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Young Learners and Drama Techniques in English Language Education

Abstract

Teaching young learners in primary schools has become reality in Slovakia. Teaching English since the 3rd grade is compulsory for all pupils. The methodology of teaching English to young learners has been discussed in abroad since long time ago and thus teachers have a lot of materials for their study and theoretical background. The problem of teaching foreign languages in Slovakia lies in the system of higher education. The languages are usually taught at the Faculties of Arts and the linguistically oriented teacher training study programme prepare students for 5th–12th grades (according to the accreditations and the system of study programmes). Some universities offer the courses focussed on teaching young learners, however the general pedagogy and psychology do not reflect the fact that English language is taught at the 3–4 grades (and in the 1–2 grades as optional course as well). Faculties of education which prepare teachers of young learners traditionally did not use to cover the foreign language teaching. This means there is a vacuum. We have the pupils that should learn and to be taught EFL. However, there are no qualified teachers. This is why we have to help those teachers teaching young learners to use their knowledge, skills and experience and to help them transfer that knowledge to their EFL teaching. The article presents drama techniques as one of the effective ways of teaching English in context based on drill but allowing creativity and personal in an amusing way.

Key words: drama, young learners, situations, learning foreign languages, automaticity

Słowa kluczowe: drama, młodzi uczniowie, sytuacje, uczenie się języków obcych, automatyzm

1. Drama in education

Quite often if we say drama (in educational context) people understand it as a theatrical performance (usually performed by elementary school learners), stage representation, however in language classes we may use different techniques that develop acting abilities and at the same time communication skills.

Communication is an exchange of information and messages and it is not only about words and phrases but also about body language, gestures, facial expressions, ability to express and “read” the ideas that are “between the lines”, that were not said. Thus using drama allows us to create a real-like situation that involves ideas, emotions, in some cases adaptability and improvisation.

There are various definition of drama and generally we can say that it is an activity when somebody pretends or portrays themselves as somebody or something else in an unreal situation. As S. Holden states: “It provides an opportunity for a person to express himself through verbal expressions and gestures using his imagination and memory.”¹ Drama techniques have been used in various fields of our lives — religious ceremonies, arts, psychotherapy, sociology in confidence-building-courses etc. In all those above mentioned situations the aim was to prepare people for various situations, to give them language and help them to show or hide feelings and at the same time to read them. It is closely connected with the communication.

Using drama techniques in language lessons students develop acting skills, mainly to:

- portray characters in monologues, improvisations and scripted scenes — what helps learner in real life situation to read the speaker, the partner;
- express themselves confidently through movement and gesture — very important for non-verbal communication;
- communicate character through movement and gesture;
- participate in blocking (adding movement) to improvised or scripted scenes;
- understand and execute stage movement effectively;
- understand and execute stage business effectively;
- develop a poised, controlled posture.²

Language teaching and drama

Many teachers use drama techniques very soon after starting teaching. As the foreign language teaching usually starts with audio-oral course, we often involve storytelling and try to involve learners in telling a story. Children can very soon repeat some patterns, or pantomime the parts of stories (some ideas will be presented later).

¹ S. Holden, *Drama in Language Teaching*, Harlow 1981.

² S. Pattison, *Designing a Character: A Drama Unit for Drama 20. Teaching Materials from the Stewart Resources Centre*, Saskatoon 2005.

The use of drama activities in language classes builds a space and context for primarily speaking and listening. In some cases it can develop reading skills (depends on the age and level of actors) and even writing skills. What is more important, application of drama techniques enables us to integrate all language skills and furthermore it involves expression of emotions and feelings. As M. Vilanova Vila-Abadal states: “We, as teachers, should aim to highlight and enhance interactive skills that will induce a coherent dialogue and understanding, and contribute to the individual’s personal growth and their fulfilment as a human being.”³

As it has been said drama has an important impact on language teaching, we have already mentioned vocabulary, grammar development and skills practice, but what is more as J. Goodwin states drama is a particularly effective tool for pronunciation teaching because various components of communicative competence (discourse, intonation, pragmatic awareness, non-verbal communication) can be practiced in an integrated way. There are some other elements involved in acquiring oral communication skills: adding efficiency to communication and drama activities facilitates the improvement of these elements. Drama being a learner-centred activity develops also the sense for community and active cooperation. What needs to be carefully considered when choosing the type of activity and material is useful and real language, as well as appropriate level.

2. Drama activities

Activities that imply drama techniques can be divided into different categories concerning different factors. We have highlighted that language is not only about the words and grammar. Social and cultural aspects are also very important. People have no problem to understand language mistakes, however they do not accept social and cultural mistakes. We have already mentioned that pantomime is one of the communication strategies, it is a compensation strategy used in conversation and needs no verbal production. Although it seems that it has nothing with foreign language learning (no foreign words are used) the technique is very important to communicate with foreigners and we need to train students to use it. There are various ways how to use mime in the EFL class. Guessing words acted out, miming the plot of a heard story, acting them out. Children are used to such an activity, in Slovakia they often play the game

³ M. Vilanova Vila-Abadal, *All the World’s A Stage: Foreign Language Teaching through Drama*, Oldenburg 2012, <http://203.68.184.6:8080/dspace/bitstream/987654321/869/1/All%20the%20Class%20is%20a%20Stage%E2%80%A6%E2%80%9DForeign%20Language%20Teachingthrough%20Drama%20.pdf> (cit. 28.06.2012).

“We are the craftsmen” (Remeselníci) where people act a job out and the rest of group had to guess it.

Sample

- You are sad. Act it out.
- You are happy. Act it out.
- You are scared. Act it out.
- You are tired. Act it out.
- You are running. Act it out.
- You are dancing. Act it out.

The instruction can be written on a strip of paper or it can be said (whispered) by the teacher, or it can be children who can think it up.

Another favourite game is called frozen images/still images/sculptures — e.g. “Make a house” (your house has one window and a garage door). Students use their bodies to create an image.

There are various alternatives, possibilities how to play it. One of the possibilities is to let learners to make a still image. The rest of a group can guess what people in the picture are doing. They can use (and practise) both interrogative (yes/no) or declarative sentences.

Chants (sometime also called action chants) use rhythm and rhyme, their use in the class helps pupils to build self-confidence and especially fluency. Students drill the text, support it by e.g. movement, what enhances memorisation. Repetition drills focus also on accuracy and lead to memorisation, and eat is very important to the automatising of language. The learnt chunks and phrases enable later smooth and fluent utterances without hesitating about language and grammar. A rhythm “Good morning good morning good morning to you, good morning good morning, we are glad to see you.” Although drills as such are not very natural they frequently use common language and phrases as e.g. “to be glad to see sb.”

Jazz chants is the term coined by Carolyn Graham. Jazz chants are used to practise intonation — stress and intonation, grammar, phrases of foreign language. C. Graham, a jazz chant writer, wrote several books with different jazz chants. She presents shorts chants, grammar chants, fairy tale jazz chants. Children love them as they may combine words, melody and movements can be added to present the content and rhythm.

Halloween Parade

Black cats, here they come!
Black cats, one by one.
Leaping, howling, having fun.
Black cats, here they come!

Skeletons dancing, here they come!
Skeletons dancing, one by one.
Shaking, rattling, having fun.
Skeletons dancing, here they come!

Witches flying, here they come!
Witches flying, one by one.
Witches on broomsticks, having fun.
Witches flying, here they come!

Spiders crawling, here they come!
Spiders crawling, one by one.
Creeping crawling, having fun.
Spiders crawling, here they come!⁴

Stop that noise

Sh! Sh! Stop that Noise!
Sh! Sh! Stop that Noise!
Come on boys, tell all the girls
Tell all the girls to stop that noise!
Boys: Sh! Sh! Stop that Noise!
Sh! Sh! Stop that Noise!
Everyone: Come on girls, tell all the boys
Tell all the boys to stop that noise!
Girls: Sh! Sh! Stop that Noise!
Sh! Sh! Stop that Noise!
Everyone: Sh! Sh! Stop that Noise!⁵
(Graham, C: Jazz chants for children)

⁴ C. Graham, *Holiday Jazz Chants*, OUP 1999.

⁵ C. Graham, *Jazz Chants for Children*, OUP 1979.

Learning jazz chants helps learners to retrieve language they need quickly. It is visible especially in case of ritual language; as an example we can present the example form of the teacher's manual *Teaching Jazz Chants to Young Learners*⁶ ("This is my friend. Her name is Sue. / Hi Sue. How do you do? / I'm fine, thanks. How are you? / What time is it? It's half past two. / Half past two? What'll we do? / I want to play. / I want to play. / I want to play all day.")

Drama techniques can be used even with the very young learners in pre-primary education, in kindergartens in various forms — games, sketches, performances, role-plays etc. (Parents and siblings often play games with children, children love pretending they are someone else).

What's the time, Mr. Wolf? (the Slovak variant is: *Janko, Janko, koľko hodín?, Vĺčko, vĺčko, koľko hodín*; American variant is: *What time is it, Mr Fox?*) is a game in which one child stands in front of (at the opposite side of the field) the group of players standing in a row. They all face the same side, what means that the wolf (one player standing in front of the others) can not see the rest of a group. Kids are asking one after another (or unisono) what is the time and they are counting aloud step forward (can also backward). If the wolf turns and can see a player to move he/she has to move to the starting position. The winner is the one who reaches the wolf's position first. The language in this activity is restricted, in fact it is a game with a prescribed text. Repeating the phrase "what's the time" and "counting" aloud leads to automatization of the phrase and numbers practice, as well as "It's ... o'clock."

More immediate language and higher productivity is expected in role-plays which is another drama technique. Here, students are placed into particular position and situation. "Generally speaking, role-play involves being an imaginary person usually in a hypothetical situation and sometimes in a real one."⁷ The advantage of role-plays is that it involves spontaneous actions, improvisation and it also develops social skills. It provides a memorable experience and builds confidence. On contrary it might be time consuming and some students might have problem to identify themselves with their roles, those who are less emphatic and not so fluent and creative might have problems to create situations. On other hand, some introvert or shy students are more active compared the typical classroom situations as they identify themselves with the characters being portrayed.

The teacher can very easily influence the process of role playing as he knows his students. A teacher can write the roles directly tailored to students to make sure they have no problem to act it out and what is more to practise what he/she needs to be practised. It is a teacher's decision how structured information he/she

⁶ C. Graham, *Teaching Jazz Chants to Young Learners. An English Language Teacher Training Video with Carolyn Graham*, Washington 2006.

⁷ S. Venugopal, *The Use of Drama in ELT: A perspective*, "The English Teacher" 15, 1986, 1, pp. 41–48.

will provide to students and how much language is included in the task (usually students get more specific information about their role on a role-play cards), it is a teacher who controls and manages the whole activity before the actual activity. In the preparation phase a teacher is in a role of facilitator, he can also become a participant in a role play. During the role play teacher usually observes and it is necessary to evaluate learners after the activity. Here, the teacher has to realise that the focus is on fluency and thus error correction is delayed, postponed for the end of the activity when s/he should highlight the major errors.

We have already said that many people understand the term drama (in education) as a synonym to short plays and sketches. These involve given scenario, roles, text written, sometimes even the movements are indicated. In this way they can be seen as the activity that is easier to be realised compared to role plays. In role plays students are actively involved in creating the content. Short plays and sketches are based on scenarios that are ready made and need to be memorised. It usually starts with reading the text aloud to give students confidence that their pronunciation is correct — we work on intonation, stress, pronunciation. In this phase we usually can make slight changes to the original text to tailor it to the students' abilities and to create our image of the play. There is also a space to redivide the text. Usually the teller has the longer utterances that can be divided into smaller bits and this gives us a chance to involve more students and to make the texts shorter and easier to memorise. On the other hand, students can be very creative and the play can be either rewritten and personalised or it can be written by the students themselves (especially older students with higher proficiency of language). The way how we can involve young learners in play creation is to ask them to prepare the decoration. This can be done in the Arts lesson, and it can easily be done in English what gives us a space for content language integrated learning and pupils see their work is meaningful and useful.

The story *Very hungry Caterpillar* written by Eric Carle is a story (book) of caterpillar that eats every day and is still hungry. The story ends with a picture of a beautiful butterfly. In fact it is a children's picture book but it can be also used for drama activities in a classroom. Pupils recycle the food vocabulary as well as names of the days of the week. (Carle got the idea of creating this book from a hole puncher: "One day I was punching holes with a hole puncher into a stack of paper, and I thought of a bookworm and so I created a story called 'A Week with Willi the Worm.' Then my editor suggested a caterpillar instead and I said 'Butterfly!' 'That's how it began,'" he said.⁸

⁸ U. Khan, *Google Celebrates Eric Carle's Very Hungry Caterpillar*, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/5021384/Google-celebrates-Eric-Carles-Very-Hungry-Caterpillar.html> (cit. 28.06.2012).

Reading a story one can realise how many objects/decorations can be prepared for the play by pupils themselves”: “In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf. One Sunday morning the warm sun came up and — pop ! — out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar. He started to look for some food! On Monday he ate through one apple. But he was still hungry...” The presentation of a story can be supported with the flashcard or real objects (moon, egg, leaf, food, apple) and even the kids can play different objects.

Preparing a performance requires a lot of work and time but there is a lot the children can benefit from and these benefits can boost to their language competences. Repeated repetitions lead to automaticity, intensive work with a text gives us a possibility to work on suprasegmental features (rhythm, stress, intonation). It gives them a sense of meaningful learning, they do not perceive drill as rote memorisation and they are becoming responsible for a joint success of a team.

3. Conclusion

Even though the article presents the positive aspects of using drama in language teaching, we have to be aware of drawbacks and disadvantages its usage bring.

Eigenbauer⁹ mentions “considerable disadvantage of isolated games and drama activities: They are usually not embedded in wider contexts, they are short ‘extra activities’, which are easily discarded if there is not sufficient time, and they are usually ‘closed’ and ‘controlled’ language exercises”. W. S. Sam enumerates nine disadvantages connected with drama education¹⁰, namely that activity is artificial, difficult to monitor, causes embarrassment, encourages incorrect forms, has cultural bias, teachers’ fear of losing control, spontaneity is lost, timing lessons is difficult, activities may not be suitable for all levels. The fact is that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and being aware of them allows teachers to plan and organise activities in a way to minimize their impact.

Drama activities are popular among students. They like performances, they usually enjoy preparation phases, they are ready to learn their roles and many times incidentally they learn also the roles of other participants. They are ready to use the language presented and practiced automatically in real life situations and older students can evaluate the benefits of learning roles by heart.

⁹ In: A. Procházka, *Drama in Modern Language Teaching*, Wien 2007, http://www.kphvie.ac.at/file-admin/Dateien_KPH/Kompetenzzentren/K%C3%BCnstl._Bildung/Downloads/Drama_in_MLT_1.pdf (cit. 29.06.2012).

¹⁰ W. S. Sam, *Drama in Teaching English as a Second Language — A Communicative Approach*, “The English Teacher” 9, July 1990, <http://www.melta.org.my/ET/1990/main8.html>

The preparation phase is frequently concurrently supported by the preparation of scene, costumes, scenery, masks where children can present their creativity and it opens the space for integrated language learning. Teacher has possibilities to use the ready-made materials or to create their own, tailored to the needs e.g. sketches. There are many books published with different drama techniques practise as well as dramas for EFL classes, similarly as they can be found on internet (see e.g. <http://efltheatreclub.co.uk/>).

Drama techniques should be included generally in the school curricula as they develop communication skills empathy and build confidence. What is more, they develop, vocabulary, fluency and accuracy at the same time. They help learners with not only vocabulary but syntactical structures as well. It is usually a student-centred activity where all (or most) of students are involved (it is suitable for all intelligence types of learners). Drama activities support habit formation (what audio-lingual method and behaviourist learning theory was grounded in) and we believe that as H. D. Brown claims automaticity is one of the main principles of language learning and leads towards fluency what is one of the basic characteristics of effective communication, and drama techniques lead to automaticity in a language what makes our learners to be effective speakers and language users.

There are various researches giving the evidence of language competence progress after using drama, however, what is equally important is the added value, that pupils like those activity and these activities motivate them to learn more about the language and to use it correctly. It shows them how the language works in a context. What is more, it leads to cooperation, empathy, creativity and gives the sense of belonging to the group what is a step to self-realisation.

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