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The Role of Drama in Teaching English to Young Learners

Recent years have witnessed a tremendous growth of interest in teaching English to young learners through drama. This has resulted, among others, from the recognition of this technique as a beneficial means of providing high quality input in a foreign language classroom. The present paper aims at specifying the role of drama in the contemporary ELT methodology and it discusses the main advantages of applying it in teaching English to young learners. The author also reports her study on incorporating drama into a sequence of lessons taught to a group of primary school learners. She presents her conclusions focusing on the efficiency of teaching selected aspects of language through classroom techniques based on drama as well as on their motivational value.

The goals and benefits of using drama in ELT

It may seem obvious to state that drama acknowledges the fundamental requirements of the contemporary ELT methodology. Yet, incorporating drama techniques into the language syllabus for young learners not only guarantees the improvement in the quality of foreign language learning in general but simultaneously takes advantage of imagination and creativity, characteristics instinctively applied by children in their everyday trials to gain knowledge about the surrounding world. Moreover, drama activities can naturally include the elements of fun and fantasy facilitating children's ability to assimilate new information (Halliwell 1992, Siek-Piskoźub 2001).

Another advantage of drama, as implemented in teaching English at the primary level, is that learners are given a chance to practise the target language in meaningful contexts within the classroom environment. Creating opportunities for learners' personalisation and internalisation of the target language stimulates, according to researchers such as Siek-Piskożub (2001), Brewster et al. (2002) and Cameron (2001), the development of basic communicative competence and, as a direct consequence, prepares pupils for the use of language outside school. Moreover, if properly constructed, drama activities can contribute to activating all learners by challenging them to engage in interacting with others and negotiating meaning. Also, owing to drama pupils are encouraged to take risks, experiment and use their linguistic knowledge creatively. In order to obtain the benefits enumerated above, the teacher can use drama to introduce selected vocabulary items and give learners an opportunity to practise and revise them. Due to a variety of possible modifications of drama tasks and follow-up exercises, learners are given an opportunity to further use the language in numerous communicative situations.

It is worth emphasising that incorporating educational drama into language learning at the primary level helps the teacher to promote different aspects of language competence. The analysis of the objectives specified in drama activities proves that they not only develop four language skills, create ideal conditions for pronunciation, rhythm and intonation practice but they also provide young learners with effective means for enriching vocabulary knowledge and internalising grammatical structures by placing the linguistic material in context (Maley and Duff 1982, Phillips 1999, Dougill 1987).

As far as foreign language listening comprehension is concerned, no specialists in the field would doubt that drama can serve as a useful tool for developing this aspect of communicative competence. The most essential problem here seems to be choosing appropriate material. One of the main criteria in this respect is presenting the text whose subject generates learners' interest – a factor that ensures pupils' willingness to get involved in the tasks.

Once the listening material is selected, the teacher decides how to implement it in the lesson. He/she can choose to pre-teach the key vocabulary. At this stage it should be noted that drama is especially conducive to illustrating the meaning of vocabulary through mime (Komorowska 2002, Byrne 1986, Holden 1981). The next stage requires that the text is presented by the teacher so that he/she conveys its linguistic message more effectively. While listening to the teacher, learners arrive at the general meaning of the text and perform listening comprehension exercises which are aimed at training particular subskills:

- listening to confirm expectations;
- listening for general understanding;
- listening to extract specific information (Harmer 1991: 214).

It needs to be added that through drama the teacher provides learners with a valuable language model as they are exposed to proper intonation, rhythm, stress and pronunciation – the essential components in developing language proficiency. Finally, the language material is presented within a wide range of voices and situations (Harmer 2001).

Another skill stimulated by the use of drama is speaking. Depending on the learners' level of language proficiency, the teacher decides on the amount of control over the language that pupils use during drama tasks. Despite the initial stage when the teacher closely monitors the majority of tasks, for example, by means of drills, pupils should be allowed more independence and given a chance to experiment with the language. Furthermore, in developing the skill of speaking in a foreign language the important issue is to encourage learners to efficiently take advantage of the fundamental properties of the spoken language, that is, intonation, stress as well as the pitch and tone of voice. Owing to drama pupils can not only realise the significance of using suprasegmental features of language listed above but also practise conveying linguistic messages more effectively, which helps them overcome fears and inhibitions about speaking the target language.

The significant benefit of using drama in EFL concerns also the fact that it follows the main principles of the Lexical Approach (cf. Lewis 1993, Chodkiewicz 2000, Nation 2001 and Schmitt 2001). As language does not function in individual words, vocabulary should consequently be presented to learners in lexical chunks to make them realise how words function in different structures. Drama helps the teacher to extend learners' lexical knowledge by working on formulaic language and contextualised linguistic items applied by children in meaningful practice. Moreover, the teacher can also systematically deal with such aspects as pronunciation, spelling and association of words with their visual counterparts and variations (Chodkiewicz 2000). It is worth noticing that teaching language through drama enables learners to practise all those aspects of lexical knowledge.

Apart from this, the use of drama activities makes it possible to approach young learners in a holistic way and to stimulate their imagination, creativity and independent thinking in the process of learning, which, in turn, can influence the learners' emotional and personal development. Acting-out is part of the human nature and it will not only give learners a chance to improve their language command but also to further shape their characters (Lewandowska-Kidoń 2001, Way 1997).

Finally, placing young learners in imaginary situations during drama activities in which they interact with other classmates contributes to their social development. Thus, pupils practise different types of behaviour, drawing on what they already know about human relationships and combine their previous experience with new information, which gradually makes their knowledge about the world and people more complete.

The study

The study into teaching English through drama to young learners was taken up by the present author in order to assess the effectiveness of selected drama techniques which were exploited within regular classes taught to a group of primary school learners.

Purpose

The specific aims of the study were defined in the following way:

- to provide high quality language input and, as a result, to give the learners an opportunity to develop and practise oral skills;
- to present interesting content and enhance its communicative value by taking advantage of both verbal and non-verbal resources such as pictures and movement;
- to promote the acquisition of the selected vocabulary and grammar aspects of English used in a clearly defined meaningful context;
- to provide the learners with good reasons for practising selected samples of the English language while focusing on the accuracy of pronunciation and intonation as well as on the use of accompanying gestures and movements;
- to give the learners a chance to use the language in a purposeful way and to encourage personalisation;
- to build motivation and positive attitudes towards learning a foreign language;
- to boost the learners' confidence and self-esteem;
- to enhance learning through fun and cooperation;
- to stimulate imagination.

Subjects and materials

The subjects of the study were 15 learners, aged 9 and 10 (8 females and 7 males), attending a private language school. They belonged to two groups classified as false beginners of English. As three of them did not take the vocabulary test only the results of 12 students were finally analysed.

The material for the study was selected from the Express Publishing's series of storytime readers. The chosen fairytales: 'The Ant and the Cricket', 'The Father and his Sons' and 'The Little Mermaid' were at the primary stage 2. Apart from readers, the teacher used the cassettes, the scripts and the selected songs accompanying them (Dooley and Kerr 2002a, Dooley and Kerr 2002b, Dooley and Page 2002).

At the end of the study, the teacher administered a vocabulary test adapted from the activities included in the storytime readers and the self-prepared questionnaire in order to evaluate the learners' attitude to the kind of teaching they had been exposed to.

Design and procedure

Each fairytale was presented separately in the course of four lessons during which the learners were gradually introduced to the stories through a number of drama and language activities aimed at:

- vocabulary presentation and practice;
- listening comprehension;
- reading aloud;
- pronunciation, intonation and rhythm practice.

Furthermore, the learners were gradually prepared to dramatise each story after a number of rehearsals during the classes.

The aim of the first lesson was to present the fairytale and familiarise the pupils with the target lexical items as well as the content of the story. The vocabulary was pre-taught by means of flashcards and speech bubbles and the learners' attention at this stage was specially drawn to gestures and body language recognised by educational drama as an effective way of facilitating the learning of new words. The movements accompanying the presentation of the vocabulary items were performed both by the teacher and the pupils. The next part of the lesson was aimed at encouraging the learners to make predictions about the content of the story on the basis of the teacher's questions, illustrations and objects related to the plot.

Subsequently, the storytelling session was organised. The teacher read out the text twice and in order to help the learners understand the content, she presented the illustrations and took advantage of the mother tongue to explain the necessary details. During the first and second listening the pupils' tasks were either to predict the events to follow and focus on the content of the story or listen for the target lexical items. Finally, the vocabulary was further practised in a number of activities in which special attention was paid to miming the recall of the words. Additionally, in order to check the understanding of the story, the teacher asked the pupils some questions concerning the content.

The second lesson, during which the learners received the copies of the story, gave them an opportunity to concentrate on the text in greater detail. To begin with, the pupils were made aware of the fact that while acting out, they should take advantage of the tone and pitch of their voice and movement so as to express appropriate meaning. The pupils read out the text chorally repeating after the teacher. During this stage not only further details of the content were highlighted but also the meaning, pronunciation and intonation of particular words and phrases were focused upon.

In the next stage, role reading, learners focused specifically on their parts of the text having in mind the general context of the story. As a result, the pupils were made responsible for their roles and they were encouraged to apply the advice about the ways of conveying the linguistic message most effectively by means of voice and gesture in practice. Moreover, the pupils were provided with the model of language presented through the recording of the story. The teacher played parts of it asking individual learners to read out their roles during a pause.

The aim of the third lesson was to act out the story by taking advantage of all the knowledge which the learners gained in presenting the text during previous lessons and combining the language with movement. The main stages of this lesson were called the dress rehearsal and the performance. During the former the teacher reminded the learners about the need to use body language while

expressing such emotions as sadness or happiness. Moreover, the pupils' attention was constantly drawn to the importance of the narrator presenting the events of the story. The task of the characters described by him/her at a particular moment was to act out the situation presented. The teacher also made the learners realise that they should listen to one another and work as a group rather than concentrate merely on parts of the text for which they were responsible.

During the performance the pupils integrated all the linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of acting-out practised previously. In order to help the learners create the special atmosphere necessary for the performance and further stimulate their imagination, the teacher prepared the costumes and decorated the classroom. Additionally, since an important characteristic of teaching through drama is experiencing emotions, solving problems and discussing various issues, the final stage was aimed at considering the moral of the story in order to encourage a new interpretation and give the learners an opportunity to view the text from different perspectives. This was possible as the materials selected for the study dealt with the issues of friendship, love, family relationships and kindness. Thus, apart from the linguistic benefits that the learners gained, they could also realise the importance of various universal problems.

The objective of the fourth lesson was to revise and check the learners' receptive knowledge of the key lexical items as well as the story content through a number of activities and the vocabulary test which took place two weeks after the study.

The vocabulary for the final test was a selection of words chosen from the stories and practised through a number of mime activities used while preparing the learners for the dramatisations. Each lexical item was presented with a gesture symbolising it to aid the learners' memorisation and recall as well as to enrich the dramatisations. The table below provides the selected lexical items and the movements chosen to represent them:

WORDS	MOVEMENTS ACCOMPANYING THE WORD PRESENTATION
fight	⇒ clenching fists and frowning eyebrows angrily
shout	⇒ opening mouth and surrounding it with hands adding an angry facial expression
spoil	⇒ kicking and stamping on an imaginary object on the floor
snap	⇒ breaking an imaginary stick into two parts
grumble	⇒ frowning the eyebrows and pouting
cry	⇒ pointing to the cheeks and imitating with hands tears trickling down the face
swim	⇒ producing circular movements with hands
see	⇒ drawing an imaginary line from eyes to a particular object
drown	⇒ moving hands in the air and adding a frightened facial expression
find	⇒ pretending to be looking for something and picking it up from the floor
eat	⇒ pretending to put something in the mouth
give	⇒ stretching a hand in front of the class
take	⇒ stretching a hand and withdrawing it
save	⇒ pretending to put objects into a hand
sing	⇒ holding an imaginary microphone next to a mouth
work	⇒ pretending to move something heavy
food	⇒ imitating the process of eating
hungry	⇒ pointing to a stomach and imitating the sound of rumbling
wind	⇒ blowing
cold	⇒ shivering and saying the word with a trembling voice
rain	⇒ showing with fingers the raindrops falling down
call	⇒ opening mouth and surrounding it with hands
speak	⇒ using a hand as a mouth in a gesture imitating the speech production
walk	⇒ marching on the spot

Results and discussion

The results of the test revealed that the majority of the pupils managed to successfully recall the meaning of the words practised in the course of the study.

The test consisted of four exercises. The teacher took advantage of the pictures used as flashcards during the study. In the first exercise the learners' task was to match five words from the list with the pictures presenting them. In the second exercise by looking at eight pictures, the pupils were asked to choose one of the two words which expressed the meaning of the presented picture. In the third exercise the learners' task was to match six pictures with the sentences provided. In the fourth activity the learners were to complete eight sentences with the words by putting the letters in the right order and by looking at the pictures presenting the meaning of these lexical items.

Nine pupils out of twelve were given the maximum score – 27 points. All the participants succeeded in doing exercises 1 and 3 (maximum scores respectively 5 points and 6 points). Two learners made several mistakes in exercise 2 (the maximum score – 8 points). Other two pupils had some difficulty with exercise 4 (the maximum score – 8 points). The results obtained by the learners in particular exercises and the final scores of each pupil are presented in the figure below:

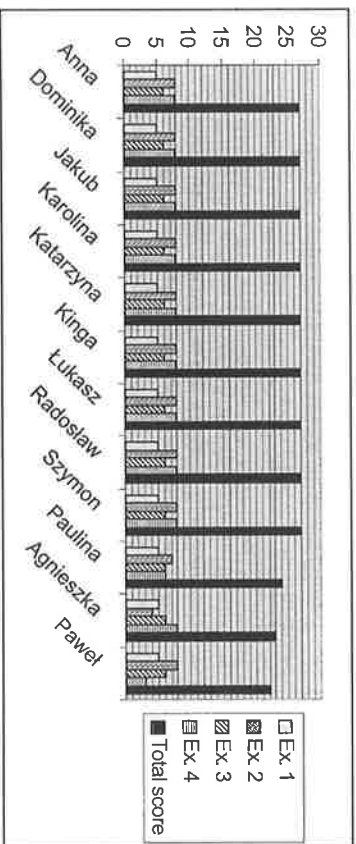


Fig. 1. The results of the vocabulary test

It should be noted that an important factor influencing the results of individual pupils might have been their regular attendance during the study since the two pupils who gained the lowest score (22 and 23 points) missed several classes. One pupil who obtained 24 points had been diagnosed as dyslexic. The remaining learners achieved the maximum score and, as they stated, the exercises were not difficult. According to those pupils, the target words which they mostly associated with particular fairytales were easy to remember owing to mime activities the children participated in while working on dramatisations.

During the oral interview summarising the study the learners were asked the following questions in Polish with some modifications, however, to make them more understandable to the learners:

1. Did you like the lessons during which the fairytales were dramatised?
2. Which parts of the lessons were the most interesting?
3. Which fairytale did you enjoy most?
4. Which lessons did you participate in more eagerly – the ones based on dramatisations or on the coursebook?
5. Did you learn any new words while taking part in the lessons based on drama?
6. Did the use of movement help you learn more vocabulary items?
7. Did learning of the new words cause any difficulty to you?
8. Did the lessons based on drama encourage you to learn English?

In the discussion the learners confirmed that the choral work on the text was beneficial to them as it gave them the necessary preparation for the dramatisations. However, the part of the lessons they liked most was working on their roles individually as it made them feel responsible for the performance.

As far as the work on vocabulary is concerned, the learners appreciated using movement with the activities, which, according to them, aided the effective memorisation of the target words.

The favourite fairytale was 'The Little Mermaid' since it contained the themes of love and the element of magic. On the whole, the pupils found the lessons varied and considered drama as an exciting and enjoyable way of learning a foreign language.

Conclusion

The study carried out by the present writer has made it possible to confirm all the benefits of implementing drama techniques in teaching at the primary level. The learners who participated in the study had a chance to develop and practise oral skills in the course of acting out the three stories. They practised the target lexical items and selected grammar aspects in clearly defined contexts and willingly applied physical action which helped them to memorise and recall the target words and structures. The learners were made to focus on the accuracy of pronunciation and intonation. Due to the fact that their language was used purposefully they could personalise it. They felt fully motivated to do all the tasks prepared by the teacher and they clearly fostered their positive attitude towards learning English.

Even though such aims as boosting the pupils' confidence were not always directly observable during the lessons, the interview made it clear that they were finally achieved. As for the linguistic goals, the learners' work on dramatisation and the results of the vocabulary test showed that the pupils managed to successfully master the target words and apply them while acting out.

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