistic situations (e.g. school classroom, a deserted house), to imaginary scenes (e.g., the threat of an unpredictable event, the finding of an unexpected object). It is important to create a lighthearted atmosphere with the power of the unexpected in which learning and fun are the primary purposes. It is then followed by a series of exploratory activities and the use of drama strategies which engage the participants in mind and body and challenge their curiosity and imagination. These activities are generally multi-sensory, multi-intelligent and collaborative. All students are invited to take an active role and to experience things for themselves. They have to ask questions, move around, take up roles, interact with others. All this interaction is spontaneous and springs from their own desire to understand and explore the situation and unveil the conflict. Thus, the use of purposeful language is encouraged. These activities allow students to work together in large groups, small groups, and in pairs to discuss and improvise possible scenarios, dramatic situations, solve problems, devise strategies and construct and explore roles. By stepping into the characters’ shoes, inhabiting them, thinking like them and acting like them, learners develop their language skills without realising they are doing so. There is no pressure to produce correct speech, the idea is that they feel the desire to communicate, that they lose their inhibitions and that they get their message through no matter how.

It is ideal for students with different learning styles and who do not share the same language level for it takes into account multiple intelligences and it allows weaker students to learn from their more able peers. At the same time those who are more proficient also feel challenged by the activities and tend to incorporate and use more complex structures and vocabulary. Besides, while speaking in role or through improvisation, they work on intonation, stress and register.

Language learners at lower proficiency levels as well as students with learning difficulties, who are at the stage of developing their basic language skills or struggling to do so and feel limited when it comes to expressing their ideas and thoughts in the second language, especially benefit from these kinds of activities because they can communicate not only through discourse but also through body language and gesture or by asking their peers or teacher for the words they lack. Using body language stretches their imagination, allows them to express what is beyond their linguistic repertoire and enables recall. Both intellectual and emotional engagement are promoted.

“Enjoyable physical movement embeds the emotional impact of multi-sensory experiences on the cells of the body to form deep neuronal patterns in the brain and thereby enable memory and recall more readily than methods having lesser sensory impact.” (Wilkinson, 2000)

Educational Drama not only helps students to develop the four skills and the 21st century skills like collaboration, critical thinking, communication and creativity but it also enables them to acquire social and life skills. It enhances self-confidence and prompts students to listen actively, to think with others, to negotiate, to be empathetic and to support, share and value each other’s participation in the process.

Educational Drama does not require sophisticated resources. It helps to create a relaxed, playful atmosphere in which students feel free to participate at their own pace, to take risks, try new things and be part of a bonded group, which learns together.

Support, security and trust are critical for allowing openness for discovery.

Reflection at the end of the lesson is also key. It is important to invite them to reflect on experiences and the things they start achieving. In second- or foreign-language classrooms there are two kinds of reflection: the first is reflection on the experience, and the other is linguistic reflection. In linguistic reflection, the focus is on whether the learner uses appropriate linguistic means to perform the social functions needed in the Process Drama.

With Educational Drama learning becomes more significant and meaningful. Also, more vivid, real and fun. It liberates the mind, body and soul. It sets students up on their feet. It provides a shared sense of discovery, an atmosphere of openness and deep questioning. “Drama lifts the words off the page and makes the language active, meaningful and fun, often leaving the learners begging for more” (Hillyard, 2016).

To sum up, Educational Drama, can become a good method in balancing learners' accuracy and fluency in second-/foreign-language classrooms. Its major power lies in that it conceives learning in a holistic way and in that it pursues communicative competence as a purpose and interaction as a focus in language learning and teaching.

To illustrate what Educational Drama is I will make use of an evocative picture. The objective of this pre-text is to set the scene as well as the mood and the atmosphere and to introduce the characters. It is meant to arouse the audience’s curiosity and to raise many questions and possibilities. No story exists at the start of this drama other than one image from it. Through drama the participants will be supported to create their own collective fiction and drama story using just a picture as the starting point. I will employ several strategies and techniques to encourage speculation, to enable and encourage multi-sensory access, response to the stimulus and to offer shared ownership of the emerging fiction. I will then provide some information as teacher in role to help build the drama and to deepen active engagement, listening and further enquiry. Next I will invite the participants to take a more active role by making them personify objects and take up roles in small group playmaking. They will be required to improvise and interact. At the end I will

encourage them to reflect on the whole story and to symbolise it physically and through captions.

These activities can be used on their own or as pre-reading activities to anticipate a short story.

The strategies and conventions used in this drama can be transferred to enable any picture or any pre-text to be used as a trigger for a story-drama.

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