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The Role of Drama in Language Teaching

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the role of drama activities in education, especially in language teaching within the Drama Club of English Language and Literature Department of Qafqaz University. It is a case study of the use of drama in a language class, describing the course structure and classroom procedures. The study was carried out in the second semester of the 2008-2009 academic years during the rehearsals of performance “Pride and Prejudice”. It includes personal experiences of group of students from different departments and different age groups and language teachers which have successfully performed and achieved their aims and evaluated the results, presenting setbacks and possible solutions for teaching language to foreign learners. Finally, it encourages the use of drama for transformative and emancipatory learning.

Key Words: Drama, language, learning, teaching

Introduction

Drama is a creative form of learning. Involving students in cooperative, process-oriented and at the same time peace-related drama activities, is therefore one of the most challenging tasks for the language teachers. As drama methods have not often been included in teacher training so far, it is of great importance that in-service training institutions offer workshops or even a real training course on the use of drama techniques in language teaching. In contrast with European countries in Azerbaijan drama as a teaching method is unknown. There were different attempts to develop this methodology, but unfortunately were left unfinished. Having personally experienced the effects of drama activities in language teaching, we came to the conclusion that it not only motivates students and helps to speed up the learning process, but also improves their relationships with each other and the atmosphere of the class. Integrating drama as a teaching method in language teaching, means bringing real life as well as fantasy situations and characters into the classroom. It requires enthusiasm and a willingness “to take risks” on the part of the students and the teacher. A risk that was gladly taken by almost 26 students from all the faculties of our university was to their own benefit. This paper presents the results of an investigation during the rehearsals into the value of using drama in a university classroom. Drawing on Di Pietro (1987) and Via (1976) on the advantages of using drama in language learning, from Mezirow (1990) and Schön (1991) on the importance of reflection for promoting meaningful learning, and from Donato and McCormick (1994) and Lukinsky (1990) on the effectiveness of portfolios as a tool to promote reflection, the paper presents the use of drama in not only language teaching, but also in different areas of teaching-learning process.

Drama in education

Theatre is an important part of many people’s lives, bringing the gifts of entertainment and story sharing to people around the world. Theatre has different forms in different cultures for example, Turkish shadow puppets, Chinese opera, Greek tragedy and comedy, traditional African storytelling and drumming, and fully staged shows and performances. No matter the style of theatre, performances have the potential to create magical and unforgettable moments for their audiences. The term ‘drama in education’ refers to using theatre for a purpose beyond entertaining an audience. This purpose is generally to change the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors or perhaps all them of audience members. There has always been a bridge between education and entertainment. From the earliest time, theatre has been used to spread news, share history, or educate people about events outside of their communities. Recently, the use of drama and theatre arts for educational purpose has undergone a remarkable resurgence. In particular, in social education provided a focus for countless dramatic presentations. Television drama, radio plays, mass media campaigns, comic books, and other imaginative offerings have been used around the world to convey information and influence behavior. Audience members

often relate to characters on stage or in the radio or television drama are motivated to participate in interactive opportunities.

There is a growing body of evidence on the utility of theatre in education in western countries. In fact in Europe many books have been written on drama and its role in education process such as "Stage by Stage: A Handbook for Using Drama in the Second Language Classroom" by Burke and O'Sullivan, "Words Into Worlds: Learning a Second Language Through Process Drama" by O'Neil and Kao, "Thinking it Through: Developing Thinking and Language Skills Through Drama Activities" by Thompson and Evans and it was largely used not only in formal education, but also in informal education. As John O. Stevens in his "Awareness" points out "...anything you can do to increase communication in your class will reduce your need to impose order by authority, and reduce the students' need to rebel against that authority". It is seen as a powerful tool in language teaching. The theatre can strengthen the emotional and psychological appeal of messages and provide a believable and interesting way to explore key points of language. Drama allows audience and participants to receive information in an entertaining and exciting way.

At its best, drama captures students' attention; even not active students bored by lessons are animated by live drama. It engages students focusing their attention and actively involving them in an experience. Active involvement means teacher achieved 50 % of lesson's objectives. If used effectively, drama allows influencing students' not only intellectual or cognitive skills, but also emotions and self-confidence in ways that traditional instruction cannot. The more the senses are involved the more effectively and actively you learn, and the improvements you make will be lasting. Whereas we teachers have long been familiar with games and small drama activities in our classrooms to encourage students' participation and active learning process, the drama as a teaching method was not largely studied and was ignored in traditional teaching process of foreign languages.

The more "open" and the less "controlled" communication is, the more fluent, natural and spontaneous and the more authentic it will be. This of course means that the traditional boring (teacher) questions and (pupil) answers are no longer the core of a lesson. Process drama is concerned with the development of a wider context for exploration – a dramatic world created by the teacher and students working together within the experience. It can also fruitfully be applied in areas like cultural studies, literature or the usual range of topics from generation gap to bullying and gender issues.

Method of study

The one-year course we have started was to process drama methods in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. As we mentioned above it required enthusiasm and a willingness "to take risks" on the part of the students and the teacher. A risk that was gladly taken by almost 26 students from all the faculties of our university was to their own and their students' benefit. They were from different faculties and from different age groups. We altogether successfully staged our play and reached our purposes. Our main aims and objectives were:

- To promote the use of drama as a teaching method in foreign language teaching
- To integrate drama into the foreign language lesson
- To attract less sociable and asocial students to work together
- To improve communicative skills through drama
- To integrate drama into the teaching of cultural studies, literature, etc.
- To promote the use of drama in communication skills, personality training, social learning, reflective skills, observation skills, aesthetic understanding, creativity, tolerance and acceptance, self confidence.

Therefore the main ideas and some results of the training course are now presented in this lecture.

We want to speak to you of our experiences with people who are students of another language. We should tell you that English is our second language and to teach the language to students of second language is very difficult. In our profession it is important to teach language with native speaker, because students of a second language in England, America and any other English speaking countries have the opportunity to hear English spoken every day. The daily necessity of speaking English gives them practical reasons for wanting to speak it well. They must find the ways to communicate in English in the workplace, to do their shopping, and to socialize with English speakers, so it is not necessary to motivate them to speak it. While we had native speakers in our university it was much better, but after all as being the teacher of second language we decided to search for ways. When leaving the classroom the question how much we have achieved our aims are always in our minds. We thought that we must find any other methodology to be successful and this method was drama. First of all we began with small group, about 17 students and began to work on "King Lear" by W. Shakespeare. We used simple version of the play not to bore students. Act by act we saw the improvement of the students, both in

their language skills and self confidence to speak in front of the people. Some of them which couldn't even answer the questions in front of the class now could freely speak to audience.

The students who are studying English as a foreign language are of course different. Because some students do not need to speak English in their daily lives, their motivation to learn it is more theoretical. Some of them know that knowledge of English, because it is becoming a global language, may help them in their chosen professions when they finish university. This kind of students have good listening comprehension and are very good with grammar, but their motivation in studying English is mostly to make good marks on their exams. If we ask them to speak, only a few in each class is eager to do so. It is sure that after some time from exam, what they have learned vanish from their minds. There are some reasons of this kind of behavior. One of the reasons is lacking self confidence, shy and having no practical experiences. They are shy about their accents, and afraid of making mistakes in public.

So we, teachers of English as a foreign language, face with two problems. The first problem is how to get students to actually speak English and not just memorize grammar rules to make good marks on exams. The second is to help them speak more clearly by slightly reducing their accents if clarity seems to be a problem. So drama method is where both of these can be solved together.

This method of teaching students to speak a foreign language was of course Drama. Using drama in the classroom is valuable. It develops students reading comprehension, vocabulary building, and most important, in using language to negotiate in real situations.

The method is simple enough. The teacher should choose a piece of dramatic literature in English or any other language. We chose "Pride and Prejudice". The novel itself is long and for many students in the classroom it is boring to read. So we made the script of the novel in a little bit simplified and shortened form. It is better that the play has many characters as "Pride and Prejudice"; almost every student could participate, so as to give as many students as possible the chance to take part. Make photocopy of the script for each student. Next, the teacher should make a list of important vocabulary in the play, and give the students the assignment of looking up these words in the dictionary. A vocabulary test may be appropriate afterwards. Next students are assigned to read the script and to come to class with a list of the characters and a written description of each character. Students should also be asked to suggest a student who should play the part of each character, and to specify which character they themselves would like to play.

They must follow following instructions: 1. Read and comprehend the text. 2. Use a dictionary to learn the words that they do not understand. Before memorizing the text they should comprehend their character and understand each word of its speech. They can even express it in their own language for the first time for better comprehension. When they read their parts in class, or better still when they learn to speak their parts from memory, the teacher can listen and make notes to help them correct their pronunciation later, remembering that clarity is what is important at this stage. Finally, when the students act their parts and invest the dialogue with feeling, they will remember the words and phrases far better than they would if only preparing for an exam, and will be able to use these phrases as tools in real life situations.

The word "Drama" is Greek word which means 'to do' or 'to act', that is to say to take action. The duty of actors in a theatrical production is to take the actions that the characters take in the story. Acting is a form of communication, and communication is the transmission of information from sender to receiver, who for our purposes now is actor and audience.

When we study a dramatic text so that we may learn how to perform the text, we must ask questions and make decisions. The playwright does not give us all this information, so in reading the dramatic text an actor must invent or create some of it, while staying faithful to what is written in the text of course. The actor must ask himself several questions: who am I? What are my relations with other characters? Why they hate me? Why they love me? and etc.

An actor must, first and foremost, communicate to an audience by transmitting information about what a character is doing in the story. If the actor understands why the character is doing what he does, this will enable him to empathize with the character and to feel what the character feels in the story, and this information will also be communicated to make the performance more believable, but this information about feelings and motivation.

When students are assigned to play the parts of the characters in a play, they should be asked to decide why their characters are saying each line of dialogue, i.e. what they want at that moment, and what their characters are doing by saying those words. They should describe their actions in terms of verbs. Not only will the students vocabulary of verbs increase, but also each entire phrase will come to life as the student speaks it as an action, and will more effectively enter the student's memory for later use in other situations and will be visual experience for other students.

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Finally we want to note that being Student Based Learning, Drama is successful method in teaching language, literature and culture. It is much more effective learning tool than simply listening to a lecture. It seems to us that students playing the roles of other characters in other cultures will not only learn language more effectively, but will also learn why we want to communicate with each other.

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