

Drama in the EFL Classroom

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What can be done to breathe life into textbook dialogs so that the learners will be motivated to practice them more naturally? Drama skits performed and evaluated by and for the class are one answer. There are many ways to delve into drama in the classroom, but key to any approach is that there should be movement. There are two basic types of movement, literal (movement around the classroom and the movement of objects) and communicative (gesture, body language, and facial expression). Movement is crucial to true communication, whereas textbook dialogs contain only words. Observe any old Charlie Chaplin silent film for clear evidence of this. University students, who are young and vibrant, are very motivated by physical action in general, so it would seem useful to include a lot of movement as an integral part of language practice.

The second key to using drama in the classroom is encouraging students to abandon the script, which serves the positive function of providing scaffolding at first, but can soon become a crutch,

preventing the learners from standing on their own two feet. Language practice should be as true to life as possible. In real life, there is no textbook to rely on in order to communicate in the moment, only our minds, hearts, and bodies.

Core to the idea of using any teaching approach is one's concept of communication. For the purposes of this paper, let it be defined as an interaction of culture, situation, mind, heart, body, face, mouth, voice, and language that occurs in order for people to mutually create sequences of meaning and expression. These sequences in turn meld together in various ways to form the events that make up our experiences. If this definition rings true, it should also be clear that language, although integral to the communication equation, is just one part of it.

Through no fault of their own, students often focus solely on words, without paying attention to all of the other integral aspects of communication which give discourse so much of its meaning.

With these ideas as a foundation, I would like to summarize the methodology which was used in a sairishu (students who previously failed English) class at Rikkyo University. The method includes several phases including : schema activation, comprehension, project explanation, group work, rehearsal, performance, evaluation, feedback, and finally viewing the video.

Schema Activation

Schema activation is important as a preliminary step towards helping the learners understand the basic situation and may also bring forth much of the functional and lexical language used in the skit. It might consist of students writing sentences to describe a picture or illustration of the characters in the scene where the action takes place. Likewise it could include a topical discussion on a topic closely related to the skit.

Comprehension

The next step is comprehension which is established through the reading of the script and answering both global and specific information questions. Students must also answer implied information and open-ended questions which should lead to an even deeper understanding.

Explanation

The project is clearly explained in the following manner.

- The acting will be done without a script, using integrated movement, gestures, props, vocal and facial expression, and spoken language.
- There will be plenty of rehearsal time.
- Props will be the students' responsibility.
- Finally the play will be acted out, video-taped, and evaluated by the students themselves.

Groups

All work is done in cooperative learning groups. The group members choose a group name and divide the responsibilities and roles amongst themselves. It is very important that the group members understand that groups, not individual students, will be evaluated. In essence, group members all sink or swim together as a group.

Rehearsal

Rehearsal is one of the most important phases in that it is a time of intense practice and group interaction. It also occupies the largest amount of class time in the project and is where most of the learning takes place. In particular, it is a time in which the instructor can interact with each group of individuals in a truly communicative manner, and give the learners huge amounts of comprehensible input as well as model lan-

guage and gestures.

The performance

Finally it is show time. Groups choose members to introduce each skit, do the videotaping, and be “helpers” for other groups (in case someone forgets their lines). Generally, the performance is a very exciting but terribly tense time for the students, therefore it is crucial that they be given plenty of time to prepare beforehand.

Evaluation

Evaluation is important not only as a way to rank each group’s efforts, but also to focus attention on all of the performances. Each group is given one evaluation form on which all of the group names, including their own, are written. Groups must fill out the form immediately after each performance. These forms later serve as valuable feedback for the instructor.

Feedback

After the last performance, students fill out questionnaires concerning their thoughts and feelings about the project, and what they have learned.

Video viewing

In the next class, the students get to view the video of their performances, while the teacher gets to view the students’ confident smiling faces, and hear their chuckles of delight.

Conclusion

Communication consists of more than words, and learners need to practice all of the communicative aspects in an integrated fashion. Classroom drama projects are very well suited to this aim. Most importantly, performance with one’s peers brings language learning into the realm of memorable human experience.

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