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Teaching English vocabulary to young learners via drama

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Abstract

Interest in the teaching of English to young learners has been steadily growing in recent years. Thus, a great many different techniques are employed to be successful. One of the most effective techniques is drama. Children, perhaps more than any other category of learners, delight in drama. They are immediately in imaginary worlds, where they can act out a role and engage in 'pretend' activities. They really appreciate the use of drama when they are taught a new vocabulary item along with other aspects of language. Memorising new vocabulary items is very difficult for young learners who have different learning styles and different dominant intelligences. However, through drama, they are not supposed to memorize words in isolation. They are involved in the contextualised learning process intellectually and emotionally. This paper examines drama, drama implementations and vocabulary teaching to young learners through drama. The main aim of the study is to determine whether drama has an extended impact on young learners' vocabulary teaching. It also covers the results of drama implementations and concludes by giving some suggestions and implications.

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Keywords: Drama; creative drama; vocabulary teaching; young learners; English language teaching.

1. Introduction

Terms to describe drama used for educational purposes include *developmental drama* (Cook, 1917), *creative dramatics* (Ward, 1930), *educational drama* (Way, 1967), *mantle of the expert* (Bolton, 1985; Heathcote & Herbert, 1985), *informal drama* (Wagner, 1998) and *process drama* (O'Neill, 1995). The literature relative to drama supports the use of creative drama as the preferred term for dramatic experiences that are designed for development of participants rather than for preparing participants for performance before an audience (Freeman, Sullivan and Fulton, 2003). The writer of this paper has also preferred to use the term 'creative drama'. In 1997, The Children's Theatre Association of America adopted this definition of creative drama: Creative drama is an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centred forms of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to image, reflect and enact upon human experience (Davis & Behm, 1978). Even though the contributors to creative drama have differed in their specific methods and emphases, a common core of basic activities exists. Creative drama is always improvised (Ward, 1952). It is improvisational because it is created on the spot, and it is not scripted. The students may act a story that they have read by using their own words, or a dialogue is created by the student, whether the content is

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taken from a well-known story or is an original plot. The learner is both participant and observer, playing a role while interacting with others in role. What is most important is that students are practically engaged in *creating drama*. A leader guides participants to imagine, reflect, and enact on issues presented in the story or situation (Siks, 1958). Lines are not memorized or written down. Maley and Duff (1982) state that words, other people's words, which have been mechanically memorized, can turn to ashes in the speaker's mouth. This process, creating on the spot and not memorizing, allows students to synthesize and to translate various educational concepts into a personally meaningful form (Kelner, 1985).

Moreover, when most teachers think of drama, they envision students memorizing lines, painting sets, and acquiring costumes and props (Coney & Kanel, 1997:8). Many dread the chaos in the classroom and the pressure of elaborate production. However, in creative drama students do not present what they have prepared in front of a passive audience. No script, technical aides, or audience are used. The process is spontaneous and not rehearsed. Thus, a polished final performance is not the goal of drama. The teacher and the students can relax and enjoy their own creations. The success of the activity is not measured by the theatrical skills, but by the creative process the students have experienced. Thus, drama is process-centred rather than product-centred.

1.1 Benefits of using creative drama in the language classrooms

One of the principal concerns in second language teaching is to find ways of creating for the pupils a more natural language learning environment. The classroom is not the best place to get to grips with a foreign language. There has to be a reason, a context, the motivation or need to use the language. It is claimed that it is almost impossible to do a meaningful teaching without employing creative drama.

Creative drama is a valuable addition to classroom instruction. It gives a context for listening and meaningful language production, forcing the learners to use their language resources and, thus, enhancing their linguistic abilities. Equally important, the affective filter is lowered: increases in self-esteem, self-confidence, spontaneity, thus reducing inhibitions, feelings of alienation and sensitivity to rejection (Via, 1976). It also provides situations for reading and writing. It is very useful in teaching literary texts as it helps in analyzing plot, character and style. It involves learners more positively and actively in the text. By using drama techniques to teach English, the monotony of a conventional English class can be broken, and the syllabus can be transformed into one which prepares learners to face their immediate world better as competent users of the English language because they get an opportunity to use the language in operation.

1.2 Creative drama and vocabulary teaching to young learners

Young learners are quick to learn vocabulary, slower to learn structures because words have tangible, immediate meanings whereas structures are less obviously useful. The children should meet and use the words in relevant contexts in order to fix them in their mind. This helps establish their relationship to other words so that a vocabulary network is built up. Duffelmeyer and Duffelmeyer (1979) point out that the way words are learned is important in that it affects how well they are really understood. It is often the case that the knowledge gained by the learner is only the surface meaning of the word and the essential meaning of the word is missing.

One way to avoid this difficulty is to use a method which ties the words to be learned directly to student experiences. Learners need to be actively involved in the learning of words. This may be difficult in the confines of the average classroom. An effective classroom method is creative drama, which provides psychological meaning as well as logical meaning. Motivation for vocabulary learning is simply to make working with words enjoyable. Creating a classroom atmosphere in which words are fun, and playing with words is encouraged can be a powerful antidote to the very natural fear of making mistakes that can so easily inhibit learning (Thornbury, 2002). Additionally, movement and pantomime are excellent components to develop vocabulary since the children can experience the feeling and meaning of the words. "Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are better understood when children physically act them out in the sequential order found in basic sentences" (Stewing & Buege, 1994).

2. Method

9-10 year-old students of the 3rd grade participated in the research. They had already been grouped into two classes, 3 -A and 3-E. One of these two classes was randomly assigned to the experimental group, and the other was treated as the control group randomly. The number of the subjects in the experimental group and the control group was equal; twenty-five students. There were 14 boys and 11 girls in the control group, and 13 boys and 12 girls in the experimental group. These students studied English eight hours per week. They had one hour of speaking and writing lessons taught by a native speaker, which went hand in hand with the main English course which was allocated eight hours per week.

Five lesson plans were prepared in order to teach new vocabulary items through drama. The new vocabulary items were chosen based on the course book and they were included in the curriculum as active vocabulary items. Each implementation lasted three regular lessons, that is, 120 minutes.

Generally, seven or six new vocabulary items were introduced. Totally, 32 new vocabulary items were taught via drama. Each lesson started with a warm-up activity. The activity was about the topic of the lesson plan and prepared the students physically and mentally for the lesson. Then, the teacher introduced new words by telling stories which drew the students' attention. She acted out the story. She used pictures, puppets, masks and real objects. In the practice part, the students played different games. They had lots of opportunities to practise new words. In the production part, they improvised different situations. They worked in groups. They made advertisements, puppets and poster displays. They actively participated in the lessons from the warm-up activity to the production part. Lastly, in the evaluation part, they expressed their feelings about the drama process and talk about the topic of the lesson plan.

On the other hand, the students in the control group learned new words, but the teacher just gave the Turkish equivalents of the words or showed the pictures. They just followed the book. They did not participate in any drama activities.

In the analysis of data, Independent Samples T- test was used to compare the values of the means from two samples and test whether it was likely that the samples were from populations having different mean values. The two samples were independent of each other in the obvious sense that they were separate samples containing different sets of individual subjects. The individual measures in both groups were in no way linked with or related to each other.

3. Results and Discussion

In the analysis of the data regarding the variables examined in this research, the following findings have been obtained. A significant difference has been observed between the arithmetic means of the groups' posttests scores in favour of the experimental group. With 95 % degree of confidence ($p \leq 0.05$) there exists significant difference between the experimental and control group. Only two of twelve scores show that there is not a significant difference between the groups because of the topics (collections and animals) the students are familiar with. It is seen that the p-value in two independent T-test scores is higher than 0, 05. Therefore, the hypothesis of the research, that teaching vocabulary to young learners through drama activities is a highly efficient technique, has been supported with the results obtained. Thus, the findings of the present research show that teaching vocabulary to young learners through drama is more effective than traditional vocabulary teaching methods.

This result is in line with the results of similar national and international studies and the findings of the study support the findings of previous studies. The findings agree with the findings of effectiveness of teaching through drama on the third graders' achievement on English as a foreign language (Aynal, 1989), eighth graders' achievement on basic rights and duties in liberal democracy (Üstündağ, 1997), the fifth-graders reading achievement (Dupont, 1989), third graders' achievement on standardized proficiency test (Barnes, 1998), elementary graders' science achievement (Kamen, 1992), and high achieving science and mathematics students' science achievement (Kase-Polisini & Spector, 1992).

Several reasons may account for the achievement of the students in the experimental group. The significant difference in the achievement in this study was attributable to the capability of drama implementations to enable students to learn new words in a context. They listened to different stories in the presentation of new words. They

picked up information about what the words meant and how the words were used as they repeatedly heard the words or saw them in print. They did not memorise the words. They had also opportunities to use them, that is, they could personalise the new words. There was a personal involvement of the students. Thus they could put the words in the long term memory. The use of long-term memory is greatly enhanced by the use of drama since the students are acting out and using different senses. Learning through experiences supported permanent learning. Students learned better, remembered the words longer and enjoyed more. As it is suggested by the constructivism, learners should be the constructor of the personal knowledge rather than receivers and repeaters of given knowledge. Only by this way learning is more meaningful, applicable and memorable (Davis, Maher & Noddings, 1990).

Additionally, they worked in groups. They learnt from each other. Since everyone was a member of the group, each student had responsibilities and helped each other. In this way, they were motivated and active. They constructed the knowledge together. Another benefit gained from group work was the development of friendship relation. As a relaxed atmosphere and sound rapport were created, students became more close to their friends. As a result, they could take risks without negative peer pressure. Besides, they had opportunities to create different things. Students realised their individual talents and their characteristics. This finding supports the findings of Yassa (1999), who showed that drama activities enable students to search for new possibilities within themselves. They gained confidence in themselves and their friends.

Besides, students' communication skills were developed. The pupils could share their own ideas and opinions with their friends. They could talk about the activities and improvisations, get feedback for their thinking and hear others' points of view. Role play activities, mime activities and improvisations enabled them to empathise with others.

In contrast to traditional teaching method, drama based lesson plans provided fun. The pupils entertained during the implementations. For this reason, the pupils' enthusiasm was high. Their attitude towards learning new words increased. They willingly wanted to participate in the activities.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results show that the experimental group achieved better result than the control group, and that drama can be an effective technique to teach vocabulary to young learners for the following reasons:

- Drama as a teaching technique creates supportive intellectual and emotional environments that encourage students to think. It allows students to apply their communication skills and encourages them to take risks.
- Drama as a teaching technique promotes long-term retention of vocabulary. Learners need to be actively involved in the learning of words. Students learn a new language to attain communication skills and express themselves. They do not learn the language to represent their teacher, but to express themselves as individuals.
- Drama as a teaching technique motivates the students toward further learning and use of the new language as a means of communication.

Some recommendations can be made as follows.

- Curriculum developers and syllabus designers, course book writers should take the effectiveness of drama into consideration during the curriculum development process. Instead of just assigning a drama activity, they might insist on drama-based lesson plans as a teaching method in new curricula.
- In order to use drama in the language classroom, teachers should be given opportunities to improve their understanding of drama and develop their confidence to be able to implement drama activities. This can be realized in two forms: as in-service training for teachers provided by The National Ministry of Education, and as in-service training provided by school administrations.
- Pre-service teacher training programs should involve a course to inform prospective teachers about the benefits of

drama and help them to gain knowledge and skills about preparation of drama based lesson plans and implementation of drama based lessons.

- Since the teacher have difficulties in preparing drama based plans, teachers should be supplied with carefully planned drama based lesson plans devised by the teachers of a school within workshops, and collected under a ‘drama materials file’, which teachers can draw upon.
- Students feel the pressure of frequent exams. For this reason, teachers are supposed to prepare the students for the exams. Their success and students’ success depend on the exam results. Instead of giving too much importance to the product, the process of students’ learning should be emphasised.
- Taking into consideration the difficulty of controlling the students in the classroom due to their unlimited energy, it would be better to use drama in class with smaller number of students, which means decreasing the class size. If that is not possible, a spacious drama room may be set aside for English teachers.
- There are some materials teachers should use during the drama implementation such as music players, music CDs/cassettes, some clothes, different crayons and paints. Thus, school administrators should provide teachers with the essential materials, too.
- The suggestions voiced above should also be implemented in other subjects of schools and their teachers, such as mathematics, history and the like.
- This study is, by no means, comprehensive and conclusive. Further research on the theory and practical implementation of it is necessary. This study hopes to serve as one of the preliminary steps towards such research.

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