

How Do Dramatization Activities Facilitate EFL Learners' Communicative Competence?

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ABSTRACT

The following report gives account of a case study conducted at a science high school in 2009. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of some kinds of teaching units to the learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), emphasized on communicative learning in a high-school. The vehicle used to trigger and develop such communicative competence was dramatization. An English class consisting of 24 students was chosen to carry out the study. Their initial level of proficiency was assessed through an oral interview in English, proving that their ability to speak in the target language was significantly lower than their theoretical knowledge of the language. During the next two months, students were exposed to a variety of activities aimed at developing awareness of the use of strategies for learning, communicative and socio-affective skills, starting by simple cognitive exercises and moving on to more complex tasks requiring the students to generate content, and thus, creating a bridge between their declarative knowledge and their procedural knowledge. The results of the study indicate that by the end of the teaching unit, students had developed more self-confidence in the use of the language, ability to work in teams and, most importantly, they valued the importance of moving their static theoretical knowledge to more active communicative activity. In conclusion, dramatization applied in the classroom significantly enhances the students' cognitive, communicative and socio-affective skills, providing them with new tools to understand their own inner processes and those of others, and to develop strategies for learning and communicating more effectively.

I. Introduction

The following report gives an account of the necessity to develop an appropriate English textbook or a syllabus for a specialized high school. The purpose of this report is to provide relevant information in designing a specially-aimed English class, the theoretical frame that supported it, strengths and weaknesses in the implementation stage of a teaching unit. The problem I detected in the school, was that the students had accumulated knowledge in their memories (declarative), but had not had the chance to see it working in a realistic way because of the lack of classroom situations directed at using the structures learned. This could explain why the students - in spite of their good marks- were not able to communicate effectively in English during the first contact. Taking this into account, I decided to design a unit that would foster and trigger the transit between theory and practice. For this reason, I decided to teach under the umbrella of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach, using dramatization as the tool to activate communication, critical thinking and social skills. Research questions are as follows:

A. Primary Objective: By the end of the project, students will be able to communicate ideas and emotions effectively.

B. Secondary Objectives: Students will develop strategies to enhance their listening and

reading comprehension of stories, both written and aural.

C. To facilitate proceduralization¹ of target structures taught in class by responding and adapting them in real time to a partner's message.

D. Progress Indicators:

- Students will effectively work in pairs or groups.
- Students will start focusing more on fluency rather than accuracy.

II. Theoretical Background

I. Declarative vs Procedural Knowledge

Declarative knowledge is knowledge with "a set of facts", on the other side, procedural is related to "how to do things" (Ellis, 1993, p. 94). The salient distinctive point Ellis (1993) made from both McLaughlin's (1983, as cited in Zainuddin & Yahya, 2002) and Bialystock's (1981, as cited in Zainuddin & Yahya, 2002) concepts is as follows; McLaughlin and Bialystock maintain the traditional grammar proponents' view, insisting that a learner's conscious knowledge can be intuitive knowledge with communicative production, whereas Ellis states that it is different from just transforming explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge. Surely, Ellis's model allows for the explicit, declarative, conscious knowledge to be changed into procedural, implicit, intuitive knowledge with fluency, but this process should have an interim stage through practice with learners' effort.

2. CLT and Second Language Learning

Ellis(1988) proposes two sets of cognitive processes contributing to a learner's second language development (SLD): primary processes and secondary processes. The first developmental route is likely to be found in naturalistic L2 learning and leads to knowledge of a non-analytical type, and secondary processes contribute directly to analytic L2 knowledge. Dramatization provides learners with a very effective environment to develop their L2 through the route involving primary processes. Primary processes and secondary processes could be related to Rivers's(1972) differentiation of skill-getting and skill-using activities. Wan (1990) said that the use of drama activities in TESL(Teaching English as a Second Language) adhere to the principles of the communicative approach. One of the aims (as it is in the communicative approach) is for the learner to achieve communicative competence.

3. Drama in Second or Foreign Language Learning

The value of drama in language education stems from the opportunities it provides for students to express themselves in English for a meaningful purpose, going beyond vocabulary and grammar (Dodson, 2002). A great many studies show that drama develops thinking, oral language, reading, and writing (Wagner, 2002). Wessels (1987) listed the potential benefits of drama in language teaching as follows: the acquisition of meaningful, fluent interaction in the target language; the assimilation of a whole range of pronunciation and prosodic features in a fully contextualized and interactional manner; the fully contextualized acquisition of new vocabulary and structure; an improved sense of confidence in the student in his or her ability

¹ Procedural knowledge is the knowledge exercised in the performance of some task.

to learn the target language. Since, as is addressed by Wessels (1987), drama can generate a need to speak by focusing the attention of the learners on creating a drama, dialogue, or role play, or solving a problem, learners have to be active participants, using their imagination and interaction communication skills in the foreign language. Conversation in drama is not completely controlled by the teacher-and this presents an advantage in comparison to the teacher-student interaction in more traditional pedagogical tasks, no single participant is dominant in the activity. As a result, drama is less likely to produce “restricted language” (Colyle & Bisgyer, 1984) in the classroom(Kao and O’Neill, 1998). In addition, the drama activities give students and opportunity to strike a balance between fluency and accuracy as well.

III. Methodology

1. Unit Planning

The unit consisted of 10 lessons. The learning objectives stated in the introduction were strongly directed towards the improvement of the students’ communication skills and the development of thinking skills connected to an active involvement in their learning process. The unit was divided into three stages. During the first, students were involved in activities oriented towards experiencing English with an emphasis on communication, rather than in formal academic content. The idea was to set the stage for the upcoming lessons which required the students to be at ease with their peers and confident enough to demonstrate other abilities. The contents used in the first lessons were the short stories (animations) in Story Lands from the English Broadcasting Station.

In the second stage, the lessons were planned to provide linguistic models and practice of pronunciation, intonation and some expressions or patterns to be often used in their speaking. The emphasis of the content in this stage was put on procedural and disciplinary aspects; Restricted and freer practice of language items as part of the procedural contents and writing stuffs, pronunciation and vocabulary.

The third stage of the project was aimed at being a production stage, in which students were required to use all the skills practiced and all the contents learned during the first two stages, and to produce a dramatization or play that demonstrated their social, academic and communicational abilities they had developed until then.

1. Unit Description (* 2 sample units from the first and the last month each)

Class 1

Objectives:

- To raise awareness of rhythm in oral communication.
- To activate a variety of lexical units in the students and use them in the context of a conversation.
- To experiment differences of meaning in oral communication when using different intonations and body language.

Stage 1: Worm up & motivation

- Teacher² presents a poem, “AUTUMN” by Emily Dickinson.
I shot an arrow into the air;
The morns are meeker than they were,
The nuts are getting brown;
The berry’s cheek is plumper,
The rose is out of town.
The maple wears a gayer scarf,
The field a scarlet gown.
Lest I should be old-fashioned,
I’ll put a trinket on.
- Students repeat it after the teacher to practice pronunciation.
- Teacher then clarifies possible vocabulary and context questions.
- Students then practice repeating the poem using different rhythms as they sharpen their pronunciation and memorize the words.

Stage 2: controlled practice of vocabulary & intonation

- Teacher hands out scripts of ‘*Hansel and Gretel*’ which is divided into several parts, written in a neutral tone (no exclamation or question marks).
- Students then, in groups of 4-5, choose a part and read together.
- Students decide on the emotional state of the characters and put punctuations.
- Teacher explains some vocabulary that seems to be difficult for a student to understand.
- Reading aloud with intonation, students learn their lines by heart.

Stage 3: Production stage

- They then act it out in front of their classmates.
- The rest of the class then reports on the impression they got from the performance
- Teacher gives them positive feedback.

Class 6

Objectives:

- To reinforce understanding of non-verbal language as a way to communicate meaning
- To introduce drama techniques to the class
- To activate a variety of vocabulary in short time and spontaneously

Stage 1: Warm up & motivation “This isn’t a pen”

- Students sit forming a circle so that they can see each other.
- Teacher shows an object, for example a pen, and tells the students that what he is holding in his hand is not a pen, but a hair brush (and mimics brushing his hair with it).
- Teacher then passes the pen to a student who has to come up with a different use for the object, starting with the phrase: “this isn’t a pen...it’s a...” who then passes it to the next student.

Stage 2: controlled practice of non-verbal language & vocabulary

Activity 1: Brain Gym³

² All the classes were led in English, managed by the native speaker, Jerald Lloyd Nelson.

- Students follow the oral instructions from the teacher, and mirror his demonstration.

Instructions:

- Show your thumbs. With your thumb touch the tip of each finger, one after the other, on both hands simultaneously.
- Sit down, and put your right elbow on your left knee, then your left elbow on your right knee.
- Stand on one foot, stretch your arms to the sides and lean forward (as a plane). Keep the position for 5 seconds. Then stand on the other foot and repeat the position.
- Sit down and take a deep breath, letting the air out slowly. Repeat 3 times.

Activity 2:

- Teacher hands out scripts of ‘*Alice in Wonderland*’ which is divided into several parts.
- Students then, in groups of 4-5, choose a part and read together.
- Teacher explains some vocabulary that seems to be difficult for a student to understand.
- Reading aloud with intonation, students learn their lines by heart.

Stage 3: Production stage

- They then act it out in front of their classmates.
- The rest of the class then reports on the impression they got from the performance
- Teacher gives them positive feedback.

IV. Pedagogical Reflections

In terms of teaching achievements, I think I was able to teach, lead and encourage my students not from the position of an “expert”, so typical in expository lessons, but in a way that made them feel involved and challenged. One interesting experience, that I consider a great achievement from the teaching point of view, is that although the project was not exempt of conflict, it was possible to manage in English and in a communicatively and socially correct manner. This was also done outside of the classroom context. To my surprise and joy, later that same day I received an email from the student:

Sir Hwang:

I'm sorry for my bad attitude on the Friday class. The reason of that is that I'm really tired with a lot of tests. I know that all of us are weary, but this is not an excuse for the compromise. I saw your effort and how you really love your profession, something that is very uncommon in our days. I need some comprehension but I know that this will work ok. Have a nice weekend.

Best regards, Yu, Sang-uk

As for the unachieved aspects in teaching, I think I failed at guiding the process for students to consciously develop cognitive strategies for enhancing their listening and reading comprehension of written and aural texts, which was stated as a secondary objective. I tried

³ Background : *In the 1970's, Dr. Paul Denisson produced an innovative approach to learning based on research from developmental specialists that experimented on physical movement to enhance learning ability. His approach, also known as Educational Kinesiology, basically consists on a series of movements that activate the brain processes and enhances the learning experience.*

to achieve too many objectives, not realizing that time was constrained, since I did not have many sessions to do the project, and students usually took more time than planned to do their activities. This resulted in the students not achieving that same learning goal, which would have been quite useful for them, knowing that after this project they would return to their usual classes, methods, worksheets and reading comprehension tests.

V. Unit Improvement And Self Evaluation

In general, some of the changes I would implement to improve the unit are connected with the length of the teaching unit, or the reduction of the number of objectives, so that there would be a balance between time and objectives to accomplish quality learning outcomes. At the same time, I would also implement a more guided process to develop conscious cognitive reading and listening with a method of 'Dictogloss' in the dramatization class.

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About the Presenter

Ms. Hwang, Seon-hee received an MA in English Education from Jeonbuk University and she is in the final term of Ph.D. in English Education in Jeonbuk University, Korea. She has taught English for over 13 years at the high school level, and since March this year, she has been involved with a English teacher club named PIE(Playtime In English). Her professional interests include content-based instruction as well as web-based instruction. Currently, she is working for Jeonbuk Science High School. *Email: letter2u@lycos.co.kr*

[Appendix I]

Final Presentation Assessment Rubric

	COMPLETELY ACCOMPLISHED	SATISFACTORY	NOT ACCOMPLISHED
FLUENCY	3	2	1

ACCURACY	3	2	1
VOICE (CONFIDENCE)	3	2	1
INTONATION	3	2	1
BODY LANGUAGE (ATTITUDE)	3	2	1

Total points : _____

Total Points : 15.

[Appendix II]

Some observations and entries from the researcher's Journal

April 1st – 2nd Class : *When required to give an opinion, students have a hard time expressing what they feel or think. There's an awkward silence after I ask them their opinion on what we're doing. At least they smiled when I gave them the possibility of disagreeing with me and tell me that what I was saying made no sense.*

April 8th – 3rd Class : *A student approached me after class. He said the classes have been creative and different from what they normally did.*

April 29th - 5th Class : *Grrr...lots of students missed their classes today because of the Korean Mathematics Olympiad. I hate it when that happens. Some of the presentations were really good. They're quite respectful when presenting.*

May 13th - 6th Class : *Madness began. Some guys are being really lazy. I talked to a couple in private and reminded them of their responsibilities. One of the good students is not happy with the grade he got on the presentation. On the other hand I felt bad for that student. He's really nice. Maybe I should have stated my evaluation criteria clearer.*

May 20th – 7th Class : *Last Lessons: I've been interrupted by several school events and official works. The guys are working slower than I expected. I understand though, that they're also on their level tests. The good thing is that they are doing everything by themselves. This is very exciting. Who knows what is going to result from all this!*

June 10th – 10th Class (Presentation Day) : *Prior to this day, the students asked me to give them more time to prepare their dramatization. I agreed to give them an extension of time, not without letting them know I would be extra demanding on the assessment of their work.*