Drama in the Mixed-Ability EFL Classroom: Observing its Effects on Motivation and Self-Confidence

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Final Thesis to a B.A.
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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Faculty of Education at the University of Iceland

Reykjavík, Iceland, 2012

Advisor: Robert Berman

Abstract

This study is a result of experimenting with the use of drama to teach English as a foreign language in Iceland with special attention placed on a mixed-ability classroom environment. It begins with a comprehensive review of research pertaining to the use of drama for the instruction of English as a foreign language. It then examines my experience in the classroom through personal observation and unstructured interviews. The discussion focuses on the main benefits to using drama in the EFL classroom including increasing students' motivation and self-confidence, as well as meeting the aims of communicative language teaching. Finally, I explore and discuss teachers' fears about drama and make recommendations.

keywords: EFL, drama, motivation, mixed-ability, self-confidence, inclusive education, active learning

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In the winter of 2011, I found myself paired up with an experienced actress, Sigríður Friðriksdóttir, to complete the teaching practice towards my degree. As a champion of active learning, I was excited to use her actor's training and experience as an opportunity to develop active and exciting English lessons for our classes. The project surpassed both our expectations and sparked this study.

The lessons, based on traditional drama warm-up games, require movement and high-energy from both learners and teachers. On the first day of class, we were surprised to discover that the school to which we had been assigned is a model for inclusive education and included children in wheelchairs, interpreters and assistants, as well as students with behavioural problems and other special needs. Of course, I had learned about inclusive education but had no experience working with students with disabilities and was unprepared for the challenges a mixed-abilities classroom can bring. I feared that drama would not be suitable and the lessons would be inappropriate or too challenging. The opposite was true.

This paper reviews literature on the subject of drama instruction in English as a foreign language (DIEFL), describes my experiences using drama in the inclusive classroom, addresses the main reasoning behind the use of drama to teach EFL and attempts to address the most common reasons teachers do not feel comfortable using drama in the classroom. This paper uses the term EFL. The research, recommendations, and discussion can easily be applied to ESL or other L2 language classes.

2. Literature Review

The process of reviewing research for this topic uncovered a large body of evidence which affirms that using drama in the foreign language classroom can significantly increase students' confidence and self-esteem (Chauhan, 2004; Culham, 2002; Dodson, 2002; Hayes, 1984; Stern, 1980). Research shows that learning activities based on drama increase student motivation (Stern, 1980; Gaudart, 1990). Literature on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) commonly describes language as fluid, dynamic and spontaneous. DIEFL adds two important layers to language teaching: non-verbal communication and emotional inflection. This supports the underpinnings of CLT, which emphasise authentic communication. Drama activities, while providing a kinaesthetic learning process, allow teachers to accomplish the goals of CLT (Culham, 2002; Chauhan, 2004; Eccles, 1989; Stern, 1980). In addition to increased motivation, increased self-esteem and accomplishing the aims of CLT, drama in the language classroom provides rare opportunities for students to negotiate their own meaning with language (Dodson, 2002). Students also report a loss of fear of rejection (Stern, 1980).

Susan L. Stern (1980) presents her research in *Why Drama Works: A Psycholinguistic Perspective.* She starts from the assumption that drama works and goes on to use quantitative and qualitative empirical research to assess how and why. She specifically cites self-esteem and emotional and kinaesthetic components involved in CLT, addressing the attitudes of both students and teachers and thoroughly examining drama techniques in L2 and EFL classes from the psychological perspective. The study reveals a dramatic increase in self-esteem and an increase in motivation and spontaneity. Additionally, students report a loss of fear of rejection.

Cameron Culham (2002) reports on his action research in *Coping with Obstacles in Drama-based EFL teaching: A Nonverbal Approach.* He starts from the assumption that the

underpinning of all language is nonverbal. The author also identifies nonverbal language as a recurring point of miscommunication for his classes of intercultural students. He allows that for the purposes of CLT, nonverbal communication, silent interactions and manual symbols are essential. Culham identifies common problems for DIEFL, within the specific context of his varied cultural classes and adult learners. He identifies negative and traditional attitudes of students and peers as common roadblocks. Culham also writes that DIEFL is often not respected as valid learning. He remarks that students who are not familiar with the student-driven classroom have more problems becoming adjusted. He references many known researchers in the field as well as addressing the underpinnings of language learning by referencing outside the field. Culham also notes several key benefits of using drama in the EFL classroom:

- Drama is well-suited to support the aims of both Total Physical Response (TPR) and CLT.
- It releases the stress that is normally associated with the language learning classroom.
- Students showed increased motivation for reading and writing tasks.
- Most importantly, students showed increased confidence.

Vani Chauhan (2004) makes another convincing case for using DIEFL in the classroom in his article, Drama Techniques for Teaching English, which details the positive aspects of using drama in the EFL classroom. He writes that drama activities provide opportunities for authentic communication and can build learners' confidence in speaking English outside the classroom. He recommends teachers add this skill to their portfolio of teaching practices.

Additionally, he writes about the nature of language itself, allowing that it involves

emotions, feelings, appropriateness of situation, and most importantly, adaptability. Traditional EFL strategies do little to address the flexibility of everyday language. The article reasons that English language learners, even after years of classroom learning, fail to master the nuances of colloquial English. He covers the most common reasons why teachers are sceptical of using drama in the classroom and recommends starting small with "one-off" activities for inexperienced teachers. This is an excellent source of practical information but lacks empirical evidence.

Judith Grey Roykja (2002) agrees with Chauhan about teachers' fears about using drama in the classroom in her article, Overcoming the Fear of Using Drama in English Language Teaching. Roykja references her experiences teaching drama workshops for EFL teachers. It covers the most prevalent fears and concerns that teachers have when it comes to integrating drama into the classroom. Teachers reported feeling inadequate to teach drama and fear looking foolish. Many teachers felt that this type of activity did not lend itself to *serious learning* and was merely play. Time constraints and covering the syllabus were mentioned as well. Royka offers practical solutions, advice, and evidence to back it up. She states that fear is the factor that most hinders the use of drama to reach the aims of CLT. She identifies motivation as a factor, not only for students, but for teachers as well.

To address the issue of teacher motivation, Hyacinth Gaudart (1990) reports on her long-term study conducted in Malaysia involving over 300 teachers in her article, Using Drama Techniques in Language Teaching. The class sizes and abilities, as well as the teachers' experience and qualifications are extremely varied. The study reports definite increases in motivation and ease of holding the students' attention.

Sarah L. Dodson's (2002) article, The Educational Potential of Drama for ESL, is an account of her action research using drama with a multicultural class of ESL learners. The

learning objectives were to integrate writing, reading, and pronunciation skills, as well as to negotiate meaning from difficult texts such as Shakespeare. The author notes positive responses from learners, with most reporting that self-confidence improved. She also offers detailed information on various types of activities. The sample was small (six students), and the results should be reviewed in this light. The researcher was able to give much individual coaching to every student, which is rarely a reality in the EFL classroom.

English through Drama by David Eccles (1989) provides substantial support for the use of drama in the EFL classroom. He writes about the nature of the English language and the learning mechanisms involved in learning the language. He agrees with Culham (2002) and Chuan (2004) that language is not isolated but embedded in a situation. Aside from involving context, language has implications. He reports that learners can benefit greatly by using drama to create a "semi-real context" in which knowledge is constructed from and built upon learners' previous and intrinsic knowledge of language. Unlike other authors on the subject, Eccles gives advice and recommendations on how to incorporate drama and reading of English. He particularly addresses using drama to act out parts of a novel or role-play certain characters to deepen learners' understanding and appreciation of the written word.

3. Why Drama?

3.1 The Elements of Language

Using drama in the EFL classroom can be of great benefit, especially for students who may have already received years of English instruction in school. While they grasp the language, they have trouble understanding when and where to use different forms of the language, e.g., formal, informal and nonverbal language, sarcasm, and language in an emotional context. This is especially relevant in Iceland, since students often assume that informal language such as slang, cursing, and addressing authority figures and teachers with

first names, is appropriate in English because of a language transfer between Icelandic and English. Icelanders have adapted English swear words for their own use so that it is not uncommon to hear *fokk* or *sjitt* spoken by small children. Eccles (1989) states that "drama provides an infinite variety of situations which will require specific language uses," thus providing situations that will demonstrate to students when particular forms of the language are appropriate or not (p.3).

A second factor may be that Icelandic students are exposed to English mostly from movies, music, television, and video games. While an American student may realise that one does not write a scholastic paper in the same tone used by a movie villain or address her teacher with the same language as a rapper, these variations in language are generally not addressed within the current curriculum. This creates a divide between what students learn in the classroom and the register they are regularly exposed to through the media. Drama exercises address the difference between formal and informal English and their appropriate uses. Subtlety and nuance, including body language and emotional inflection, are also addressed, giving students a more complete picture of the English language.

In her book, *Drama as a Second Language: A Practical Handbook for Language Teachers*, Susan K. Hayes (1984) notes that "Through drama the student learns to perceive and identify different situations, to assume an appropriate role, to understand different functions and points of view and to manipulate language accordingly" (p. 8).

3.2 Authentic Language

The principles of CLT call for language teachers to use authentic language. The same successful students who receive good grades and find filling in the blanks of their workbook relatively easy may show difficulty in generating spontaneous language and discerning the social and emotional context embedded in everyday language. David Nunun (1989) echoes

this sentiment in his book, *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. He writes: **"**learners are required to put language to a range of uses, to use language which has been imperfectly mastered, to negotiate meaning, in short, to draw on their own resources rather than simply repeating and absorbing language" (p.86). The spoken language used in drama activities mimics more closely actual authentic language. The website, Drama in the ESL Classroom, makes its case for improvisation:

> In improvisation, students do not necessarily know what comes next. The scene is created as they go. Participants must pay attention to their partners in order to react appropriately. This forces them to listen carefully, to speak clearly, and to use language in an authentic (i.e., unplanned) way. (Drama in the ESL Classroom, 2012)

3.3 Motivation

Because drama exercises can be presented in a way where students feel like they are playing, as opposed to working, the learning process becomes more positive and enjoyable, knowledge will be more readily retained and students will be more motivated to learn. Why is motivation important? Gaudart (1990) shows that increased motivation results in increased learning for EFL, and a more recent study reports that motivation is "seen to be the major affective individual-difference variable contributing to achievement in learning another language" (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003, p. 129).

3.4 Self-Confidence

Studies show repeatedly that motivation is linked to self-confidence**.** A student in a role-playing situation has the opportunity to use the target language as someone else. This removes the pressure on the learner and in turn builds her self-confidence for the using the target language in real life. Additionally, removing the *right answer/wrong answer* format of

the traditional classroom lesson allows learners to take risks and build their self-confidence. In drama there is no wrong answer, every effort is correct and every language misuse is an opportunity to learn.

4. Inclusive Education

"Inclusive education is the attempt to educate persons with intellectual disabilities by integrating them as closely as possible into the normal structures of the educational system" (Michailakis & Wendelin, 2009 p.1). This is a simplistic definition of a very complicated issue. Experts, parents, teachers, students and schools are in the process of debating what *inclusive education* actually means and entails.

Dóra S. Bjarnason (2009) a, self-described, "ardent inclusionist" describes the complex issue of inclusive education as a "maze." She explains why inclusive education, which I have referred to as the mixed-ability classroom, applies to all students: "Inclusive education implies quality education appropriate for each learner, respect for human rights and democratic education for ALL children, and thus full, active participation of each and every learner in a vibrant learning society" (p. 15). Bjarnason describes her view of what inclusive education is which will serve as the underpinning of my use of the term in this study:

Inclusive education is a process. That process holds the promise of helping teachers, schools and researchers to identify and gradually remove barriers and exclusion in our schools and society and identify and make use of inclusionary opportunities, both pedagogical and social. (p.15)

5. Methodology

The study was a result of the hypothesis that using drama to increase motivation and attention in ESL classes would result in increased learning as the positive correlation between

motivation and learning is established. Basically, would students be more motivated and would their self-confidence in English improve if I brought drama into their EFL classroom? Two classes of 14–16 year old students from a school in Reykjavík made up the sample. The study took on a new direction as the fact that the school was inclusive came to light. The participants were given pre- and post- questionnaires, which assessed their over-all enjoyment of English class and how they felt about their abilities in English. These questionnaires, along with my personal observations through logging my experience formed the basis of my assessment of the participants' motivation and self-confidence. Additional information was obtained by observing other teachers, as well as questioning teachers and students involved in or close to the project.

6. Observations

Research shows a strong relationship between learners' motivation, self-confidence and learning. In short, when one value increases, the others almost always increase as well. I hypothesised that if learning was fun then learners would be more motivated and if motivation increased then self-esteem and learning would increase as a result. In order to gauge learners' self-esteem, I administered a questionnaire with a few simple questions before and after the study. The questionnaire included two closed-ended questions: 1.) *I enjoy English class* and 2.) *I am good at English.* The students answered by making a selection from a Likert scale. The following is a recounting of my observations drawn from my journal and descriptions of how drama can benefit mixed-ability classes. Note: All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the students.

6.1 Drama Works With Diversity

"Language allows us to communicate our needs within the community and to negotiate with others but it also most importantly allows us to express our own personality and uniqueness and to develop consciousness" (Hayes, 1984, p. 4).

During our first class, a particular student, Alexander, announced loudly in Icelandic and with his back defiantly turned to me, "This is stupid; I can't speak English; I won't do it!" The homeroom teacher apologized for his behaviour later and explained that he was usually defiant and disruptive in class and that I should, "be tough with him." By allowing Alexander to take the spotlight, his behaviour began to improve. I believe that Alexander may misbehave in order to be the centre of attention, and when he was allowed to become the centre of attention through drama he didn't feel the need to act out. Towards the end of the first week he was literally jumping up and down, exclaiming, "Alien space cowboys from mars!" when we asked him what genre of film he wanted to act out. This learner, previously labelled difficult and defiant, had made below average grades in English. Alexander's behaviour improved remarkably when he became interested and engaged. Despite his negative attitude during the first few days, he became one of my enthusiastic students. It turned out he spoke fluent English at a level few of his peers could match.

One of the students, a girl named Salka, is confined to her wheelchair, and is sight and hearing impaired as well as being physically handicapped. I had no experience working with students with physical handicaps and feared she might feel alienated by the kinaesthetic aspect of my teaching strategies. However, Salka did participate in almost all of the improvisation activities and even took an active role in many of the theatre projects, often writing the scripts, planning and acting. I was relieved to find that drama activities can be used with a diverse group of learners and instead of alienating Salka they highlighted her talents.

The diverse group of learners included two boys who are hearing impaired. They had a sign-language interpreter with them at all times. This posed another learning opportunity for me. For example, I needed to learn to not speak with my back turned when I wrote on the board, making sure that they could always see me *and* their interpreter. The silent activities and the activities which focused on body language provided a rare opportunity for the two hearing impaired students to participate on a level playing field. It was clear that they enjoyed the advantage they held over their peers where interpreting body language was the challenge.

Some of the students, when appropriate, have freedom of choice to come and go as it suits them. Lóa, who is diagnosed on the autism spectrum, and according to her homeroom teacher, "never chooses to come to English class," showed up for one full class, which was challenging for her and she participated in our drama activity, showcasing her great sarcastic wit. This was a high point for me as a teacher and a positive indication that drama can motivate students who previously have shown little or no enthusiasm to learn English.

Learners are diverse, not only in capabilities, learning styles, and intelligences, but personality traits as well. Bjarki was painfully shy and self-conscious about speaking English aloud and refused to speak more than one or two words at most. When asked to converse in English with a peer about a topic, he remained mute or spoke Icelandic. His written assignments were all above average and it was clear that he was a perfectionist when it came to his school work and wanted to excel. For all intents and purposes, this student would have graduated with six years of English instruction and perfect marks on all his tests, yet be incapable of uttering more than "yes" or "no." The final project included a performance of a short skit by groups of learners. No one, however, was required to perform if they felt uncomfortable, and the activity was not graded. Bjarki stood on stage and spoke his lines aloud – very quietly, but aloud.

Through the use of warm-up games where learners are encouraged to act *silly,* students gradually gain self-confidence. DIEFL is well suited towards a diverse student body and a mixed-ability classroom, perhaps even more than traditional methods. Teaching in an inclusive schooling environment requires flexible and easily adaptable lesson plans to suit a large range of abilities. A teacher needs to hone her eye to recognise and cultivate each learner's strengths and help them to discover how they learn best.

6.2. Drama Increases Motivation

Students, both able-bodied and those with special needs, showed increased motivation and self-esteem. After a few classes, a buzz came over the school. Learners met me in the hallway and asked about our upcoming lessons and showed up to class excited and engaged. Often the lessons were on-going group projects carried over from the previous class, and I was pleased that many students gathered as a group and began working without any prompting. The students who were not in our ESL classes began to question their teachers about why they did not get to do drama. The teachers I spoke with wanted to understand how this could possibly teach English and some asked to observe the class. By the end of the first week almost all of the school knew what was going on in our classroom, and why, and several students commented that English was their new favourite class.

The pre- and post-questionnaire results supported my hypothesis. On the question, "I enjoy English class." The results showed increased numbers on the *agree* and *strongly agree* choices and decreased numbers on the *strongly disagree* and *disagree* choices. These results show that more students enjoyed English class and fewer students disliked English class. I had personal conversations with several of the special needs students. I assumed that the students with major physical handicaps would prefer traditional methods of teaching. This was not the case for Salka who expressed her preference for our active classes over traditional

book-based teaching. Bjarki, however, was one of the students who were glad to return to the book.

6. 3. Drama Increases Self-Confidence

In addition to motivating learners, DIESL can increase learners' self-confidence and is perfect practice for speaking English. "The ability [for learners] to express themselves effectively and increase their word power depends to a large extent on confidence and self-esteem…achieved by placing the learner in an active context" (Hayes, 1984, p. 5). During the first few days, we played warm-up games which were meant to create an environment of trust. The learners, self-conscious at first, slowly began to come out of their shells. Students like Bjarki took risks and spoke English aloud and students who were wry of participating began to let their guard down and act silly. I would say that the exercises and group-work did much to increase the participants' self-esteem over-all, and not just speaking English.

The second question: "I am good at English," was answered quite negatively at the start of the research period, with a large proportion of students answering that they *strongly disagree*. The portion of students who *strongly disagreed* was much smaller on the second questionnaire and the portion which *agreed* increased. This indicates an increase in self-esteem.

I observed all of the positive aspects indicated by the research and an increase in both motivation and self-esteem. I observed first-hand how well DIEFL can work and that it does benefit students with diverse learning styles, a wide range of capabilities, and varying levels of proficiency, making DIEFL ideal for use in an inclusive environment.

Lastly, to report my own feelings about the experience, I enjoyed myself. I found teaching in a vibrant and creative atmosphere stimulating and challenging. It convinced me that language learning can be active and reaffirmed my commitment to make learning fun.

7. Why Not Drama?

The worries and concerns teachers have about the use of DIESL come up repeatedly on ESL forums, in scholarly articles, in the literature on the subject, and throughout my conversations with other teachers. Those concerns, although worded diversely, most often are a variation on a few key fears and questions. I attempt to address those most common here.

7.1. What if Learners do not Want to Participate?

Some learners , like Bjarki, are painfully shy and may benefit from gentle and supportive prodding and encouragement, but it is not recommended to ever coerce or push students to perform in front of their peers. Offering the reluctant student a mute role or encouraging her to take part in a silent game can often be a bridge. The goal is to present varied and interesting opportunities and work to strike interest while fanning the flames of self-confidence**.** David Eccles recommends slyly avoiding the word *drama* and using the term role-play to begin with as it carries neither the connotations nor preconceptions (Eccles, 1989).

7.2. I do not Want to Take Part. Is That Okay?

The students will not get into an activity if the teacher is not fully committed herself. It is important to present the activity well and be well prepared. Teachers report consistently that they feel they shouldn't use drama in the classroom due to their lack of training. This may be something for universities offering teacher training to consider. Until then, David Eccles (1989) offers this advice:

The teacher takes a part in the drama – she is in role as well as the pupils. This means the teacher is inside the drama, with the pupils, and projecting attitudes which can be used in the service of the drama the pupils are creating. (p.8)

7.3. Won't I Lose Control Over my Classroom?

When endeavouring to change your classroom, a common fear is: "Won't the students be out of control?" While it is true that students used to a more rigid classroom exhibit the rubber band effect – becoming rowdy at first and relaxing once the routine is established – it is important to note that the active classroom is not without structure or boundaries and teachers also report that they have an easier time holding students' attention with drama than with traditional methods (Gaudart, 1990).

7.3.1. Democracy in the Classroom. One solution is to allow students to create and enforce their own rules as is in line with the principles of *democratic schooling*. The students take an active rather than passive role in the classroom regulation. Some may argue that by allowing the students freedom in creating rules and regulations, authority may be lost. Research suggests that increased student participation is, in fact, likely to enhance discipline (Osler & Starkey, 1998). Allowing students more freedom to govern themselves may even eliminate the resistance to authority figures, or rebellion. Weimer (2000) writes:

The more structured we make the environment, the more structure the students need. The more we decide for students, the more they expect us to decide. The more motivation we provide, the less they find within themselves. The more responsibility for learning we try to assume, the less they accept on their own. The more control we exert, the more resistive their response. (p.98)

7.4. What Will my Colleagues say?

Teachers reported a fear of looking foolish, time constrains, and covering the syllabus as reasons why they did not use drama in their EFL classroom (Royka, 2002). In addition to those fears, often teachers did not see the drama activities as "serious learning" (Culham, 2002; Royka, 2002). One of the English teachers I spoke to echoed these sentiments exactly. She was a dedicated and well-organized teacher who relied heavily on workbooks. She said she was curious to observe some of our classes and showed me the test that the students needed to pass at the end of the year and explained that it was stressful to cover it all. She admitted that she would like to try some more activities in her class but she felt like she was neither trained nor qualified to do so (Personal communication. 10-14-11).

Initial reactions from fellow teachers can range enthusiastic to down-right chilly. It is important to focus on giving your best to your students and not to worry too much about naysayers. You may be inspiring those around you to make some changes to their teaching repertoire. An excellent teacher should have, at her disposal, an arsenal of skills and feels comfortable useing traditional methods along side active learning to reach all her students.

7.5. What if This is out of my Comfort Zone?

Another reason previously unaddressed is that using drama in the classroom requires high energy. It can be physically taxing for the teacher. Vani Chauhan (2004) recommends small, "one-off" activities for the inexperienced teacher. Maryellen Weimer (2000) writes about the role of the teacher and the shift that it is taking:

Teachers no longer function as exclusive content experts or authoritarian classroom managers and no longer work to improve teaching by developing sophisticated

presentation skills. They will lecture less and be much more around the classroom than in front of it. (P.14)

Teaching requires commitment to change and improvement, as does any profession. Teachers need to be aware of new ideas and advancements in the field. A comfort zone could also be described as a rut. Even the most enthusiastic teachers can find the act of trying new teaching methods intimidating, especially if the culture of the school is based on traditional classroom models. *Effective Learning in Classrooms* (Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007) recommends that "Teachers find small spaces to make changes; not being heroic but starting with small but important aspects of the classroom." In other words, one does not need to make a dramatic, sweeping change; merely trying small new activities can be beneficial and give a teacher confidence for further exploration into DIEFL.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Both the *newest* models of learning and the *oldest* provided by Socrates in *Theaetetus*, view the teacher as the *midwife of knowledge*. She is a facilitator of knowledge, helping students to construct and build upon the information they already have. DIEFL is a tool which can be used to help learners construct their own knowledge and help the teacher become the co-creator of that knowledge. It is my experience that DIEFL is especially suited for the mixed-ability or inclusive classroom. It allows flexibility in a learner-driven environment that could not be achieved with traditional methods. It is my recommendation that EFL classes in Iceland focus more on DIEFL and that teacher training include instruction on how to use it.

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