



## Storytelling Is a Useful Technique in Teaching EFL

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### ABSTRACT

Storytelling is one of the simplest and perhaps most compelling forms of dramatic and imaginative activity. A good place to start is by telling stories to your students and encouraging them to share stories with one another. All of us can become engaging storytellers with a little practice. There may also be members of staff who are particularly skilled at telling stories. Listen to each other, watch videos of storytelling and encourage the children to identify techniques they could use in their own stories because a good teacher is a good storyteller. Drama strategies - also known as drama techniques or drama conventions - are the everyday tools of the drama teacher to enhance the learning of a foreign language. Drama strategies develop different skills to encourage discourse, interaction and creativity. They aim to improve communicative and performance skills through activities such as character development and storytelling and be used across the curriculum to actively involve students in their own learning.

**Keywords:** Foreign Language, Storytelling, English, Albanian, drama teacher

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The whole arsenal of drama methods serves to enhance the learning of the foreign language, as I have discovered during the last four years when developing the Creative Drama Approaches to Language Learning (when I started preparing my dissertation theses). The study research seeks to find benefits, influence of drama techniques and outcomes to be achieved in classes where teacher and students experiment together.

Apart from benefiting the students' learning of English, drama develops other useful educational outcomes: (these are some of the expected outcomes in classroom drama)

self-confidence, personal response, freedom of expression

social interaction and empathy

creativity and imagination

willingness to explore and research new ideas and methods.

This is how Neeland and O'Neill practiced the use of drama as a method with teachers of English as a second language when I participated in a drama workshop in Switzerland, in 1996. To my knowledge, I am one of the first teachers of English in Albania who has first studied and consciously used drama as a method in the classroom (after I returned from Switzerland in which Cecily O'Neil and Jonothan Neelands were invited to train the teachers of English language in a Drama Workshop 'On how drama can work wonders', 1996).

This is an illustration of one of the experimental classes using drama as a method in teaching English as a foreign language.

The teacher tells the class a story of a situation and explains new/difficult vocabulary and grammatical points. In groups the students share their views about the situation presented in the story and imagine how they would feel if they had been involved in the story.

They imagine three or four characters, a scene and write their ideas about the situation. Then one group starts asking questions about their characters, how they feel about the situation (maybe assisted by the teacher asking an introductory question to establish the spirit of the enquiry). Then it is the turn of the group who have to ask questions of the characters to the other group.

Each group improvises the story, choosing the methods of presentation they wish to use. One group may improvise a sequence of freeze-frames, another group may present a mime, another group may use words and movement or still images. For the spoken version of the improvisation, the whole class may contribute: if a student in the performing group runs out of words or ideas, any other student in the classroom can assume the role. No-one therefore is excluded or frightened of getting involved, and the whole class contributes. Meanwhile they may take notes of what they liked or disliked and at the end express their non-judgemental opinions.

An extension to this process is to ask the students to listen to an audio-cassette recording of a scene once or twice with pre-listening questions to focus on their listening (e.g. 'Lady Windermere's fan' by Oscar Wilde).

Knowing the scene in detail they can then write a summary of the action, and can characterise the people involved in the story. Then the scene can be extended, again using freeze-frames to imagine what may have happened or could happen before/afterwards, adding or substituting new ideas and vocabulary. At this stage the students will want to learn their scripts, which will be very easy. I found this very useful in my drama classes. The students will also want to write their own versions of the story or situation.

Using a photograph or poem as the starting-point is more advanced, as this implies inference and visual literacy? these skills need to be developed first.

Drama can work together with students' creative writing and visual art as long as carefully observed during drama classes.

Further explanation of the data collected with clear objectives whilst using drama in improvised classes are stated below:

To begin with, the students write their own comments on the theme of 'trafficking in human beings'.

For these reasons the students were shown a set of images on the theme and then made images for their dramatized scene. It meant:

Letting pupils take risks.

Drawing on the imagination.

Raising levels of interest and motivation.

Developing skills which are common to both areas –listening, focus and concentration, use intonation and body language in communication, physical control, etc.

Language cannot be taught without reference to the emotional element which is present in every word uttered as “real” language. Drama is used to put some of this forgotten emotional content back and, in turn, the insertion of emotional content brings with it the need for particular strategies.

A. Teka, one of my students quotes one friend who said “I’ve been learning it for two years and I’m still speaking a two year old’s language”. K. and D?, who pioneered the use of drama techniques in the use of English as a Foreign Language stated that “beginners” language should make as much sense as the language of advanced students”.

The question to be asked, however, is how we can achieve this in a classroom situation when students have not yet attained an advanced level of language competence.

Two things can be done as far as evidenced during the classes:

Students can be introduced to communication strategies which can be practised within any dialogue situation – these include stalling, playing for time, reacting.

Students may also be asked to consider the context in which the language takes place.

In drama terms, they are asked to consider the key words in improvisation – “who” “what” “where”. It is needed to consider the difference between the sentence “Is this a box?” which may take place in a language lesson, and the line in MacBeth “Is this a dagger which I see before me?” In the drama/languages pilot simple dialogues with fixed content were given a huge variety of meaning through the imposition of different contexts. Students did this through use of body language, pitch, pace, tone, the use of silence.

Drama has not been previously considered as a useful method of teaching at a University level in Albania. It has just been used as a subject in itself looking only at its theoretical importance and analysis of plays, theme, subject, main idea, related ideas, messages, moral and figures of speech.

It has traditionally been taught only as a subject like other subjects to students who study English as a foreign language. My two colleagues, E. Subashi and E. Vukaj, who teach Drama like me to first and second year students asked me to share my relevant resource materials with them which I happily did and they were enthusiastic to discuss with me using drama as a method even in teaching other subjects in English.

The three of us used to participate in one another’s drama classes and discussed about our findings as reflective practitioners.

For example, I practised drama as a useful method in my business English classes (students played the roles of bank deposit officers and customers). But it turned out to create some problems with one of the groups.

One of the students could not answer the questions of his friend claiming to be the credit officer. He had not prepared the terms of the loan contract I had given them beforehand and failed to argue about meeting the criteria to being financially supported. The students understood that:

‘Drama needs sufficient knowledge about the topic and a certain level of language to cope with and use it successfully’. This was also one of the lessons learned during the process since the process of experimenting drama is more important than the objectives as set in the beginning of the class or expectation of outcomes.

In this context the researcher may often use a tableau as well to boost good communication skills of the students.

A tableau can be used to quickly establish a scene that involves a large number of characters. Because there is no movement, a tableau is easier to manage than a whole-group improvisation – yet can easily lead into extended drama activities. It can be used to explore a particular moment in a story or drama, or to replicate a photograph or artwork for deeper analysis.

My colleagues were curious to know and consequently asked: How do you do it? One of the ways of practical activity was:

Students stand in a circle, or around the performance area and a theme is given. One by one, they step into the space and establish still images in relation to one another until the tableau is complete.

At this point ‘thought tracking’ can be used to find out more about each of the characters. The scene can also be brought to life through improvisation, with the teacher clapping her hands to signal the beginning and end of the action.

Once students are familiar with the technique, they can also work in small groups on different aspects of a theme. The class can discuss each group’s tableau in turn, mentioning what they can see happening, what they would like to know more about and what they think could happen next. Afterwards, each group can comment on how these viewpoints compared with their initial intentions. Some of the examples well thought beforehand were analysed in the classroom.

### **1.1 Examples**

Students look at a painting or illustration of a historical scene that shows a selection of different characters. They bring it to life by representing the characters with their bodies.

Current Affairs/History: Small groups are given different newspaper reports of the same incident (or differing accounts of an historical event) and asked to produce as accurate a tableau as possible. This can be used to examine how events may be communicated differently according to the observer’s point of view.

For a more light-hearted activity, groups can devise a tableau on a specific theme, such as epic books or movies, famous locations or well-known historical events. The other students then try and guess what the tableau represents.

Groups can be asked to tell a story through a series of prepared still-images. This can be an effective method for students who are less inclined to improvise dialogue. The still images can also be brought to life through improvisation. Freeze-frames and still images can be usefully combined with Thought Tracking, Forum Theatre or Flashbacks and Flash Forwards.

Still images provide one of the most flexible methods of working in drama. They can easily be used across the curriculum, for example:

Groups can tell a story by using three images to create a beginning, middle and end.

You can help to improve students' vocabulary skills by asking them to illustrate a word or phrase in a story using a still image.

Fun can be had making group objects that turn from one thing into something else – for example Cinderella’s pumpkin turns into a coach, mice into horses, a rat into a coachman, and lizards into footmen.

In Science, groups can develop a series of images showing the process of metamorphosis (e.g. caterpillar to butterfly or frogspawn to frog).

The staging of a play in a foreign language offers a variety of opportunities for language acquisition.

Drama has always been used as a method in foreign language teaching: however, before I came to Birmingham I did not realise that sometimes I had been unknowingly using teaching methods that belong to drama!

Drama and languages have much in common. As curricular areas, both need their learners to be active, expressive and communicative participants. Using our strategies to teach the four skills of language helps learners to learn the mechanics, but using drama helps them to experience the language.

I have tried starting from listening to reading a story. This could be a piece of literature (short story/poem /extract from a novel or play text) or a newspaper article (news story /interview), film/television (drama/documentary) or even from reading just a picture or photograph. The stimulus makes the imagination work hard? and the 50 minutes of the lesson passes unexpectedly, usefully and effectively.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Teaching portfolios are a collection of evidence of development in teaching expertise. They can contain an unlimited variety of materials including lists of courses taught, teaching innovations, personal teaching philosophy, evidence of successes, evidence of engaging in professional development in teaching.

Evidence collected during drama classes and attempts to use drama methods creatively may lead to substantial improvement to practise referring to note taking time and again.

The analysis of findings during drama courses and qualitative nature of data gathered in the form of ‘understandings’ and ‘meanings’ were particularly useful but needed to be interpreted carefully.

The University of New South Wales' Postgraduate Program in Higher Education, the Australian

University Teaching and Learning course at the University of Western Australia; and the Graduate Diploma in Tertiary and Adult Education at Murdoch University incorporates a reflective practise approach. However, they all contain an inherent connection between reflection and action on a range of relevant aspects of teaching.

Two recent examples are the Reflective Teaching Practise for Staff Developers workshop by Mar Siksna (University of Queensland) held at the University of New England, 1996 and the Reflective Teaching workshop for academic staff by Anne Jasman at Murdoch University, 1996. Teaching philosophy and problem based learning methodology.

This research tries to explain that qualitative teacher research may be considered valid when it promotes transformation in practise which is evidence of learning. This occurs when teacher researchers are actively involved in learning while researching. The method involves the teacher setting the classroom activities so that students are engaged in a problem based learning methodology. This methodology then becomes both “a teaching strategy and a foundation for research.”

This research studies professional growth whilst directly engaged in practise-based inquiry.

Concurrently, it represents the contributions that drama teachers, as insiders in the field, can make to using drama as learning method through systematic research that informs practise.

Formerly a drama teacher and Head of Drama at QUT, Brad's current research investigates practised methodologies for researching the arts and creative practises, and evaluating the role of Drama and the arts in educating 'the creative workforce'.

Betty Jane Wagner summarizes recent research on drama in education and creative drama, featuring studies that show drama's effect on thinking, oral language, reading, and writing. Most of the studies answer the broad question, "Does classroom drama actually teach anything?" Wagner presents the best studies in both the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms.

According to Wagner "Process Drama and Multiple Literacies takes you inside classrooms where process drama successfully taps students' multiple literacies, integrates content from across the curricular areas, and develops students' social and critical awareness. These classrooms span a wide range of ages, and their stories will show you how this technique allows students to view the world from multiple perspectives by involving them in situations where they must make informed decisions.

And far from simple classroom plays, process dramas are conceived and enacted by students in response to the issues and questions raised by content in the classroom".

The image based study uses photographs to prompt reflection, interpretation and analysis. The use of different images as the image of a migrant mother, a street child begging for money or a violinist playing tunes in the street to earn the living have inspired the students to develop their own stories and improve their writing and communicative skills as well.

Putting the strategy into practice

This part is about the content of my research. It looks at an important social issue as that of 'Integration' and reasons of failure to build a really democratic society.

Teacher researchers should strive to be ethical by seeking safety for all involved, allowing for free and equal voice and minimizing power inequities.

The teacher should plan follow-up activities about the dramatizations and improvisations that allow for individual expression of the cooperative experience. The students can illustrate and write about the activity or poem. Future lessons can also include the dramatization and improvisation of short stories, fables, and plays. The same techniques and follow-up activities should be employed.

Collection of data about the process of change

It occurred to me as I watched the scenes and listened to the students recite passages, that they achieved a greater understanding of this event in a drama class than if they had silently read the entire chapter and subsequently answered questions.

They were actually walking carefully to ensure that the nitro-glycerine strapped to their backs did not explode (Reflective journal, December, 2007).

Students' reflections were carefully noted and reflected in day to day journals which were afterwards validated after a three weeks' time when the activity was organised again with another class. Some of the opinions of the students were expressed in their writing diaries as following:

'I think that we have more understanding of the lesson when we do activities like that because when we write notes and stuff I don't know about everybody else but I know that I can't stay focused and I have a lower level of understanding the lesson. Then again when we do stuff like we did this morning, I understand better because I had fun and it doesn't look like it but I actually concentrate and understand better. I think it gets too distracting when we are quietly writing a note because everyone jumps at every little noise! So, it gets really distracting and boring and annoying!

In other words, I like doing drama activities better and I think everyone else does too!

I had all students reflect on "learning English through drama" after our first morning together'.

Test day - I assumed the role of the employer as I handed out sheets. I told them that in Italy we were concerned about our people working as emigrants and suffering the consequences of any job discrimination.

I understood that some of them had concerns about the future of their families. I asked them to write me a letter explaining to me what their concerns were and what recommendations they would like me to take into account for a better handling of economic situations.

There was a further education for us as we read the reflections of the academically strong students in the class. Some of these "high-achievers" had taken special note, without any solicitation, of the unusual participation of their peers who were normally quiet or unsuccessful in their work. One student explained in her assessment:

-‘I suppose that this [doing drama] was less tiring, and more fun than writing notes. I know that I learn just as good by reading, but this was still an interesting idea. I did like the casual atmosphere, and the freedom to express our feelings creatively. The only thing that could have been improved would be to include more facts and information into the technique’.

I feel that if this could be met, it would be nearly perfect. Some of the less attentive students may be intrigued by the idea of learning through drama. In fact, they may not even realize that they're learning at all, but the information is more likely to "stick in their minds."

Many students in the class had taken note of surprising and new participation from their peers in the drama work and the subsequent breaking of old patterns and dynamics in the classroom.

Linthwaite, Lewis, Staton (2006) support that "Qualitative researchers try to be more useful, wanting to engage with the complexity of practise by developing a range of 'practise-based research' strategies such as action research, grounded theory and reflective practice".

According to Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) "Action research has been defined variously and there are many forms, arising from different epistemological bases. What the definitions have in common is that action research (like the one applied in drama classes) involves inquiring into one's own practice through a cyclical process which involves planning, acting, observing and reflecting". Major action research projects in tertiary teaching have been undertaken in several universities and include: the CUTL action research projects at the University of South Australia (Smith, 1994).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In a classroom where drama has been exploited, there is often, too, this experience of profound change for the participants. For the weaker students we tracked in a particular class, they had the surprising and necessary experience of success and in so doing became different learners and different people. Much educational research confirms that success begets success. What we could not have anticipated is the extent to which this success would change others' perceptions of their peers.

This reflective process is the equivalent of what psychologists have called “meta-cognition,” and psychotherapists have called, “psychological minded-ness.” Thinking about thinking—questioning assumptions, the meanings of words (semantics), the emotional power of images (semiotics), the way language and arguments are structured (rhetoric), looking at forms of personal and cultural self-deception (psychoanalysis and propaganda analysis)—this is an unending challenge to learning. Drama can help make learning a foreign language fun, and changing roles and using other dramatic approaches generate types of thinking that reflects greater mental and emotional maturity and flexibility.

Drama and narrative form work well together if the drama explores the story rather than merely acting it out.

But on the other side, acting out adds values to storytelling and text analysis.

Each time we leave a performance, we are reminded that theatre and dance are the most evanescent of art forms, and that what we have just seen can never be beheld again in the exact same way. Even if we should return the next night to repeat the aesthetic process, a second viewing cannot reproduce the reaction of the first because we have been changed, by both the production and by everything else that has happened to us in the interim (Taylor, 1996, 97).

Lifting the text from the book requires good knowledge of the structure of the language and masterful interpretation of even the implied meaning in order to express it in well pronounced sentences.

Rather than learning stories rote pupils should identify key images and important moments, and retell the story in their own words. Still images can be used to mark out those key moments, as can drawing storyboards and story maps or (for younger children) sorting pictures into the right order. It is well worth playing some games to develop oral skills and get the creative juices flowing. These can help to develop vocabulary, story-making and storytelling techniques. Still images need to be explored further in another research paper



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