

## **Drama in language learning**

**Liliana Russo Rastelli**

### **1. Definition of Drama**

Drama interaction is an activity which can be considered as essential in the learning process of a foreign language. It helps students and teacher in many ways and has many psychological benefits as well. But contrary to what we may think, it is not widely used in schools because some teachers are afraid of not being able to carry out all the activities or because they feel they cannot handle it. Anyway it should be encouraged because it is a practise which does not involve too much time and gives many benefits to teachers and students alike.

Depending on your group you can choose some activities or you can invent the ones that suit you and your students' best, but having everything ready makes it easier to use especially the first time you decide to use a dramatic test to perform. I would recommend teachers to have a look at prospective plays and have a selection ready to choose from when the moment comes, this is easier than having to browse through lots of pages in a hurry! We should bear in mind the fact that we are doing dramatic activities when we read a story aloud or when we do pair work and there are many ways to practise before getting into a full fledged play.

So now let us examine what is drama. I like one definition which says that drama is written dialogue which involves a wide range of responses and gives stimuli for the development of speaking, listening and writing activities.

We can distinguish between Drama which is a process of activity and Theatre which is more interested in the product, that is to say the performance. A performance demands more time and care while drama is an everyday activity. We make use of dramatic instances when we do dialogues, readings or we represent parts of a lesson. And in this way we give life to the words written on the page and help students become aware of speech features, paralinguistic and extra linguistic features. It also helps to make learning more memorable because students get the idea that dramatic activities are fun and so they relax and produce more.

### **2. Advantages**

There are many reasons as to why we should use dramatic activities in the classroom, especially if we are speaking of primary school children. Students become aware of different possibilities of expression. They can express what the text says and also what they want it to say. They realise there are many possibilities when reading a text and many more when performing because there is no "right" reading but a conveyance of meaning.

Doing dramatic activities can help communication, motivation, speaking skills, team work, collaboration and building up confidence among other factors.

Let us have a look at each of these factors:

- Communication is improved because they have to use the language to communicate the idea of the play or dialogue they are reading.
- The children are motivated because it is something different from what they do everyday.
- Speaking skills are improved because they need to make use of good diction in order to be understood and they pay attention to intonation as well.
- As far as team work is concerned, it is important to work together for the realization of one goal, the performance as a group. Nothing works if one wants to show off; we should all have the same goal in mind. So there is a need to help the others, to rehearse together and try to help the weaker members of the group. At the same time this helps build up their confidence as learners and they are motivated so we have a complete circle and positive feedback.

We should bear in mind the process of using drama: reading, understanding, interpretation and representation.

The reading part can be done first by the teacher and then practised by the students with the help of the teacher. We should explain anything that needs further explanation and help them see the nuances of the play. Then we should help in the interpretation, giving them clues as to how to go about it and praising them in their improvisation (as far as the play admits it) and finally the big moment of representation when we have to help perform in the best way possible to put the message of the play and the group across.

It is important to follow some steps so as to ensure the understanding of the students and the participation as well. If they see they can do something, they will be more receptive and will be able to relax more at the time of using drama as a means of communication.

### **3. Disadvantages**

Some teachers consider that there are too many drawbacks as regards using Drama. For example they argue that it can take too much time, they can be afraid of being mocked by the students or they may feel that they lose control of the class.

I think all those objections can be ruled out because you do not need to be an expert in order to use drama in your classroom and you can overrule the difficulties by reading or asking a colleague how to go about it. Perhaps attending some workshops can cure teachers of their fears. I think we should be ready to try new things in teaching as in all walks of life so following the same line we can say that some teachers will be more adventurous than others and this will be reflected in their classes.

### **4. Some tips on the use of dramatic instances in class**

One of the secrets of having a good class making use of drama is to have a good time, to encourage students to improvise and take it easy. You do not need to correct every single sentence the student utters, you must be there but let them interact with each other and see what comes out offering encouragement. When you have to correct something you can do it in group and not as criticism but as a way to improve the play. It is

very important for students to see the attitude of the teacher; a relaxed teacher will obtain much better results than a teacher who feels uncomfortable with the whole process.

A good posture is necessary in order to make good use of our voice and paralinguistic features. The Alexander Technique consists of thinking to the body rather than actively doing anything with it. To overcome his difficulty, Alexander developed four specific mental directions to guide his body into an improved use.

1. Allow your neck to release so the head can balance forward and up.
2. Let the torso lengthen and widen.
3. Let the legs release away from the torso.
4. Release your shoulders out to the sides.

All these positions plus a good use of voice and relaxation techniques can be used at the beginning of the rehearsal to allow you and your students to start the task in a confident and relaxed manner. In fact I sometimes start my classes with a massage so that students calm down and feel the contact with the others thus allowing us to work better as a team and not to have individuals trying to monopolise the teacher for instance.



Before we start using a play in class we should explain why we may want to do that activity: it may be that a group needs bonding and we decide that the best way to do it is through drama but there should be other reasons as well for it to be worth while, the use of proper pronunciation and intonation patterns for instance.

## 5. The Little Red Riding Hood experience

The first steps to take are: explain why we want to do a play, see if the children are enthusiastic with the idea (we should be enthusiastic ourselves if we really want to do it), and then we have to examine the play or give them a choice among several plays that have already been read by the teacher and considered to be convenient. Once the play has been chosen, we have to read it aloud and explain some characteristics (if it is a comedy or a happy ending story etc). In order to assign the roles we should have an audition and the rest of the students should give their opinions as to who is best for each part.

Personal choices have to be taken into account too, there may be students who do not want to have a big part for fear of not remembering the part or others who love being stars and want the longest part... There should be a part for each student and it should be invented if it is not there. In the Little Red Riding Hood version that I used there was only one girl and I had a 4 year old and an 8 year old so we decided that in our play Little Red Riding Hood had a younger sister and they were supposed to go together, they also complained that their lines were too short so we invented a longer dialogue and they decided what they wanted to say and in the end it turned out to be a dialogue between the two sisters. Another of the girls did not want to act but she was very helpful as prompter so that was another role successfully assigned.

As to the costumes, everything had to be prepared out of the clothes we had at home: One of the girls came dressed as Dulcinea and it was good enough to play the part of big sister, granny was wearing an apron, the woodcutter his father's trousers and shirt etc, so there was no expense and no extra work for the mothers.

There were some rules or tips which were to rehearse for ten minutes at the beginning or end of the class but only if they behaved very well (which they did) and I was quite strict with the time limit so as not to have a whole class devoted to rehearsing.

One of the best experiences has been the bonding between students and teacher because our relationship grew a lot and that has enabled us to work even better, there is more confidence and they feel that learning English can be fun too.

I saw in the BritLit page that they had worked with Little Red Riding Hood and was curious as to what they had done with it. Being an old tale I assumed that not much could be done but I was wrong so I put the idea to my students and we started working on the project. First of all I downloaded all the arts material and selected the tasks to be done according to ages. The youngest girl was going to colour the pictures we would need to prepare a poster, while the others would be in charge of doing “mix and match” or working on vocabulary. Then I put the idea to the children of trying to see what could be done with this play and perhaps performing it. They accepted the idea and we had an audition to select the different characters and who was going to do what. There was a Chinese girl, very nice but very shy, who decided she did not want to act so we offered her the position of prompter. Then we had to audition for the parts of woodcutter and wolf. Initially there were no problems but when we had rehearsed all the parts, the wolf decided he wanted to be the woodcutter so we reached an agreement: either he played the part or my dog would do it. Seeing that he couldn't exchange parts with the woodcutter, he decided to do it himself and in this way we avoided a mayor crisis because the other children are a bit tired of the “stardom” of this boy.

The following text is what I downloaded from the BritLit page and what I used for the production of the play.

*Carolyn Ardron and Sue Clarke. Illustrations by Paul Millard*

All around the world children love listening to and reading fairy tales in their mother-tongue. Whatever the reason, fairy tales provide both children and teachers with a familiar starting. All in all it must have taken perhaps 8 classes to prepare but only using up a little rehearsal time at the beginning and end of class. Little Red Riding Hood point from which to explore stories in a second language.

This kit contains a variety of resources, from text and tasks to illustrations, flashcards and presentations, for you to download and use in your classroom. You can also find computer based interactive materials for students on British Council's [LearnEnglish Kids](#) website.

**Downloads** The downloads are divided into five sections

- [Activities](#) - is a collection of materials related to the story
- [Chants](#) - is a collection of spoken drill type activities
- [Flashcards](#) -is to help you build up vocabulary and support understanding
- [Play](#) - helps you to use the materials to produce a short play
- [Story](#) -helps you to tell the story

**Activities** - is a collection of materials related to the story

- [Introduction](#) - tells you how you can use the materials in class
- [Charades](#)
- [Big or Little?](#)
- [Big, Bad Wolf](#)
- [Bingo](#)
- [Categorise words](#)
- [Colour in the characters](#)
- [Colour in Little Red Riding Hood](#)
- [Label Little Red Riding Hood](#)
- [Match characters and descriptions](#)
- [Match character's speech](#)
- [My Little Red Riding Hood story](#)
- [Picture dictionary](#)
- [Picture wordsearch](#)
- [Story review](#)

- Vocabulary checklist
- Wanted posters
- What can you see?
- What have I got?
- What's the time, Mr Wolf?

**Chants** - is a collection of spoken drill type activities

- Let's go to Grandma's
- Please don't play in the wood
- Tummy, teeth and tail
- What a good girl!
- Wow Whee!

**Flashcards** - is to help you build up vocabulary and support understanding

- Working with flashcards
- Characters
- Body
- Clothes
- Food
- Home
- Little Red Riding Hood
- Wood
- Word cue cards

**Play** - helps you to use the materials to produce a short play

- Working with plays
- Making masks
- Making masks colour
- Play – Version 1
- Play – Version 2
- Play – Version 3

**Story** - helps you to tell the story

- Working with stories
- Story A4 flashcards
- Story flashcards on PowerPoint
- Story filmstrip
- Storyboard

These plays can be adapted for different groups and you can use at least one every year as a sort of consolidation activity or rounding up of the school year. The activities I chose were the ones which were more significant for the task ahead but they gave a purpose to the whole acting activity.

The project art was done according to ages and according to preferences, if a child likes colouring, or cutting and sticking together or doing crossword etc, they could choose the activity they liked best.

We all have to work to obtain something and in this case it was a nice performance and to show the parents that they could say and do things in English. I placed a lot of importance on the collaborative factor and I explained that to the parents because the children had behaved very well indeed. But before asking parents to come we had to have several groups watching us and giving their opinions which was very valuable because they were given in a very positive way and as pieces of advice.

As we advanced into the story we discovered that we were learning many things and that there was a lot of collaborative work being done because there was one aim in common and that was to have a nice time and a nice performance.

These children even asked if they could come and rehearse on their own and I told them they had to be very quiet because I had other classes. And in fact they behaved very well and obviously I had to praise them. They grew in responsibility and collaborative work.

## **6. Another play**

On the other hand, I had another group with older students (11 years old) and I had to look for another type of play. I found one called “The Police” where there were several parts but not enough for everybody so we decided to have 2 children for each part and I gave them the choice of performing twice or of performing together and they chose to do it together and they shared their parts very well. There were two little sisters in the group and they were presenters. So we had a part for everybody and they could all collaborate in the outcome of the play.

# The police

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**Scene** A public meeting at which Inspector Black is giving a talk about the British police force  
**Characters** Inspector Black  
PC Green  
WPC Brown  
PC Grey

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**Black** Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Inspector Black, and I've come here tonight to talk to you about the police force in Great Britain. The police force in Great Britain is very professional, very intelligent and very...professional. So, I'd like you to meet some of my very professional and intelligent police officers. First of all, I'd like you to meet PC Green. Ladies and gentlemen, PC Green.

**PC Green enters.**

**Black** Good evening, PC Green.

**Green** Good evening, Inspector Black.

**Black** Now, what does PC mean? Tell them, Green.

**Green** I beg your pardon, Inspector?

**Black** Tell them.

**Green** Tell them what, Inspector?

**Black** What do the letters 'PC' stand for?

**Green** Oh! 'PC' stands for 'Peter Christopher'.

**Black** What?

**Green** It's my name, Inspector. Peter Christopher Green – PC Green.

**Black** Green...

**Green** Yes, Inspector?

**Black** Do you think that we call you 'PC Green' because your name is Peter Christopher Green?

**Green** Yes, Inspector.

**Black** Well, you're wrong. 'PC' stands for something else.

**Green** Really?

**Black** Yes. Now think: What does 'PC' stand for?

**Green** Postcard?

**Black** No!

**Green** Personal computer?

**Black** No!!

**Green** Oh, I know! Prince Charles!

- Black** Green, 'PC' does not mean 'Prince Charles', or 'postcard', or 'personal computer'. It means 'Police Constable'!
- Green** Really? I didn't know that.
- Black** You are Police Constable Green.
- Green** Thank you, Inspector.
- Black** Now, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to meet another British police officer: WPC Brown.

**WPC Brown enters.**

- Brown** Hello.
- Black** Now, if 'PC' means 'Police Constable', what does 'WPC' mean?
- Brown** 'Wife of Police Constable.'
- Black** Don't be stupid, Brown! You are not 'Wife of Police Constable'!
- Brown** Yes, I am, Inspector. I'm married to PC Green.
- Green** That's right, sir. We're very happy.
- Black** 'WPC' means 'Woman Police Constable'. Now, ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, Green and Brown are wearing nice blue and white uniforms.

**Green and Brown demonstrate their uniforms like fashion models.**

- Black** Hat – or helmet. Blouse – or shirt. Skirt – or trousers. Boots...or boots. So, this is a police uniform. But there are a lot of police officers out there in the street with no uniform.
- Green** No uniform?!
- Brown** They must be very cold, Inspector.
- Black** No! They're wearing normal clothes.
- Brown** Why's that, Inspector?
- Black** They're wearing normal clothes because they want to look like normal people. So...here is a police officer dressed exactly like a normal person. Ladies and gentlemen, PC Grey.

**PC Grey enters. He is wearing a police helmet and boots, and a pair of long shorts and a brightly-coloured shirt.**

- Black** Now, as you can see, there is no way that you would know that PC Grey is a police officer.
- Brown** Except for the helmet.
- Black** Except for the helmet.
- Green** And the boots.
- Black** And the boots. Except for the helmet and the boots, there is no way that you would know that Police Constable Grey is a police officer.

**PC Grey does not look very pleased.**

- Black** Now, Grey – tell these people what it feels like to be a police officer with no uniform.
- Grey** It feels stupid.
- Black** What?
- Grey** It feels stupid. I mean, I'm a police officer: I want to wear a uniform!



The police 3

**Black** That's enough, Grey.

**Grey** I don't want to walk the streets looking like this!

**Black** Grey! Get back in line!

**Grey** Would you walk the streets looking like this?

**The Inspector blows his whistle. Grey gets back in line.**

**Black** Green! Brown! Grey! It's time for equipment demonstration.

**Green** }  
**Brown** } Equipment demonstration!  
**Grey** }

**Black** Now, every police officer has three important pieces of equipment. A whistle –

**Green produces a whistle.**

**Black** – a truncheon –

**Brown produces a truncheon.**

**Black** – and a notebook.

**Grey produces a comic.**

**Black** A notebook, Grey, not a comic.

**Grey** They didn't give me a notebook.

**Black** I see.

**Grey** No uniform, no notebook. It's ridiculous!

**The Inspector blows his whistle.**

**Black** That's enough, Grey! Now, what are these very important pieces of equipment for? First of all, the whistle. The whistle is used to attract the attention of other police officers. Like this:

**Green blows his whistle.**

**Green** Oi!

**Brown blows her whistle.**

**Brown** Oi!

**Grey has no whistle.**

**Grey** No uniform, no notebook – and no whistle!

**Black** And now, the truncheon. Green, Brown, Grey – ready with your truncheons!

**Green** Sir!

**Brown** Sir!

**Grey has no truncheon.**

**Grey** No uniform, no notebook, no whistle – and no truncheon!

**The Inspector blows his whistle.**

**Black** Right – forget the truncheons. The notebook. Green?

**Green** Yes, Inspector?

**Black** What is the notebook for?

**Green** For making notes, Inspector.

**Black** Very good, Green. Brown?

**Brown** Yes, Inspector?

**Black** Have you got anything in your notebook?

**Brown** Yes, Inspector.

**Black** Good. Read it.

**Brown** Oh. All right. **(Reading)** ‘ “What I did today”, by Woman Police Constable Brown, aged twenty-five...and a half. Got up. Said “Hello” to Police Constable Green. Made a cup of coffee –’

**Black** Thank you, Brown. Grey?

**Grey** Yes, Inspector?

**Black** Have you got anything in your notebook?

**Grey** **(Holding up the comic)** You mean this?

**Black** Yes.

**Grey** Yes. **(Reading)** ‘ “Mickey Mouse goes for a picnic.” On Saturday, Mickey and his friends –’

**Black** Grey! I mean: Have you written anything in it?

**Grey** No.

**Black** Why not?

**Grey** Because they didn't give me a pen!!

**Black** All right, all right, all right. Here you are.

**The Inspector gives Grey a pen.**

**Grey** Thank you, Inspector.

**Black** Now, have you all got everything you need? Whistle?

**Green** Yes!

**Brown** Yes!

**Grey** No!

**Black** Truncheon?

**Green** Yes!

**Brown** Yes!

**Grey** No!

**Black** Notebook?

**Green** Yes!

The police 5

**Brown** Yes!

**Grey** No!

**Black** Boots?

**Green** Yes!

**Brown** Yes!

**Grey** Yes!

**Black** Helmet?

**Green** Yes!

**Brown** No!

**Grey** Yes!

**Black** (*Slightly confused*) Well, that seems all right. Now it's time for action!

**Green** }  
**Brown** } Action! Right!  
**Grey** }

**Black** I want you to get out there, in the street!

**Green** }  
**Brown** } In the street! Right!  
**Grey** }

**Black** And find some criminals!

**Green** }  
**Brown** } Criminals! Right!  
**Grey** }

**Black** And when you find them...

**Green** }  
**Brown** } Right!  
**Grey** }

**Black** You know what to do!

**Green** }  
**Brown** } What?  
**Grey** }

**Black** You arrest them!

**Green** }  
**Brown** } Arrest them! Right!  
**Grey** }

**Black** And then there won't be any criminals left!

**Green** }  
**Brown** } Right!  
**Grey** }

**All** Left! Right! Left! Right! Left! Right!...

**They all march away.**

As you can see the whole play is a long dialogue where there is one “narrator”, Black, and he is the one to guide the others in what they have to say so it is important to choose a “good” Black in order to have a successful play. It is also important to explain the characteristics of the other characters because in this way children can give them the different intonation patterns and body language that is needed and perhaps they can not get it themselves if it is not explained to them.

The problem with this play was the use of irony and obviously children were not ready for this so the way I read the story and how I explained the different nuances of voice and character to them was all important. So much so that they were very good in getting into the part of Police officers and boss by using different ways of interaction.

As we got into the rehearsing the children got enthusiastic and they wanted to invite their parents to a performance. We decided to use the garage and not to prepare many things as regards setting. We divided the garage into two parts, one as a stage and the other as place for the audience.

Before that, we decided to rehearse in front of some companions and they gave us their opinions and we changed things accordingly. Then we talked about costumes and decided to use whatever could be found at home and not to have to spend any money.

They characterized themselves and decided to perform together so they agreed that the two or three students who performed the same part would get dressed with something similar, similar colour or hat or something that they considered appropriate.

At the beginning I was worried about discipline and the way of interacting of the students but it soon became apparent that they knew how to behave when they were really interested in what they were doing.

## 7. Conclusion

I have learnt that using dramatic text or doing dramatic representations help a lot because the level of interaction reached is very valuable for future projects.

When I set about doing both activities I just wanted to see if they could work, now I know that they work and the idea for prospective plays is to choose plays where they can have fun and at the same time stretch their knowledge a bit more, it can be by using a play that has more vocabulary and we have to work on that or something a bit more complicated than what we have currently been doing as ways of consolidation or extra teaching.

It may also be convenient to use at the end of the year because children are tired and they see drama as a ludic activity and it is a great tool to consolidate what has been taught before and to use elements like body language and use of voices in order to stimulate imagination as well.

By using plays in my classes I have grown as a teacher because I can explore different venues that I had not thought of before, classes are more entertaining and I can notice the progress of some children who in a traditional class would not have thrived.

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