Engaging in Dramatic Activites in English as a Foreign Language Classes at the University Level

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Resumen

Este artículo estudia como, por medio de actividades dramáticas , ficción y realidad se unen para ayudar a que el estudiante de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera pueda comunicar de una forma personal y significativa. El tipo de actividades propuestas están diseñadas para generar ese espacio en el que los estudiantes puedan relacionarse personalmente entre sí en un entorno capaz de producir una interacción espontánea y creativa. El trabajo incluye dos tipos de actividades dramáticas elaboradas para estudiantes de universidad que ejemplifican lo expuesto en el estudio.

Palabras clave: actividades dramáticas en EFL, intearcción significativa

Summary

In this article, we discuss how, through dramatic activities, fiction and reality can work together to help the English as a Foreign langage learner communicate in a more personal and meaningful way. The kind of activities proposed are designed to help engender a space where students can personally engage with each other in an atmosphere that is conducive to creative and spontaneous interaction. Two examples of dramatic activities, designed for university students, are given.

Key words: EFL drama, ELF dramatic activities, meaningful interaction

1. Drama and Language Learning

In foreign language learning, it is important to establish an atmosphere where students can freely explore the language. Since language means communication, it is essential to provide learners both with activities that help them to develop their communicative competence in English and a flexible atmosphere that is conducive to the application of these resources.

The need to create a dynamic, interactive space in the foreign language learning environment is not a new concept. Rivers (1987: xiii) proposes establishing spaces that promote individual and personal communication. On the other hand, Stevick (1976: 33) recommends the creation of environments where the expressive capacity of the whole person can be explored; a place where, as Krashen (1987: 73) points out, learners do not feel inhibited to express themselves.

Dramatic activities such as storytelling and scenarios (Di Pietro 1994: 41) can provide students with the possiblity of performing interactively in a transformed space, where meaningful communication can take place. With stories and dramatic interaction, learners face novel realities and new challenges, and by participating in these sort of activities, students can experience the language in a personal and creative manner.

This is in line with Vigotsky's (1998) proposal of four phases in the development of creative imagination: exploration, inspiration, participation, and interaction. In the first phase, learners explore a novel situation, which may be in the form of a story or a scenario. If the input is in some way relevant, or meaningful, the

learners, to some extent, become inspired and are subsequently motivated to participate. At this point they produce or express themselves interactively with others, as long as they feel that they are in an unthreatening environment.

In this article, we will discuss how, through dramatic activities, fiction and reality can work together to help the English as a Foreign langage learner communicate in a more personal and meaningful way. The kind of activities proposed are designed to help engender a space where students can engage with each other personally in an atmosphere that is conducive to creative and spontaneous interaction. Some examples of different dramatic activities, designed for university students, will be given.

Over the years, a number of authors have written books supporting the remedial use of drama in the language learning field. Schewe and Shaw (1993: 7) indicate, Tenuous though they may often have been, connections have long existed between modern language teaching and drama or theatre. Authors who have written book-length works include Parry (1972), Via (1976), Nomura (1982), Smith (1984), Maley and Duff (1984), Di Pietro (1976, 1987, 1994), O'Neill (1989, 1995), Kao and O'Neill (1998), and Whiteson (1998).

But what is drama? The *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* (2012) defines it as a composition in verse or prose arranged for enactment (as by actors on a stage) and intended to portray life or character or to tell a story through the actions and usually dialogue of the enactors. The enactment of a story, then, is at the core of drama.

All dramatic activity involves a process of theorising and hypothesis testing. The word "theory" comes from the Greek word θεωρία, meaning "contemplation". Pabón de Urbina (1997: 296) explains that the word in Greek also means espectáculo o asistencia de espectáculos. Similarly, Lyman y Scott (1975: 1) note, "Theory" is derived from the Greek term for "theatre". This derivation suggests that the method appropriate to theorising was, from the beginning, dramatistic. The authors further propose that the intention of observing has always been to bring truth to light. The sought-after truth was *aletheia* (literally, "unhiddenness"), the truth that was hidden from view but available (Lyman and Scott, 1975: 1).

To a greater or lesser extent, seeking to bring truth to light comes naturally to human beings. Implicit in this view is the idea that the everyday world provides situations from which truth might be extracted by those who would take the trouble to look (Lyman and Scott, 1975: 2).

Drama derives from the Greek word δρᾶμα, meaning action. In essence, drama is natural human action, which involves searching for truth and bringing it to light. But drama also entails revealing the uncovered truth to others. This notion coincides with the fourth definition of the word drama given in the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* de la Real Academia Española (1992), Suceso de la vida real, capaz de interesar y conmover vivamente, and with the meaning of the word "dramática": Capaz de interesar y conmover vivamente.

We maintain that drama consists of stories and enactment, and it is participatory, a natural dialogical process in which meaning is established and shared through action, interaction and personal commitment. Echoing Lyman and Scott (1975: 3), we believe that drama is an inextricable part of all social interaction. In the modern language teaching field this notion of drama has been advocated by authors such as Via (1987: 10), who holds that Drama is communication between people , and Lyman and Scott (1975: 3), who claim that Reality is drama. This is what makes it a valuable tool in second language and foreign language learning.

Over three decades ago the Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe established that In the school context as for adults, the communicative skills should indeed be the primary objective of learning a foreign language (Porcher 1980: 9). Few teachers, today, would disagree, though there is no unanimity about how to go about achieving this goal.

We hold that, in both the second language and foreign language learning classroom, as in the real world, real communication is dramatic and replete with role-plays as strategically active scenarios (DiNapoli & Algarra 2001a). This is in line with what Stern (1980: 82) proposes, claiming that drama develops skills in personal and interpersonal expression. It is, in the words of Vitz (1994: 23), a natural outgrowth of the trend towards an interactive approach to second language teaching.

We believe that dramatic activity in the classroom is a creative, interactive, and dialogical process involving the solving of problems that are fictionally created by what Courtney (1990: 6) calls an as if mode of thinking. Courtney explains, Being "as if" is the self's fictional mode of operation (p.13).

An "as if", or fictional, kind of thinking comes naturally to human beings. When we think of possibilities we are imagining scenarios. We then externalize possiblities in action, testing their feasibility in reality. It is the way humans naturally create a dramatic world that provides a valid perspective on the actual world (Courtney 1990: 50). People normally imagine performing different roles in fictional situations. We do this in many spheres of life, not all of which are as obviously dramatic as role-taking or theatre (Courtney: 13). The author further explains, At the core of all dramatic activity is a fictional mode of thinking that involves a dialogical process of hypothesis testing in groups. This social interaction is the basis of meaningful communicative performance.

The *Merriam-Webster Unabridge Dictionary* (2012) defines fiction as the act of creating something imaginary: a fabrication of the mind. The creation is fiction, and it is the nature of human intelligence to engage in fictional creativity in order to better understand the world. It is both rational and logical to create a dramatic scenario that provides a convincing perspective on one's surroundings.The creation of fiction lies at the center of dramatic activity. The story must be dramatically meaningful for the person who is doing the telling or enacting it. In addition, it should be engaging for others.

Dramatic engagement is not the same as problem oriented simulation (DiNapoli & Algarra 2001b), which, as Jones (1995: 18) suggests, is an event in which the participants have (functional) roles, duties and sufficent key information about the problem to carry out these duties. Simulations are undramatic role-plays, the principle aim of which is the correct execution of grammatical structures or language functions. The students' concentration is focused primarily on linguistic form, and the activity, therefore, is not dramatic or truly meaningful, because the performers are not cognitively and affectively involved in the performance. The performers are not emotionally committed to the roles they are playing, personally lacking what Packard (1987: 14) calls a stake in the story. Not being personally committed to the roles they are playing, they cannot give their full attention to the performance itself. Using dramatic role-play to develop emotional aptitude (DiNapoli 2009), therefore, is essential to learning another language.

Claiming that logical and affective commitment obliges students to attend to the verbal environment, Scarcella (1978: 45) maintains that a student's cognitive and emotional commitment to the discourse of a

dramatic activity is essential, and is derived from the intrinsic factors, feelings and attitudes, and extrinsic factors, interests and cares, that are particular to the individual and the fictional circumstance. In this line of reasoning, Hegman (1990: 304) affirms, The fusing of affective and cognitive components of learning

benefits both affective and cognitive components of learning, and both are critical to mastery of L2. Moreover, Via (1987: 113) holds that performers must bring to the role-play a concept of self, because It is impossible for someone to be anyone else; therefore language learners need to add their own feelings and desires, and he suggests getting them to ask themselves the the magic if question, as in, for example, What would I do if fell in love with the smartest student in the class?

However, drama is not about stereotyping characters and banalizing situations that seem to be real. This can only hold back meaningful communication building, as can also the imposition of laws and social mores. As Barnes (1968: 14) notes, interaction will merit the name "drama" by not seeking to impose a single "right answer" but to contain a complex of attitudes and judgements.

This is precisely what makes drama a potent resource in the EFL classroom. Yet, as O'Neill (1989: 528) points out,

> Of the many teaching strategies which are likely to promote dialogue, the approach which has the greatest potiential and yet is the least often used is drama in education—where teacher and students co-create fictional roles and contexts, in order to explore and select on some issue, concept, relationship, or event.

2. Two remedial drama activities

The authors of this paper have over the years consistently endeavored to find ways to get their English as a Foreign Language students at the university level involved in dramatic activities, or activities consisting of stories and participatory enactment in a natural dialogical process, in which meaning is established and shared through action, interaction and personal commitment. This is the meaning of dramatic activity as we see it, though the activities themselves may differ procedurally.What follows is a descriptive analysis of two different remedial dramatic activities, implemented in order to raise the students' communicative competence in English.

a. Activity 1: Constructed Situations

Context

The first one was carried out during the early weeks in a class of Textos Filosoficos en Lengua Inglesa, at the Universidad de Valencia, involving intermediate and upper-intermendiate English level speakers. It was based in part on the artist Tino Sehgal's constructed situations (Collins 2012), in which prior to the start of the activity, each student is given several prompts to choose from that, when posed as questions, serve to initiate a dialogue between two interlocutors.The prompts, or skeleton topics, are used to call forth real-life stories.

Procedure

The procedure of the activity is as follows: The students are paired off and asked to engage one another conversationally for a few minutes. While they are talking the teacher walks around and, discreetly, listens in on as many conversations as possible. After a few minutes the teacher calls out All right, Talkers, stand up and engage someone else, meaning those who are speaking at the moment are to find new partners.

In the previous class session, the teacher will have asked the students to consider for homework a series of "constructed situations" to be used for initiating and maintaining a conversation in the next class. The situations are constructed in the sense that each "talker" is provided with a skeleton upon which improvisational layers can be added to the performative edifice of voice, language and movement. The

performance is the engagement itself. The "talkers" use the questions to engage one another. The interlocutors are both question askers and interpreters. One of them initiates the engagement, usually with a question such as, I like your tatoo. Where did you have it done? The question is derived from a constructed situation, which the interlocutor had chosen previously. In this case, the topic initiator was satisfaction.The four prompts, or constructed situations, given to the interpreters are used to call forth anecdotes or stories. To the best of their abilities, the "talkers" are to be prepared to discuss moments in their lives when (1) they have experienced a sense of arrival, (2) they have experienced a sense of belonging, (3) a sense of satisfaction, (4) or a sense of dissatisfaction with themselves.

Experience/Results

In the past, during the activity students have used the constructed situational prompts to discuss such matters ashow they had arrived in class that morning, initiated by the topic initiator "arrival", or, stemming from the same topic, what their arrival in Valencia for the first time had been like. In response to the topic initiator satisfaction, a student once said she was satisfied with herself for having recently moved in with her boyfriend; another student discussed his dissatisfaction with the political situation in the country. While the discussions were taking place, the teacher circled the room, encouraging students to include as many details as they could. One student said she was satisfied with her recent visit to New York City, where she had met a lot of interesting people. When pressed for more information by her partner, she explained that she had made friends with an artist couple from Ecuador who lived in the Bronx, and that she had visited their studio, describing as best she could, with as many details as possible, what she had seen and experienced.

Whenever Spanish was heard being used by a student, the teacher discreetly approached the individual, listening closely to what he or she was saying, before asking, in English, the person to explain in more detail, in English. One student was talking about the overcrowded tram she had caught to class that morning. As quietly as possible, so as not to attract too much attention from the others in the class, the teacher asked her, in English, if she could recall anything, or anyone, interesting she had seen on the tram. The student replied that she could not, so the teacher asked her if she had ever seen anyone interesting on a tram. The student recalled a man who had once boarded with a monkey in a cage who had got off at the beach. The teacher left her and her partner discussing that anecdote.

The overall objective was active, authentic engagement in English. Passivity was discouraged. The students were told, Spectators are unwelcome. In way not unlike the humanistic techniques for language learning proposed by Moskowitz in her serminal work, *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class* (1978), the "talkers" were encouraged to show an interest in their partners. Asking pertinent questions was one way of doing this. Sehgal (Collins 2012: 34) refers to the process as an interrogative art, prompting concentrated exchanges of thoughts between interlocutors and engaging in creative meaning-making (DiNapoli 1997)

In the course of the activity, the teacher encouraged the learners to share as many details as they could in a real engagement. The "talkers" blended personal experiences with some fantasy. Anecdotes dovetaled together as the conversation proceeded. On one occasion, a student said she was happy with a tatoo she had

recently had done on her arm. Her partner said she was disinclined to get a tatoo because she was afraid of needles, but that she thought having one was "cool" and wondered what it would be like if she had one. That was authentic engagement, where anecdote and fantasy overlapped, the kind of real, improvisational engagement that Del Close (Halpern np: 2005) calls theatre of the heart, in reference to engagement between

improvisors who mutually respect one another and speak from their hearts, honestly, about real experiences or fantasies.

b. Activity 2: "Fool the listeners"

<u>Context</u>

The second dramatic activity we will present here is based on narrating stories and is called "Fool the listeners". The activity was performed on several occasions by intermediate and upper-intermediates students of fine arts and architecture at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia.

<u>Procedure</u>

The dramatic activity consists in having students tell stories in English about themselves or somebody they know. The objective in telling the story is to convince the listener that they are being told a true story. The students have to prepare a story that is scary, intriguing, hard to believe, surprising or even fantastic, depending on the topic chosen by the teacher.

The students are asked to tell the story in a way that manifests their commitment to it. The teller's personal engagement in the undertaking is imperative to the success of the activity.

When the teller finishes narrating, the listeners then proceed to ask questions in order to find out whether the story is true or false, and whether it is so completely or partly.

The activity was carried out over the course of two class sessions. The first session took place during the last twenty minutes or so of the class. It consisted in the teacher telling the students a story in English, along the lines of one of the constructed situations mentioned in the previous paragraph.

After being told the story by the teacher, the students then decide whether or not the narration was true. To this end, the students ask the teacher a battery of questions with regard to the story. These questions might entail any aspect of the telling, including hesitations in the teacher's telling, contradictions, seemingly unsound reasoning, or any other aspects related to the narration. At the end of the question and answer session, the students decide, amongst themselves, whether or not the story was, indeed, true, partially true, totally false, or just a little. Subsequently, the teacher confesses the veracity or fallacy of the story, or parts thereof.

It is important to keep in mind that the success of the story depends not only on the fact that it is personally meaningful for the teller, but also on its being only slightly far-fetched, neither too believable nor too improbable. According to Di Pietro (1981: 33), "real life provides much raw material for classroom scenarios". In truth, real life is full of implausible, preposterous happenings to draw upon. In a dramatic activity, an interesting story, or anecdote, is one that is, to some extent, astonishing, questionable, or incredible.

At the end of the first session, the students are asked to prepare to tell a five to ten minute story of their own for the next class session. They are to confine their narrations to the constructed situations mentioned earlier: scary, intriguing, hard to believe, surprising or fantastic.The teacher tells them that the objective is to mislead, or deceive, the listeners, for example, by narrating an improbable event as if it were factual, or inserting unlikely occurences as if they had actually happened.

For the dramatic activity of the second class session, the students are put into groups of four. The members of each group then tell each other their respective stories and at the end of each story, as in the

previous class session, the students decide whether the story they have just heard, or any part of it, is true or false.

After having heard each others' stories and appraised their veracity or otherwise, each group then chooses the one story they feel is the best. The story voted the most oustanding of each group is then narrated to the class as a whole, and the question and answer session as to the credibility, or inverisimilitude, of each narration is once again repeated by the entire class. At the end, the group as a whole decides on the best story.

<u>Experience/Results</u>

In our experience, the majority of the stories that the students told were factual, perhaps because lying is more difficult to sustain than telling the truth. That said, by and large, the untrue stories ended up being more entertaining than the factual narrations were.

The following examples are of two students who elaborated different personal stories, both surprising and quite unbelievable. But, nevertheless, through their juggling of reality and fiction, they were able to fool the rest of the class with their tales.We have chosen these stories because they connect very well with the reality of university students. As a result, the emotional engagement with the listeners provided fertile ground for real interaction.

In the first story, told in a very dramatic fashion, the student was telling the truth and supplied a lot of details. But the listeners wrongly concluded that the story was untrue.

The second story, however, turned out to be completely false. But it was narrated in such a convincing way that almost everyone thought that it really had happened. This was because the narrator ostensibly did not try to convince them of the veracity of her story but delivered it in a natural manner that disarmed the potentially skeptical listeners. The stories as recorded by the teacher and then transcribed may be read in the Appendix to this article.

3. Conclusion

During the dramatic activities described in this paper, the students' linguistic mistakes mattered less than the real communication that took place. Fiction and reality blended in personal and meaningful ways, thoroughly engaging the interlocutors in a dialogical process, in a relaxed atmosphere, conducive to creative, uninhibited and spontaneous interaction. The students experienced the language in a personal manner, both emotionally and cognitively. It was dramatic in that it consisted of stories and elicited participatory enactment, the basis of all social interaction, in which meaning was established and shared through action, interaction and personal commitment.

Story A, told by a student of the School of Architecture

The School of Architecture of the UPV is located opposite a tram stop, called "La Carrasca". The students are all familiar with the stop, which becomes very crowed during rush hours. The student begins the story:

One day, I had to come to the School on a Saturday morning to hand in a project. What a surprise. The tram stop was completely empty. After handing my project in, I went back to the tram stop. Shoot! I couldn't find my tram card so I had to buy a single ticket. More expensive, of course. I was totally alone on the platform, when I deposited a coin in the slot. I pressed the button and… the machine started throwing a bunch of coins at me. I couldn't believe it. I put the coins in my pocket except for one which I deposited again in the slot to get a ticket, but… another surprise, the machine gave a bunch of coins for the second time. By then, a girl had arrived and started looking at me with curiosity. All these coins but still no ticket!
I tried for the third time. I put a coin in and… no kidding, more coins again!
The girl looked at me suspiciously. I told myself (this machine must be broken. Let's take advantage of that!) But when I deposited my euro again… this time I only got a ticket.
I took the tram and counted all the coins that I got. A total of 36 euros! That made my day.

After telling the story, the students asked him several questions to find out if he was telling the truth or not. They finally decided that he was lying. The student, then, explained that the story was totally true but unfortunately it did not happen to him, but to another student, and he was just standing on the platform while the other one hit the jackpot.

Story B, told by a student of the Faculty of Fine Arts

It was a special day. I got home really late the night before and woke up almost at lunch time the next day. The apartment was empty, as usual, I'm always the last one getting up. I brushed my teeth and had some toast while listening, very annoyed, to the noisy workers rebuilding the street in front of the Serranos Towers. It's been seven months since I came to live in this flat, which I share with three more students. Seven months with that noise! Why are they spending this huge amount of money?
I finished my homework and went to the University. I stopped in the cafeteria and met Miguel, one of my flatmates. He was very upset because something had happened. This is what Miguel told me:
 "I was still sleeping when our neighbour, the old lady, finally woke me up because of her banging and screaming for help for a long time. I finally got something to get dressed and opened the door. She was standing in the landing crying desperately. Mumbling something about her little dog and her washing machine. I kind of understood that the washer fell down and, also, that she could not find her doggy. Well, she needed my help: an old lady, 75 years old, could not possibly lift a washer herself. Actually she lives alone with her dog, her only family that we know. We like her a lot. She is not the typical pain in the ass lady; she is the kind of the helping one. She usually invites us for coffee and cake and brings us delicious food. She is aware of how bad we students, far from our family eat.
I walked in her apartment, followed by her, opened the kitchen door and saw the whole thing: The washer had fallen on the floor. I lifted carefully when—gash!—I saw the little dog smashed on the floor. I could hear the scream of my neighbor behind me. She fell on her knees trying to find some kind of life inside the poor little animal. Too late. The doggy was pretty much dead. Hey! And there I was not knowing what to do. Watching my desolated neighbor crying, I asked her how this could possibly happened. She told me her washer was a really old one. In fact some years ago, it started shaking dangerously while *centrifugating*. It even fell down once, but not over her dog. Somebody put some *cuñas* to hold it. But the *tacos* got wore down, and two days ago she realized she had to buy new ones. She removed the old ones, thinking of putting new ones, but the night before she totally forgot that the washer was loose, and set the washing machine as usual. She went to bed without realizing that her doggy was comfortably sleeping next to the washing machine, her favorite place in winter, so cozy and warm.
When the washer fell down, the dog could not escape.
What a way to start a day! Miguel was really down and upset, but when he finished telling me what had happened, the coffee I was sipping came back from my stomach trying to find a way to escape"

When the narration was done, the class asked a lot of questions. The story was so sad that most people concluded that it could not have been invented. The narrator had spiced the telling with details that were familiar to students sharing an apartment, which made the story even more believable. In the end, the listeners were informed that that the story was fiction, which was a relief since that meant the dog was still alive.

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