

Using Drama with Children

According to the late John Haycraft, English Teaching Theatre (ETT) "...makes students aware that English is not just words, structures and idioms, but it is a lively, dramatic and versatile means of communication. It emphasizes too, that learning and teaching can and should be pleasurable" (Case and Wilson 2003, 4). Haycraft's observation about the usefulness of ETT applies equally well to the use of drama activities in general. Drama offers an excellent opportunity for students to develop fluency in English.

Drama is concerned with both the product (the performance) and the process of language learning. Using drama in the young learner (YL) classroom gives children who are shy when speaking a foreign language a character to "hide behind." *Dramatizing*, as Phillips (2000) suggests, is perhaps a better word for this than *drama*. Dramatizing means that the children become actively involved in a text. This personalization makes language more meaningful and memorable than drilling or mechanical repetition.

Why use drama activities?

Drama helps children to activate language and have fun. Using drama ac-

tivities has clear advantages for language learning. It encourages children to speak and gives them the chance to communicate, even with limited language, using nonverbal communication, such as body movements and facial expressions. The use of drama can reduce the pressure that students feel, so they become ready to talk sooner. A number of other factors also make drama a powerful tool in the language classroom. Reading dialogue aloud from a textbook is different from acting out the same dialogue. Drama involves children at many levels—through their bodies, minds, emotions, language, and social interaction.

Drama motivates children.

Dramatizing a text is motivating, and it's fun. The same activity can be done at different levels, which means that all the children can do it successfully. Most children like drama activities. English language skills will be developed successfully if students are motivated.

When designing an activity, the most important consideration is probably the degree of interest and involvement it generates. I planned a drama program for a group of 17 pupils from a primary school; the average age was 9 years. Prior to embarking on this drama pro-

gram, I surveyed learners to determine their motivation for studying English. I wanted to find out what they liked doing in English class so that I could select activities that appealed to them and would motivate them. In response to my survey, all of the learners indicated that they liked playing games and watching videos in the English language classroom. Pupils also liked very much working in a big group, dramatizing, doing a project.

Learners seem to become more motivated about language learning when a video is involved. Drama activities are among the favourites. So why not use video in drama activities?

It is known that young learners are mostly visual learners. Therefore visual support is of high importance. Drama plus video stimulate the imagination of the pupils, and video materials give language learners visual support, which helps primary school students learn.

Drama is familiar to children.

Dramatizing is part of children's lives from an early age. They play at being adults in situations that are part of their lives. Many of these day-to-day situations are predictable. Children try out different roles in make-believe play. They rehearse the language and the "script" of the situation and experience the emotions involved, knowing that they can switch back to reality whenever they want to.

Such pretend play prepares children for the real-life situations they will meet later on: it is a rehearsal of the real thing. Make-believe encourages their creativity and develops their imagination and at the same time gives them the opportunity to use language that is outside their daily needs. Language teachers can use this natural desire to act out situations by asking students to pretend to be Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, or a robber and to use all the language that grows out of that personality or role.

Drama helps children build confidence.

By taking on a role, children can escape from their everyday identity and lose their inhibitions. This is useful with children who are shy about speaking in general and especially shy about using English, or who don't like joining in group activities. If you give these children special roles, it encourages them to be those characters and to abandon their shyness or embarrassment. This is especially true when you use puppets and masks. The teacher can

use roles to encourage children who would otherwise hold back and to control children who dominate the weaker ones.

Drama helps children build skills in group dynamics.

Children often work in groups or pairs when dramatizing. Children have to make decisions as a group, listen to each other, and value each other's suggestions. They have to cooperate to achieve their aims, find ways of settling their differences, and use the strength of each member of the group.

Drama is appropriate for children's different learning styles.

Dramatizing appeals to all kinds of learners. We receive and process information in different ways; the main ones are through sight, hearing, and our physical bodies. One of these channels tends to be dominant in each of us. When children dramatize, they use all the channels, and each child will draw on the one that suits him or her best. This means all the children in a class will be actively involved in the activity, and the language will "enter" through the channel most appropriate for each of them.

All drama activities can be used at a variety of levels. Even if an activity is designed to be an elementary activity, it can be enjoyable for intermediate or more advanced students; conversely, even a drama activity designed for intermediate students may be used with elementary students. You will naturally choose activities and plays that are generally age appropriate and appropriate for your students' level, and also perhaps because the chosen activities help to reinforce the practise of particular language areas from the course you are teaching.

Language personalization

Dramatizing allows children to add an emotion or personality to a text that they have read or listened to. Take any word, sentence, or short dialogue (two to four lines) and ask children to practise saying it "in character." By interpreting the words, children make them their own. This also makes language memorable. Children especially enjoy interpreting the words with a puppet in hand.

Language in context

In the classroom, we often expose children to small bits of language, such as individual words, rather than whole phrases or "chunks." When speaking, children are not often asked

to combine the different structures they are learning. Drama is an ideal way to encourage children to guess the meaning of unknown language in a context, which often makes meaning clear. Similarly, children will need to use a mixture of language structures and functions if they are to communicate successfully.

Cross-curricular content

When using drama, your aims can be more than linguistic. You can use topics from other subjects. For example, children can act out scenes from history. You can work on ideas and issues that run through the curriculum, such as respect for the environment, and road safety. For example, last year for school project week, we joined efforts with a biology teacher, and the students acted out a fairy tale about flowers.

Important messages can be conveyed and explored through sketches and role plays. Drama can also be used to introduce the culture of the new language through stories and customs and with a context for working on different kinds of behaviour.

The pace of the lesson

Drama can add a change of pace or mood to the classroom. It is especially appropriate for young learner's short attention spans. Dramatizing is learner-centered, so you can use it to contrast with the more teacher-centered parts of your lesson. It is active, so you can use it to make a class more lively after quieter or individual work.

Practical advice on using drama in the classroom

Choose the right activity

When planning drama activities, teachers should take into account: (1) the learners' interests, (2) the learners' needs, (3) the learners' ages, (4) and even the time of the day.

If an activity doesn't correspond to students' interests, if the learners are tired because they had a physical training lesson or a test right before the activity, it could be waste of time. Drama activities should not emphasize accuracy and fluency; instead, focus on practising language. Listen-and-do activities are the solution.

Start small

Not all children are good at acting, especially if drama is not part of their first language curriculum. But most children like drama activities. Introduce drama into your classroom in

small steps. Start with easy, guided activities (miming), and move on to less controlled activities (plays) as the children gain confidence.

Total Physical Response (TPR) activities are an excellent way to introduce dramatization: have children respond to language with their bodies, a first step to miming and acting.

Help children realize that they can say things in different ways: loudly, quietly, angrily, sadly. (It's a good way to explore the power of their voices.) Choose one word and say it in different ways. (The children need to see that you are enthusiastic about dramatizing.) Next have the children choose words and practise saying them in many different ways. This could be done as a kind of competition; children enjoy this activity.

Give feedback

Drama is an enjoyable way for young EL learners to practise using English. Give feedback on what the children have done, not only the end product and language but also the process they went through, the way they cooperated with each other, and how they came to decisions. Always find something positive to comment on.

For participation in a drama activity, and especially in a performance, you can give colourful, specially designed certificates to the young actors: "This certificate is awarded to ___ for the way he/she acted/presented/danced/..."

Classroom drama activities

Listen-and-do activities can be part of almost any lesson. Such activities help children:

- to acquire English by listening to instructions;
- to be active and enjoy doing things in English;
- to use nonverbal clues (e.g., gestures) to interpret meanings;
- to get used to understanding general meaning;
- to prepare for spoken interaction;
- to absorb good pronunciation and intonation patterns.

Some other drama activities that students enjoy are outlined below.

Miming practise

Students learn gestures to go with words that are repeated in a story. Then, as the teacher

reads the story aloud, the children do the actions when they hear the key words.

1. Select a story with repeated words such as the story of *The Big Cat in the Big House* (below).
2. Select gestures to go with the repeated words.

Big	Starting above your head, trace a big circle with your hands
Cat	Show gestures like cats washing themselves, licking a paw
House	Draw a house in the air
Long	Stretch both arms out straight to make a long "line"
Tail	Wave an arm behind your back like a cat's tail
Happy	Mime that you are happy
Hair	Point to your hair or touch your hair
Small	With your hands, trace a small circle above the floor.
Sad	Mime that you are sad
3. Teach students gestures for the repeated words.
4. Slowly read the story aloud, and have students do the appropriate gestures as they hear each repeated word.

The Big Cat in the Big House

Once upon a time there lived a *big* cat in a *big* house.

The *big* cat had *long* black hair and a very *long*, *long* tail.

The cat was very *happy* that it was very *big*.

Next door to the *big* cat there lived a *small* mouse in a *small* house.

The mouse was very *small* and so was its house.

The *small* mouse was very *sad* that it was very, very *small*.

Miming stories

Students will willingly compose their own story. They welcome the chance to show what they can do with the language.

1. Give students a list of words you want them to know or to review. For example, *heart, friend, apple, eat, tired*.

2. Ask students to compose a story using the words.
3. When they have finished writing their story, have students take turns miming their stories while the rest of the class tries to guess the whole story.

Miming game

Children use actions or gestures to indicate a word and other students guess the word. This game can be played in teams (one team shows the actions and asks the other team to guess what the words might be) or as a big group (one student shows/mimes and the others guess).

1. Make a set of miming cards based on the content that students have been studying. For example, if 7-year-olds have been studying the names of farm animals, you can prepare cards with the names or pictures of farm animals (goat, cow, hen, etc.) on each card.
2. Next have a student select a card and pantomime the item on the card.
3. The other students guess what is being mimed.

Variation: Write down the names of different characters from stories that the students have been reading. The name of one character should be written on each card. For example, Tom Sawyer in *Huckleberry Finn*. Each student selects a card, then writes a few sentences from the point of view of the character. The student then reads the sentences aloud, using the mannerism, tone of voice, etc. of the selected character. The rest of the class guesses who the character is.

Transform stories into mini plays

1. Choose a simple story that students have been studying, such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."
2. Create a script for the story with as many parts as there are students in your class. Note that you can have several students playing the same part. For instance, you could have three different students playing the role of Goldilocks.
3. Have students practise learning the different parts.
4. Have students prepare costumes and props.
5. Put on the play for other classes and/or parents.

Student versions of dramatic productions

As watching videos is among my students' favourite activities, I try to use videos often and exploit them as much as possible. There are many variations for the use of video. Here are a few:

- Students watch a fragment, a video sequence with no sound, and guess what happens. Students then create a dramatic scene based on what they have watched. Students then watch the video sequence with sound and compare and contrast their version with the video.
- Students don't watch, but only listen and try to guess what happens and where the events take place. Students then create a dramatic sequence based on what they have heard. Students then watch the video sequence and compare and contrast their version with the video.
- Students watch only a very short fragment and then predict its continuation. Students then act out the continuation. Students then watch the continuation and compare their continuation with the video.

Conclusion

The use of drama activities has a definite place in the YL classroom. Such activities provide meaningful and enjoyable language practise, and they encourage learners to explore the wonderful world of the English language through drama. Drama activities also develop students' intelligence by stimulating their imagination and creativity. The more drama the children do, the better language learners they will become.

References

- Case D., and K. Wilson. 2003. *English sketches*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.
- Phillips, S. 2000. *Drama with children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GALINA ZALTA teaches English at Purvciems Secondary School in Riga, Latvia. She has been teaching English since 1993 and teaches both primary and basic school students.