

IN THIS EDITION

Three Reasons why I teach Phonetics

by Marianne Jordan (Page 5)

Making a case for collaborative writing in the L2 classroom

by Susanna Wickes (Page 7)

Shining the Spotlight on Drama in the Classroom

by Shona McDonald (Page 9)

The Impact of Teacher Cognition in Very Young Learner Pedagogy

by Shay Coyne (Page 12)

Materials adaptation begins with materials evaluation

by Touria Jouilla (Page 14)

L1 in the English Classroom

by Barbara Hernandez (Page 17)

SEN in the English language classroom

by Damian Cunniffe (Page 19)

Supporting experimenting in junior centres

by Laura O'Grady (Page 21)

Considerations in Teacher Development

by Christohper Farrell (Page 24)

The pedigree of learner autonomy

by Peter Lahiff (Page 26)

No. 3

17th February 2017

ELT Ireland features (Pages 1-3 & 29-30)

Welcome to our Third Bulletin

by Dr. Lou McLaughlin

Recipe for a good ELTed talk by Peter Lahiff

Meeting Up with managers by Joanne Mitten

Newsletter know-how by Ben Dobbs

Acknowledgements by the Editor

The Glastonbury of Grammar by James Duggan

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Shining the Spotlight on Drama in the Classroom

by Shona McDonald (Atlas Language School)

Would you like to find a new creative way to inspire and motivate your students to speak English? Have your students ever expressed fear or anxiety over speaking English outside of the classroom? Have you considered using drama to help? Without a doubt, drama has a role to perform beyond the confines of the theatre. As educators, it is imperative that we recognise and appreciate the potential of the creative arts at work in our classrooms and the ability of the arts to bring any subject alive, above all, a language. Using the dramatic arts as a tool in teaching English allows the student to lift the words from the page and experiment with them in a variety of situations.

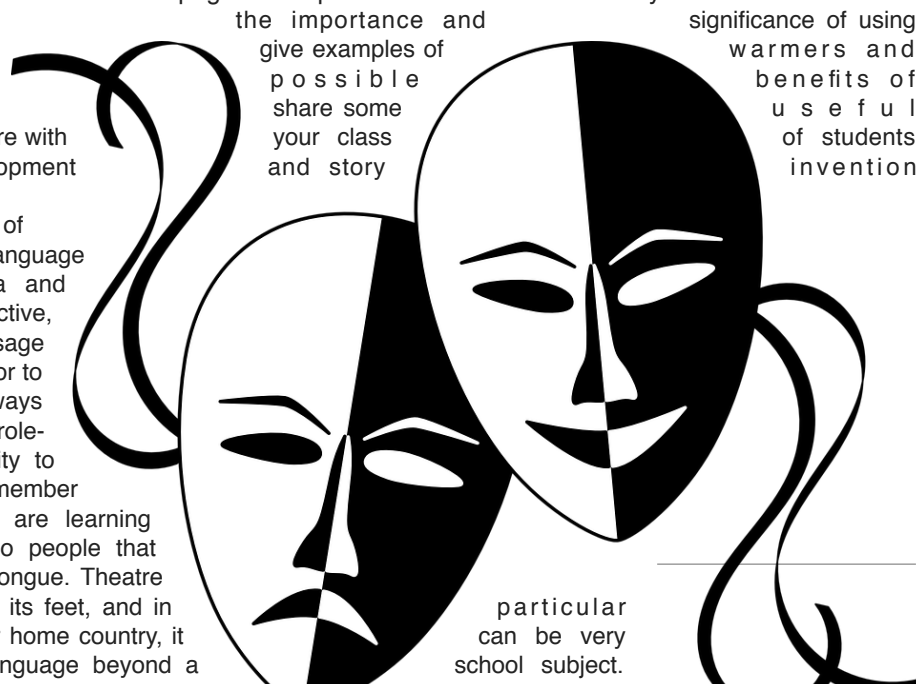
In this article, I will firstly discuss drama in the classroom. I will then give examples of possible activities on devising a piece of theatre with through character creation, development before concluding.

Firstly, I will discuss the advantages of including drama in an English language curriculum. In my opinion, drama and language share the same core objective, to communicate. It could be a message or a story, it could be to an audience or to each other, but the primary aim is always to interact and express. Drama and role-playing give students the opportunity to put down the grammar book and remember that the primary reason that they are learning English is to portray a message to people that would not understand their mother tongue. Theatre allows students to see language on its feet, and in when one is learning English in their home country, it difficult to imagine English as a language beyond a Students can find it difficult to envision ever having to use outside the four walls of the classroom. Drama gives the rehearsal space for that, to see language in use in the pursuit to achieve a goal, whether that be to buy milk in a shop or to complain in a restaurant. "The improvisation aspect of drama gives students opportunities for developing their communication skills in authentic and dynamic situations." (Boudreault, 2010)

Seeing English as a means to achieve an aim can oftentimes help and encourage weaker or less driven students overcome their fears and inhibitions of speaking aloud and increase their self-confidence. Motivation grows from the enhancement of self-esteem and students then aim higher and push themselves further.

Drama is also a powerful tool in evoking and inspiring creativity and developing the storytelling ability of the student. It provokes imagination, an aspect which comes naturally to children, but needs to be more artistically brought to the fore in adults. The focus goes beyond simply the meaning of the text to how it would be said and why and when it would be said, linking it to the reality of speaking English outside the classroom.

Furthermore, Roleplays in the classroom are a very rich form of revision and reinforcement for the students, allowing them the opportunity to practice language already learned, recycling material that the students are already familiar with. It places a particular emphasis on pronunciation which is a key contributing factor in the success or failure of an interaction with a native speaker. There is a higher probability of remembering a word if it has been rehearsed and repeated over and over again in various styles and formats and with that certain inhibitions that the speaker may possess about the pronunciation of some problematic words will be overcome. Roleplays aim to show students the usefulness of the language they have been studying, how its purpose extends beyond merely passing an exam in school. A new language opens gateways to new interactions, new opportunities and new experiences.



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Putting on a mask in the classroom

Pic by Pixabay

“Drama attempts to bridge the gap between the carefully controlled language work that is often done in the classroom and the complexity of unpredictable language and behaviour we are confronted within the outside world by physically and emotionally engaging our students in safe and occasionally unsafe situations.” (Almond, 2005). Drama gives the students the opportunity to learn and practice in as near a natural environment as possible. Learning is increased, I believe, when there is a combination of thinking and doing.

Warmers

Warmers help the students relax and alleviate any fears or misconceptions they may have about drama. Warmers also focus the participants and transition them into this new creative space for working. Through loosening up, they are unconsciously letting down the barriers to language learning and are taking in a language without being aware of it. All of these activities share the advantage of being low cost and adjustable to any level of English.

I will now outline some warmer activities that I have done in class and how they can be organised.

Mirror Hands: In pairs, the students stand opposite each other. (Student A and Student B) A leads the activity by moving their hands. B is A's mirror and must follow and copy A's actions as though A is looking in a mirror. This activity is very simple and straightforward. No words are exchanged which eases students into these activities. It focuses the students' concentration and develops eye contact and trust between the students.

Touch: This whole group game is also very simple and effective as a starting exercise and works particularly well with younger children. All students line up in the centre of the room and the teacher says “Touch something red, Touch something big...” The last person to touch an object of that kind is eliminated. This activity is effective

because it allows the students to practise the adjectives and there is a little competition happening in the activity which always heightens the attention of the students and ensures they try harder.

Blind: This activity is done in pairs. A closes their eyes and B leads them, by placing one hand on their elbow and one hand on their hand, around the room ensuring not to bump into any other pairs. B can explain to A what is happening around them. They can then change places. This activity deepens the trust between the classmates and through the explanation, students can practise words related to direction. There is also a variation of the activity where two students from the whole class are chosen and named A and B. A stands at one end of the room and B stands at the other. A closes their eyes. The remaining participants place themselves as obstacles between B and A, standing, sitting, or lying. B must now direct A through the obstacles. When A reaches B, they have finished and they can exchange places or another pair can try. This game can become a little chaotic and so the teacher does need to observe closely to ensure that everyone is participating actively and safely.

What am I doing? This activity is very useful for practising the present continuous. There are a variety of present continuous action sentences in a box on the table. The students are in two teams. One student comes up, picks out one sentence and mimes their sentence to their team. They need to guess what the student is doing. If they can't guess, the other team can guess and if they are correct, they get a point.

Hotel Receptionist: This game focuses on the formation of questions and the use of modals. One student is the hotel receptionist and one student is the guest. The guest has a request he would like to make to the hotel receptionist but he can't speak. He must mime his request and the receptionist must guess. The other students sit behind the receptionist and if he/she gets it wrong three times, then the other students are invited to guess. The person who guesses correctly is the guest for the next round.

Working towards a play

The production of a play is the ultimate goal with the use of theatre in the classroom, but a lot of work is required to achieve this. Firstly a decision needs to be made on whether a text is chosen and possibly adapted to suit the level or a text is devised by the students themselves. Having experience with the latter, I will now outline some exercises that have helped my students in their devising process and the creation of this new world.

Theme construction and development

Freeze framing: The students are divided into groups of 4 or 5 and the teacher shouts out a random concept word for instance 'love' and the students need to produce a freeze frame picture of what that word means to them. The teacher should focus on concepts or themes that the students had been considering for use in the creation of their play. The teacher might also incorporate thought-tracking into this activity, whereby he/she taps one of the students on the shoulder and they have to say what they imagine their character would say in this moment and in this position.

Character Construction and Development

The envelope: This activity is used to create a character. The teacher divides the class into groups of 3 or 4. He/she then gives each student an envelope or bag containing 6 to 10 objects. The students need to imagine that these items all belong to their character. From this evidence, they need to build a character profile. This could be developed by then joining two teams and getting them to create a dialogue between their two characters. As the teacher is observing the activity, he/she can take note of any interesting ideas that could be developed as the class moves towards a storyline.

Developing the character: Students trace around each other's bodies on a large piece of paper. Each student should have their own body outline. They write their characters

“Through loosening up, they are unconsciously letting down the barriers to language learning.”

name on top. On the paper, outside the human outline, the students write down situational words about this characters life, facts about his/her life and on the inside, write down their internal feelings. The character cut outs could be passed around the room so as to get every students input and opinion on each character.

Hot-seating as the character: This activity would be very useful when the student know their characters and their script very well and are just getting used to their character. Here, one at a time, the characters sit in front of the rest of the class and for one minute questions are fired at them that they must answer instantly. The questions should be issues that are not directly addressed or referred to in the play. The idea is to get a fuller, rounder picture of this character as a whole person. For example: "What's your favourite colour? Where did you go on holiday last year?"

Focus on Relationship between Characters

Concentric circles: This is a good activity for the cast overall to work on together. The teacher calls out a point in the play, such as the opening scene, and the students as their characters must stand closest to the character they feel they are emotionally closest to and furthest from the character they feel they are emotionally furthest from. They then repeat the activity for different times during the play as relationships and loyalties may change.

I have outlined the various benefits of such exercises throughout this article and have also shared some examples of activities that can be organised in class, which I hope you will find useful.

To sum up, drama and the use of the arts in education promotes and encourages active participation, cooperation and collaboration. It puts students in the driving seat of the class, allowing them more time for conversation and speaking practice. In my opinion drama acts as a motivation factor, a fun and interactive activity to engage students and encourage them. The ultimate aim of the use of drama in the classroom is to allow students to feel capable and brave enough to put their English into use outside the four walls of the classroom. This method of education is very much focused on whole person learning with the emphasis being on the collaboration of the four skills, reading writing speaking and listening, that we might normally teach in isolation, but can be so much more effective when taught as a whole.