

Theatre in Education: A Case of Foreign Language Teaching in Italy

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Abstract

Theatre in education is a form of applied theatre that is widely utilized in foreign, second, and/or additional language education. Even though several theoretical frameworks are provided, single cases play a key role to reflect on and to understand this hybrid entity of arts and education. This case study explains a case of Theatre in education company that provides theatre in education programmes for the schools in the north of Italy. The qualitative inquiry collected data by interviewing the theatre-makers about their experiences. Furthermore, the performances were observed in a certain rationale. The thematic analysis is grounded on code weights and code co-occurrences within the data. The results indicated that the programmes provide a learning experience that fosters active learner participation. The reasons that lead to learner participation are discussed; moreover, practical implications are given in the conclusion.

Keywords

Theatre in education; Foreign language teaching; Case study; Qualitative

Introduction

Theatre in education (TIE) is a method that integrated the forms and opportunities of theatrical arts into education. Jackson (2002) stated that TIE is a definable movement that started to emerge in the 1960s in Britain based on the needs posed by the schools. He defined TIE as an activity that aims to provide a stimulus on a chosen subject in and out of school through an absorbing, challenging, and even provocative experience for students. Likewise, according to Nicholson (2009), it is a pedagogy that fosters theatrical art as a media of learning and social change. On the other hand, Bolton (2002) believed that TIE, concerning with dramatic art and pedagogy, is not performing for big audiences followed by brief hot-seating procedures; it has an

emphasis on change of understanding. Furthermore, TIE is not a one-off performance in schools; instead, it is a coordinated and structured pattern of activities that may include permutations of traditional theatre such as actors in role or use of dialogue and stage effects. It may also include elements of drama in education such as active participation of students in or out of the role and exploring issues or ideas through improvisations (Jackson, 2002).

TIE is realized in the form of TIE programmes, which include these coordinated activities that are oftentimes structured around a topic referring to the school curriculum or the life of audiences. Besides the performance, TIE programmes are composed of a series of complimentary activities targeting the content of the performance before or after it. The phases of TIE programmes can be categorized as pre-performance, performance, and post-performance phases (Uştuk, 2016).

Within the framework of foreign, second, and/or additional language (L2) education, TIE has been utilized for a long time but one of the earliest contextualization dates back to Case and Wilson (1981), who termed it as English Teaching Theatre. However, they only presented their practice and materials in the book. Regarding TIE in L2 education, the first model was suggested by Aita (2009; 2010) as 'Theatre in Language Learning'. In his model, Aita proposed aims and pedagogical outcomes targeted by Theatre in Language Learning. According to this model, the use of TIE in L2 education has several objectives such as professional theatre performances acted by native English speakers; the commission of age-appropriate and specifically targeted plays; publication and distribution the play texts before the TIE performance; and the provision educational materials that supplements the production and the play text (Aita, 2009: 68). To add, in Theatre in Language Learning Model, several pedagogical outcomes were defined. To illustrate, this model intends to build cross-cultural understanding; to make the study of English 'fun'; to take language study out of the classroom context; and to hear English spoken by native speakers (Aita, 2009: 68). Additionally, the research of TIE within the scope of L2 education is not limited to Aita. More recently, Pakkar-Hull (2014) presented a project called 'Mosaic', which is a multilingual TIE project that intended to promote multilingual pedagogy in schools where English is an additional language used by students with the immigrant background. In the case of these schools, monolingual view of 'English-only' policy was used; thus, denial of multicultural reality in L2 learning context lead to division

and detriment. Pakkar-Hull (2014) stated that through a TIE programme promoting multilingualism and including L1 resources of the participants into the L2 learning process, it is possible to challenge the monolingual understanding of L2 education and to constitute a safe L2 learning environment that has a positive impact on participants. Naturally, the research on TIE in L2 education, as a part of TIE movement, relies on the practice: Actual TIE companies, programmes, materials and projects all over the world (Pammenter, 2002). Thus, this study also relies on a practice of TIE in the L2 education context in Italy. The theatre company called *Action Theatre in English* was founded in 2013 and are active in the city of Turin and its vicinity. The case of this company is exclusively exceptional, as it has got a specific perspective on the utilization of TIE in L2 education. In that, their programmes rely on the dynamics of physical theatre. Thus, the current study intends to investigate the case of *Action Theatre in English* Company in a case study design to explain the characteristics of their practice through the perceptions of the implementers: theatre-makers. Therefore, the study inquires the following research question:

- What are the characteristics of the company's practice?
- How can its implementation be discussed within the methodological framework of L2 education?

Method

Case study research design is adopted for the current study. The company called *Action Theatre in English* is the research focus. Taking the authentic texts that are produced by the actor-teachers, the performances, materials, and the style into account, the specific case of TIE in L2 education can be called as a bounded system: an entity by itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). More specifically, an intrinsic case study design is chosen as the study concentrates on explaining the characteristics and gaining a deep understanding of a particular case without bearing any intention to compare and contrast the case to the other similar cases (Hood, 2009). To make the boundaries of this entity clear, participants and information about the TIE company are presented in the following sections.

Participants

The study group is composed of eight professional theatre-makers actively producing and providing TIE programmes for L2 education purposes. There were five female,

three male participants in the study group. The age range of the participants was from 21 to 63. Five of the participants were from native speakers of the L2 that they teach whereas two were not native but proficient speakers.

The study group includes one director, five actor-teachers, one material developer, and one administrator. In other words, four professional roles within a TIE company are focused. In the context of the current study, the role of ‘director’ refers to professionals who lead the TIE company and decide on the content of the TIE programmes. Second, actor-teachers are those who implement the TIE programmes by performing it to and with L2 learners. They directly interact with the learners whereas the other roles do not interact with the learners. Next, material developers work as pedagogical consultants that help the other theatre-makers to adjust the content to the needs and curricula of the schools. Material developers also develop the supplementary materials that are provided in the whole TIE programme. Last, administrators are also part of TIE company crew and they are responsible for the communication with schools, for presenting the programmes and collecting feedback from school authorities.

Research context

Action Theatre in English, is a TIE company whose TIE programmes target at teaching English as a foreign language in the city of Turin and its vicinity in Italy. The company has been active since 2003 and presents TIE programmes and workshops for kindergartens, primary, middle, and secondary schools. Even though the company is mostly active at a regional level, the crew is composed mainly of people from various countries. There are theatre-makers whose L1 is English as well as theatre-makers from other linguistic backgrounds. The company presents itself as a TIE company whose work is grounded on the principles of physical theatre and make use of puppetry and mask. The company claims that the programmes are designed in align with the level of students and they are consistent with the national curricula. According to the statistics given by the company, in the season of 2015-2016, they presented nine TIE programmes and six smaller scales show for various sizes of learners aged from four to 16. In total, they reached about 50.000 learners in the 2015-2016 educational year.

Data collection

For data collection, two qualitative data collection techniques were utilized. First, semi-structured interviews were used since it allows flexibility for the respondents to reflect on their experiences in depth (Richards, 2009). To apply the data collection through interviews, an interview guide was created by the researchers. It contains questions asking the key concepts regarding the respondents understanding of TIE in L2 education. Second, participant observation technique is utilized. This kind of observation is preferred as it provides a two-fold observation of the case. The first author of the current study involved in the TIE company in a ten-day long study visit in 2015 upon the invitation of the company. The observer took part in all the activities of the TIE company. He toured with several groups performing in various town and cities. Additionally, he participated in the rehearsals, material assessment sessions, and performances. Participant observation technique allowed the researchers to have rich data regarding both the setting of the case by getting involved and the TIE performances by studying the interaction and experiences happening during the study visit from an observer's perspective (Cowie, 2009). During the study visit, the interview data were also collected. For collecting the observation data, a specific procedure was followed. First, upon the arrival, the director of the TIE company organized a meeting in which the visiting researcher gave an introduction to the study and explained its aims. Later, the visiting researchers had an additional meeting with the director to foreshadow the observation problems. After all, the logistical and practical problems were sorted out, an observation guide is constituted. The observation guide is based on the framework of key dimensions of observation suggested by Cowie (2009). Accordingly, field notes with regard to space, people, activities, objects, actions, events, time, goals and feelings were taken during the study visit when the observer interacted with any of the participants or observed them in action.

Data analysis

To analyse the data, authors utilized thematic analysis, which followed the procedure of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the six-phase outline of thematic analysis was used. Initially, the process of analysis was structured and the authors got familiar with the data. After generating initial codes and searching for

themes, the overarching themes were reviewed and themes were contextualized. Lastly, the report of analysis was produced. Both of the authors conducted the thematic analysis in blind sessions and then they negotiated to reach the final results of the analysis. This procedure was followed to ensure the trustworthiness of the current study.

For the analysis, the qualitative data analysis software called *Dedoose* version 7.6.6. was utilized. The transcriptions of the interview data and the field notes were entered into the system and the data were coded. Later, the authors reached a consensus regarding the themes that the coding results led using the procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

After the data was coded, 14 weighted codes emerged. These codes demonstrated how TIE in L2 education is experienced and perceived by the implementers. The codes are presented in the word cloud given below:



Figure 1. Word cloud including the codes of the data

As illustrated in Figure 1, the most weighted code was the experiences regarding learner participation and purposeful communication. Additionally, the specific attitude of the actor-teachers and the unique role that they represent during the TIE programme was also a weighted code in the data.

Moreover, taking the code co-occurrence into the account, the results demonstrated that learner participation may be related to the exclusive communication in some cases whereas sometimes to the role of the actor-teacher. The code co-occurrences are shown in Figure 1.

Codes	Different learning space than regular classrooms	Group work is promoted	Group-dynamics	Learner participation	Learners helping each other	Learners' use of L2 when they don't have to	Physicality	Purposeful communication	Role of the actor-teacher	Self-esteem	Total
Different learning space than regular classrooms			1		1					2	4
Group work is promoted			1								1
Group-dynamics	1	1		8	5		1		6	1	23
Learner participation			8		2	1	3	10	12	1	38
Learners helping each other	1		5	2					1		9
Learners' use of L2 when they don't have to				1				1			2
Physicality			1	3							4
Purposeful communication				10		1			5		16
Role of the actor-teacher			6	12	1			5		2	26
Self-esteem	2		1	1					2		6
Total	4	1	23	38	9	2	4	16	26	6	

Note. The code co-occurrence table is exported from Dedoose software v. 7.6.6. Only the co-occurring codes are included in the matrix.

Figure 2. Code co-occurrence matrix

Based on these results, three overarching themes emerged in the data: (1) purposeful communication that leads to learner participation, (2) role of the actor-teacher that leads to learner participation, (3) supportive group dynamics.

The first overarching theme can be coined as purposeful communication that leads to learner participation. The theme is composed of codes showing that when the L2 learners' communicative act is reinforced with a realistic purpose, their participation is triggered and becomes imminent. The artistic-director of the TIE company supported the theme followingly:

"The kids come to the stage and they have to solve some problems. When they are solving problems in the context of the play, they become involved and have to interact in a meaningful way."

An observation made by an actor-teacher also support the relationship between the purposeful communication and learner participation:

"...it has always been interesting for me to see that students interact with each other in English. They stop using their own language. That does not happen in a regular lesson. They do not just speak in English but they interact among themselves in English. Because they realize actors need to understand what they say to each other. Of course, it is us to build their involvement into the show."

Likewise, some incidents from the field notes also approve that purposeful communication is a key point for learner participation. During a performance, an actor-teacher found a note that is written in Italian as a part of the plot but the actor-teacher was native English speaker and did not understand. Some L2 learners volunteered and helped the actor-teacher to overcome the difficulties. L2 learners got themselves involved in an interaction with the actor-teacher on the stage because their purpose was to sustain the performance.

The second overarching theme was called as the role of the actor-teacher that leads to learner participation. As the previous theme, the second theme was also with regard to L2 learners' participation during the TIE programme. However, this time the attitude and role of the actor-teacher can be discussed as the source of the learners' participation. The following comment from an actor-teacher illustrates the situation from a practitioner's point of view.

"In theatre, the actual language is the main means of communication. A show is certainly not a lesson but an experience in which we engage with the audience. A play is a story and all the actions in it. And in a play, students forget about using the language. Speaking is like a game. You do not concentrate on actually using it and that's how you can manage it."

Additionally, one actor-teacher asserted that the actor-teachers play with the L2 learners, they do not play to the learners. This explains very clearly that what TIE practitioners do is not only a performative action in which they present a script in mise-en-scenes but it is an educational interaction. The same actor-teacher also stated

that the actor-teachers and the learners are on the same level during a performance and they both learn much from each other; thus the effect is mutual. This attitude exemplifies the role of the actor-teacher and how it influences the learner participation.

In addition to similar comments, observation data also revealed situations in which the unique attitude of actor-teachers played an important role on learner participation. While observing the performances, actor-teachers encouraged learner participation in a number of instances; especially learners from immigrant families or those who do not seem so volunteer were intentionally included. The inclusive manner of actor-teachers played an important role to create the safe learning atmosphere during the performances.

Last overarching theme suggested that learner participation is linked to the group dynamics created in a TIE experience and the interpersonal relationships among the learners. However, regarding this theme, the data from interviews with theatre-makers and the data from the observation do not show compatibility. In that, the actor-teachers believe that TIE programmes are too limited to have an impact on creating a sustainable group dynamics and it is not the result of their implementation. To be more specific, since TIE performances may include large groups of L2 learners, the practitioners believe that their influence on the creation of a healthy group dynamics is not so relevant. However, for performances or workshops addressing smaller groups of learners, the results vary. The situation is clarified by one of the practitioners as follows:

“Since the students are more included in the process while a workshop, all the effects on classroom environment are replicable. Simply because in a small group, a group of 20-25 students, all these effects are relevant. They learn their lines, they watch themselves on a video, the group is working together, nobody is telling them “no”, so it is a safe learning. They see themselves actually producing something. It is not necessarily an outcome of theatre for TEFL, any theatre in school environment or such workshops bring the group together.”

As a result, the data demonstrated that many influences emerged as the outcome of TIE programmes in L2 education; nevertheless, three major themes can be stressed as they suggest that some outcomes are linked to each other in a cause and effect relationship. The code co-occurrences revealed that increased learner participation during the TIE programmes, which is verified not only by the TIE practitioners but also by the researchers, is linked to some other characteristics of TIE programmes. These characteristics are the purposeful communication that is initiated by the

fictional reality of TIE performances, the exclusive role and manner of actor-teachers, and safe classroom environment that leads to a supportive classroom dynamics and relationships among the L2 learners.

Discussion

The current qualitative case study discussed two research questions. The first one intended to explore what the characteristics of the company's practice are. The second explained how the company's implementation can be discussed within the methodological framework of L2 education.

Regarding the first research question, the results indicated that the implementation of TIE in L2 education in the case of the current study have some compatibilities to other cases presented in the prior research. Word cloud of the weighted codes in the data shows the structural characteristics of the TIE implementers that constituted the study group. The characteristics of the study group's implementation are exclusive learner participation, purposeful communication, role and manner of actor-teachers. What is more, their implementation intends to create an alternative learning space that is different from regular classroom contexts. In this safe learning space, group dynamics and group work is initiated so that learner motivation and self-esteem is aimed to increase. Their motivation and self-esteem are discussed to increase as TIE performances create a platform on which they can understand the target language with the help of physicality of the actor-teachers. As a result, the interaction between the actor-teachers and the learners, and oftentimes the interaction among the participants is in L2 since the learners enjoy the performance and want to keep it up. Therefore, the characteristics of the TIE implemented of the study group offers a specific approach to TIE in L2 education.

This approach is in align with other TIE approaches in L2 education reported in the earlier studies. As asserted by Aita (2009; 2010), motivation is a key aspect within the framework of TIE in L2 education. What is more, Aita (2009) also underlined the interaction in TIE performances between the iconic, deictic, symbolic, intentional and unintentional signs produced by the actor-teachers and how the learners interpret these signs. The company's practice is also based on the characteristics of interaction between the actor-teachers and the learners and it is the properties of this interaction that leads to increased learner participation. However, unlike suggested by Aita

(2010), the study group did not infer any effect of TIE regarding the promotion of Anglo-Saxon culture although the study group of the current study was composed of native speakers of English. This indicates that the promotion of Anglo-Saxon culture is not and should necessarily be the outcome of every TIE implementation and companies can develop their own sociolinguistic approach.

The second research question aimed to explain how the approach and implementation of the company be explained within the framework of methodology of L2 education. The explanation is threefold.

First, the learner participation can be linked to the purposeful communication provided by the action and the nature of TIE performances. This nature relies on the principles of communicative language teaching; in that, TIE performances put a specific focus on activities that foster language use as a tool to fulfill an interactive task (Harmer, 2007; Denkçi-Akkaş, 2016). Similarly, Harmer (2007) stated that activities in communicative language teaching involve students in a realistic communication, where L2 learners are directed to perform a successful communicative task to carry on the communication. In the TIE practice in L2 education examined in the current study, the learners get themselves involved into the dramatic action so as to carry the performance on. This characteristic of TIE performances was also supported by Pakkar-Hull (2014), who suggested that putting the L2 learners into the role of skilled and capable communicators within the fictional reality of TIE performances help them acquire a new language identity signaling that they are in the role of language expertise. Thus, once they have a purpose in using the language, they have the inner drive to participate in the performative experience.

Second, role of the actor-teacher is particularly considerable taking the impact of this role into the account. Once the actor-teacher succeeds in expressing that they intend "to play with them, instead of playing to them", they propose a different register than the conventional register between the teacher and the student. The supportive and inclusive manner of actor-teachers is crucial to involve the participants, who are especially more oppressed and avoid participating in a performative action in front of the rest of the learner group. This is also linked to the third aspect of the analysed TIE practice, which is the safe learning environment and supportive group dynamics. This phenomenon is parallel to the parameters on which L2 motivational self-system is grounded (Dörnyei, Csizer, & Nemeth, 2006). Dörnyei (2009) suggests that there are

two possible selves, which are the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self. Moskovsky, Racheva, Assulaimani, and Harkings (2006) proposed that in terms of L2 learning experience, the ideal L2 self is concerned with aspects of learning situation there and then such as the classroom environment and learner group dynamics. Thus, it can be suggested that once TIE practice enables the L2 learners to engage in a supportive classroom environment, the individuals' aspirations regarding their achievement and competence as L2 learners are positively influenced.

Conclusion

In summary, the current case study showed that the implementation of TIE in L2 education practiced by the study group is alike to the other similar practices reported in the prior studies. However, the study also showed that the emphasis and content of TIE programmes vary according to the contexts of each TIE company. Furthermore, the analysed practice has an influence on L2 learners' participation with respect to the purposeful communicativeness, role of the actor-teachers, and the classroom environment exclusively provided by the TIE company.

The study has certain limitations. First, the results are naturally limited to the case and its bounded system that was analysed in the current study. Second, the analysis of the qualitative data is limited to the thematic analysis conducted by the authors of the current study. Last, although the company employs many other theatre-makers, the research included only those who were volunteers to participate. Thus, the results are limited only to the experience and data collected from the study group.

Regarding the results of the current study, there are several practical recommendations. Initially, it can be suggested to L2 teachers who consider including TIE programmes as parts of their L2 curricula should bear in mind that there is not a fabricated, uniform fashion of TIE programmes; instead, every company may have their own approach and style. Second, this is the reason why a need analysis is required to find the TIE company that serves the most appropriate TIE programme: the most appropriate to the context of L2 teachers and learners. However, it is evident that learner participation is a unique outcome of the TIE programmes and L2 teachers and educational policy-makers who observe the need for more participatory L2 education in their contexts can consider TIE programmes as a solution for the need.

It is recommended for the future studies to provide an inclusive review of similar academic research and practice. Therefore, the prospective studies can draw a contemporary and holistic theoretical framework that may illuminate researchers and implementers in terms of their practice and that is how to create a functional praxis of TIE in L2 education.

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