

Drama and ESL Teaching C. Glock

In 1989 I conducted a minor research project with foreign students. The aim of the project (Glock, 1989) was to begin to assess the validity of developing communicative competence in English as a Second Language, (ESL), students through experiential drama. Parts of this project have been documented in the NADIE Journal (1991, 16-24) and in a book (to be published in 1993 by Peter Lang, Frankfurt) which focuses on using drama in teaching English as a Foreign Language and as a Second Language.

In this paper I will discuss some of the issues which emerged during the project in relation to the work that I am currently undertaking with ESL students.

In the paper I refer to three different groups of students:

Group A: students with whom I worked in the major part of my 1989 project. They were classified by their regular teacher as early-intermediate to intermediate language learners.

Group B: students with whom I worked to trial drama materials prior to the 1989 project. They were considered by their regular teacher to be advanced language learners.

Group C: students with whom I am currently working (1992). They are mainly intermediate language learners working on the Tasmanian Certificate of Education Stage 3 ESL Syllabus (Schools Board of Tasmania, 1991).

When I conducted the project, I worked with students (Group A) with whom I was unfamiliar. I went into their classroom for a limited time, conducted the drama session and left. I was not with the students for their regular language program, nor did I witness follow up work or planned and incidental outcomes of the drama experiences. Evaluations were made through observations and reflections upon the students' behaviour and participation during the practical sessions only. I knew that the students were developing confidence and oral language skills in contextual situations. However, I was unable to further develop these skills, or to maximise the potential for communicative development, because a week usually passed before I worked with the students again. The trust and rapport I had built up with students had to be reestablished each time I visited. These were not ideal conditions in which to trial and evaluate a drama program, but at the time I considered myself fortunate to be offered a target group with which to work. I am now in a position in which the language experiences I offer to students are more cohesive. I am able to make accurate judgements about students' work and participation and about the effectiveness of particular methods of teaching, including drama.

In 1992 I am working in a senior secondary college in Launceston, Tasmania and am teaching the English as a Second Language program for students of Non English Speaking Background (NESB). I work with these students for five or ten hours per week, depending on their timetable commitments and needs. I am therefore able to plan extended experiences with appropriate follow-up and to carefully monitor the students' progress.

There are students of twelve nationalities in the group, so there is no common mother-tongue language: we have to speak English! The nationalities are: Chinese (Cantonese language), Japanese, Korean, Maldivian (Dhivehi language), Vietnamese, Thai, Iranian (Persian language), Dutch, Swiss

(German language), Lithuanian, Danish and Norwegian. The students also have a wide range of language ability, and for most of the year this diverse group of people has worked together in one class. Clearly, it has been vital to provide experiences which would allow students to learn and develop at their own pace and levels of ability. Experiential drama has been an ideal medium for allowing such individual progress.

Experiential Drama

Experiential drama is concerned with students' ability to imaginatively place themselves in another person's situation and to express ideas and feelings through communicating with other people in a variety of agreed upon contexts. It has been recognised that drama can play a significant role in developing language skills (Parsons and others, 1984).

Drama

Children need opportunities to use language in a variety of contexts and

for many different purposes. Language in the classroom is bound by the classroom context. The implicit or explicit rules of appropriate behaviour for both the teacher and the children dictate the style of language and the purposes for which language is used. In drama the children and teacher can take on roles which make other kinds of language and social interaction possible; the classroom is transformed, in imagination, to some other situation, place and time. By assuming a role and identifying with other people and other times, children develop contexts for language outside the usual classroom situation. (Education Department of Tasmania, 1985, 22). Through working in such imaginative situations students, of all ages, are given opportunities to use language in believable contexts, in many registers and for a variety of purposes. These ideas also apply to students who are learning English as a Second Language, and could be broadly categorised as a communicative approach to second language learning.

There are many barriers to be overcome in working with ESL students. For example, expectations exert a powerful influence, particularly when working with adult students.

Student expectations

Gilhotre and Callender state that:

From life experiences, an adult may have developed certain attitudes which cause him or her to resist new information as threatening to preconceived ideas (1985, 11).

Such attitudes may initially result in resistance to communicative approaches, as students feel that they are wasting time chatting and 'doing' activities which have little to do with real language learning, (Bassano, 1986, 13). Adult students have frequently been conditioned to believe that a formal approach, involving drilling, repetition and written exercises, is more appropriate for their situations than a communicative approach. This conditioning often comes through their past school experiences, their involvement in traditional ESL programs or their perceptions of their specific needs (Leeson, 1975, 185). However Breen and

Candlin comment that student expectations can be educated (1980, 95). Similarly, Nunan (1988, 18), argues that if the teacher is convinced about the efficacy of the program, it is sensible to devise experiences which will convince the students of its worth.

In the early stages of my program (1992) I encountered resistance to communicative approaches from some of my current students (Group C). This was particularly evident among those students who had been articulate communicators in their first language. They were impatient to develop this same level of communication in the second language, so that they could function at an 'appropriate' level in their new society. They really wanted to sit at grammatical exercises and receive regular drilling and repetitive oral work. Involvement in a developed drama context, however, generally convinces students that the language experience is worthwhile. They are aware of their personal commitment and involvement in 'real' language. The reluctant students soon realised that the language they were using in developed contexts was far more natural and spontaneous than the language required for textbook exercises. It was more like the language they would use when communicating in real life.

Previous experience

Students' experience in their first language does have implications within the second language program. Their previous communicative competence affects their willingness to take risks, to think beyond superficial concepts and to express their thoughts and feelings in interactional situations. Breen and Candlin (1980) and Swan (1985) state that students should be given credence for the knowledge about communication that they bring to the language class. Often their previous understanding of communication is ignored and learning of the new language is imposed upon them, as if communication were something completely unfamiliar to them. Swan (1985, 5) states that: 'Foreigners have mother tongues: they know as much as we do about how human beings communicate.'

My current group of students includes a mechanical engineer, a university professor, a medical technician, three young mothers, a nurse/social worker, a refugee, a Christian pastor and full-time students of varying

ages. Communication has clearly been a necessary and integral part of their lives. They are aware of the importance of mutually understood interactions. They have vastly differing life experiences to bring to the class, various levels of schooling and academic ability and varying needs and expectations of what the course will provide for them. They are communicators but in a new environment they lack the verbal symbols (Gilhotre and Callender, 1985, 11) to convey their ideas and feelings. They need to feel the roots of familiarity in their language encounters. Since language is so much a part of our feeling of being at home, that aspect of it becomes a pedagogical context for any consideration of methodology and curriculum planning (Winning, 1992, 5). ESL teachers have a responsibility to help students to feel 'at home' in their new language.

Teacher expectations

I believe that in my initial project (1989) my expectations of students underestimated their abilities to utilise their language beyond basic daily requirements. Perhaps patronisingly, I concentrated on the issue that I and countless other ESL educators considered essential: survival. I did not realise that to feel 'at home' students needed to move beyond their functional needs. They also needed to be able to express their thoughts and feelings.

During the project I introduced drama at a superficial level. Because I did not know the students and their capabilities, I did not exploit the medium to its full potential. The dramas conducted were concerned with routine life and primary needs: visiting a hospital, going on a picnic, shopping, and so on. The students were actively involved and certainly used language for a variety of purposes in meaningful contexts, but the content dictated the level of language use. There was a lack of developed meaning, intellectual engagement and aesthetic response.

I now realise that this was not entirely attributable to the students' capabilities and stages of learning, but to the challenges that were offered. I had assumed that if students were at an early stage of language learning they would only be able to offer responses at a simplistic level and that, as they developed drama and linguistic skills, they could be challenged at a higher intellectual level. I have now recognised that students' linguistic competence is not reflective of their levels of thought. Although this seems to be an obvious concept, it receives scant attention in ESL literature or teaching materials. It has become increasingly evident to me, however, as I have worked with the current diverse group of students developing close and trusting relationships. They harbour deep feelings and emotions which often remain unexpressed because of a lack of confidence in the new language. I am aware of students' own sense of inadequacy in this regard.

Communicating feelings

Many of my students keep a daily journal in which they write about their lives, special events and feelings. Feelings, particularly, seem to present the biggest language barrier for students. For example, a student recently wrote: 'Today I feel very sad but I can't find the words to write about it.' When I talked with her later I discovered that she was undergoing a significant emotional upheaval. She had no-one with whom she could discuss it in her own language, and was not sufficiently familiar with her new language to write down the personal, intense feelings that were in her head. Orally, she could talk to me with confidence and was relieved to have this opportunity, even though she was too shy to initiate the topic. I have encountered many similar situations during this year. For example, a student whose mother is dying of cancer in her home country; a mature woman who thought she may be pregnant at forty eight years old; a sixteen year old boy whose host family wanted to move him out of the house and a young girl who did not know how to cope with a friend who was making improper suggestions.

Many of the students are not sure of the social and ethical implications of these situations. Some of them come from cultural situations in which the open expression of feelings is discouraged. They are therefore left

alone to dwell on these thoughts and emotional crises. This can only increase their sense of alienation. One way of overcoming this problem is

to introduce drama contexts which encourage the use of language at abstract levels. In such contexts students use language to express ideas and feelings through analagous situations.

Winning (1992, 2) discusses the process of migration as '...one of disagreeable alienation. It is harsh in its lack of familiarity.' In recognition of this sense of alienation I structured a drama experience which would enable students to express their feelings about the problems of fitting into a new culture and about leaving 'known' things behind.

The following pages describes the drama structure and the implementation of this structure with Group B (advanced learners) and shows how some parts of the drama were approached with Group C (current students).

The structure is a framework for working through a number of language experiences with students. It is intended to be open and flexible. It is expected that different responses and outcomes will occur for each implementation.

Drama Description

Leaving home

As an introduction to this drama, a session in which students are given practice in looking at and describing people, particularly in relation to characteristics, attitudes and feelings would be valuable.

Using a picture of a person, a story is built up about his background by the teacher asking questions around the group who are seated in a circle. e.g. What is his name? How old is he? Where is his home country? Why did he come to Australia? What sort of work do you think he will do? Tell me something about his family. Questioning continues until a reasonable amount of information has been gathered. This information is retold to the students as a reinforcement of their ideas.

Students, still seated in a circle, take on the role of the character developed above. They are asked questions one by one to build up more personal details. How long have you been in Australia? Do you have any family here? Tell me about any family members that you have left behind. What is your favourite Australian food? What do you like best about Australia? Tell me about the friends you have made? Why do you like or dislike the Australians you have met so far? How do you feel about leaving your country? What do you miss most about it?, and so on. Again this information is retold to students to reinforce ideas and to build up a comprehensive picture of the character.

Students are asked to sketch the most important thing that they have brought with them from their country, still in the role of the initial character. Students share these drawings with another person, explaining the importance of the item. Some of these responses may be shared with the group, students telling about their own or their partner's drawing. At this stage students are developing their own stories.

Changing partners, students, still in role tell another person what they like most about Australia and the incident or circumstance that has given them most problems.

Students write a diary entry for a particular night which focuses on the information built up in the previous storying.

Reflection:

What do you think this person felt in this situation?

Why?

What did/could he do about it?

How do people feel....?

Have you/anyone else been in a similar situation?

How did you feel...?

Have you ever felt like that before?

What did you do about it?

What could you do about it? and so on.

Drama implementation

The following documentation of the implementation of the drama experiences with two groups demonstrates the potential of challenging students to express their feelings when working in imaginative situations. The vital element is that students developed the personal situations co-operatively and therefore the context held a group meaning as well as individual meaning for each student. The language utilised by students reflected these meanings and allowed them to communicate on an affective level.

Implementation of drama with Group B

The students had no previous experience in drama, but I gave them no specific instructions. I merely told them that together we were going to make up a story.

A picture of a man was used as a starting point.

Students sat in a circle and were asked questions, one by one, to build up a story about the man and his circumstances.

The students understood that they were to offer imaginary information about the character in the picture and cooperatively created the following story which I then retold to them as a record and reinforcement of the information that they had offered:

The man's name is Peter. He came from Yugoslavia ten years ago looking for a better life for himself and his family. He has a wife and two children, but he left them in Yugoslavia so that he could work to build up a home before they arrived. In Yugoslavia he was a farm worker, so when he arrived in Australia he looked for work on the land. Things have not eventuated quite as he hoped, however. Ever since he arrived in Australia he has worked for a farmer who is not paying the correct wages, and is very hard on his workers, many of whom are migrants. Because they are mostly unskilled and uneducated they are afraid to challenge the boss about their conditions, or to venture into other areas seeking employment. There is a sense of dissatisfaction among the farm workers, but they do not know what to do. Peter, particularly, is sad and angry because he has not seen his family for ten years and cannot see any prospect of his circumstances improving in the near future so that he can bring them to be with him once

again. He also feels guilty about leaving them to fend for themselves without his financial or emotional support. The best aspect of his life in Australia is the development of close friendships.

The retelling was important in modelling more sophisticated language than the students had offered whilst using the information that they had developed together.

All students were enrolled as Peter and questions were asked around the circle, so that they could further develop the story, this time from the personal viewpoint of the character that they had created. The questions in this part of the drama were generally related to the feelings of the character. This changed the language emphasis from a concrete mode to a more abstract mode. The following are examples of the questions that were asked:

How do you feel about being away from your family?

How long do you think you can go on in this situation?

What did you hope to gain from your new life in Australia?

Why did you leave Yugoslavia?

How do you feel about your boss?

How has life in Australia been for you?

What are the best things about living in Australia?

What is the greatest problem you have had to face?

What do you particularly miss from life in Yugoslavia?

What do you think life might be like in other parts of Australia?

Students understood that they had taken on a role, and responded from the viewpoint of that character, basing their responses on the information that had previously been developed about Peter, rather than bringing in new ideas which could be contradictory to the original story. Students spontaneously changed from the third person 'he' to the first person 'I' when they were questioned in role. Responses tended to be emotive and to reflect the anger, guilt and frustration of a man struggling to improve his existence in this new country as suggested in the story. These ideas also emerge in the writing documented later.

Still in the role of Peter, but working individually, students were asked to sketch the most important object that they had brought with them from Yugoslavia as a souvenir or a symbol of their past life. They were then asked to work with a partner and explain the significance of this object. Students then shared with the group the stories told to them by their partners. Students sketched the following:

- a packet of soil brought from home
- an old pocket watch with a picture of the family inside the hinged lid
- a picture of the family in front of a simple cottage in a setting of hills and trees
- a gold pocket watch on a chain, open, with the words on the face, 'Rolex, Yugoslavia, Quartz'
- a fountain pen inscribed with the words 'Peter with Love'
- a multi-coloured tasselled scarf, depicted with striped wavy blocks of

colour, suggesting a
handwoven effect
- an item of jewellery

When students explained the significance of the objects to another person, stories evolved which added richness and depth to Peter's history. For example, the scarf had been a gift from Peter to his wife when they were courting, and had been among her most treasured possessions. Peter had brought it with him so that he could remember their times together, and feel a bond with her despite their separation. When he was lonely he would take out the scarf and reflect on happier times and family life. All of the objects had similar sentimental associations. When students were later asked to undertake a writing task, reference to these objects featured in their writing. This suggested that through making an in-role commitment to the object by sketching it and then discussing it, it had acquired a special significance for them.

Students' writing

Students were asked to imagine that it was the end of a hard day on the farm and they were lying in bed reflecting on their existence. They felt a need to write about how they were feeling at that moment. Three examples of students' writing only are included here, and are discussed mainly in relation to their abstract qualities. The work is presented unedited, as it was recorded by the students.

This sample has a poetic tone, which contributes to the poignant sense of hopelessness and isolation. The object he drew was the gold watch with a picture inside.

A day's work done. Nothing else to do except staring at the infinite heaven. There's no moon tonight. The stars are shining bright but not for me. Again, I think of home. I took out my precious watch and on the cover, I saw the same photo I see every lonely night. The surrounding was quiet except it was broken once a while by the sound of the crickets and my sigh. On the picture, I saw our happy family.

The following sample is also written in a poetic style. The student used symbolism and imagery in likening their loosening bonds to dry soil which cannot hold together. His drawing was of the packet of soil.

My dearest,

I always dream of you. So I smell and taste a pack of soil which I have brought from our lovely home. Since the soil lacks water it, like our situation, is loose. I don't want to see this situation. So I use my tears to make it wet, to tighten our love.

The final sample of writing included in this section is in the form of a journal entry. The writer is agonising over his situation and the guilt he feels in deserting his family. His depth of feeling is suggested by his use of punctuation, despite its grammatical inaccuracy, and by his repetitive pleas for guidance. Many factual elements from the original story appear in this sample. This demonstrates that the writer has understood and retained the initial information built up by the group, and that he has synthesised parts of it into a new context, which is his own.

Dear Journal,

What shall I do!! Shall I find a new job or remain where I am. Oh no, I wish God in heaven will help me. For this ten years, I have been for nothing since I left my family. I'm really ashamed of myself. Oh well, what shall I do!!! I have been thinking for a couple of days. Today, I received another letter back from home saying that they are shortage of money. Even, the boss haven't pay our wages for last weeks yet. What shall I do!! I hoped I would die instead of thinking all these problem. Goodnight Journal.

Implementation of drama with Group C

Using the same structure my current students (1992) created a story about an immigrant from Czechoslovakia. He had been in Australia for a couple of years, working to set things up for his family. He had started to build a house for them, but was very lonely and isolated by his foreignness and language problems. To compound this he had just found out that his daughter was very sick in hospital in Czechoslovakia and he desperately wanted to be with her, but couldn't raise the money to travel home. The students sketched and discussed similar precious objects to those offered by Group B: photographs, jewellery, letters, family souvenirs.

Student's writing

The following is one students' diary entry in the role of Ian, the migrant, as he reflects on his situation.

When I was get home from work place I was feeling very tired and bored because I worried so much about my daughter. She has been sick. I haven't got any information from my wife a week ago. I was waiting. I though that she will ring to me today or tomorrow then I was go to take a shower and cooking for dinner but I was just get the bathroom, the telephone rang. I though my wife ring to me, but it were not. It was from my friend. He asked about the job. I was go to the bathroom again but the telephone rang again. I though sure that is from my wife but one more time I was hopeless. It were from my boss. He said I was look very tired today. I should stay home tomorrow for relax because know I worried so much about my daughter then I was thank you to him. About half an hour later, I was still on the chair to thinking about my daughter. I was not worried about go to work tomorrow because I could stay home. The telephone rang again. I was hurry to hand up the telephone then I heard my wife's voice. I was not to say hello to her. I asked about my daughter. My wife said:"She is OK now. It will be go away next few days." I was sing a song. I went to take a shower and have dinner. I was ring to my boss and told to him: "I will go to work tomorrow because my daughter is OK now."

The writing was from a Vietnamese student who generally had problems with making himself understood, orally and in writing. He had made little commitment to written tasks and certainly had not undertaken any extended writing. Despite the grammatical and syntactical errors, however, his meaning is clear and evokes sympathy and understanding in the reader. He

was motivated by the context, and his own understanding of the feelings of the character, and was able to express his ideas with confidence.

Reflection on students' writing

Previously I had believed that the advanced students were able offer their abstract, heartfelt responses because of their superior linguistic experience and abilities. However, it is clear that this less experienced student is quite capable of formulating his thoughts and feelings in his second language. He is also able to communicate them to an audience. In some ways, his response, whilst it is possibly not as poetic or articulate, creates more dramatic meaning. For example, he sits quietly on the chair after his boss's phone call, thinking of his situation. He sings when he hears the good news about his daughter. I believe that such responses are representative of the frequently unexpressed feelings of migrants in similar situations of alienation.

The key to the the type of language can be found, I believe, in the developed context which was created through the drama situation and the deepening of the participants' personal understanding of and involvement with the situation, through storying at various levels. The context was created by the students and the teacher, working co-operatively, and the language challenges were posed within this developed and meaningful context. At the same time there was an expectation that the students would be able to make responses within the context of the drama.

Conclusion

I believe that learning experiences which enable students to communicate at an abstract level, should be set from the outset of a communicative language program. If this occurs students, even if they prefer a traditional program, are likely to attempt to communicate their personal meanings, regardless of their perceptions of their language competence. When such meanings are communicated successfully, as they may be in a drama, or indeed any developed and meaningful language context, students will be encouraged to try out language in registers and situations that they would not usually encounter.

Drama is a valuable medium in which to introduce positive and relevant learning experiences with the aim of fostering communicative competence. It also has the potential for extending language learners into abstract thinking and communication. When students can express ideas and feelings at their personal levels of intellectual development without fear of failing, their sense of alienation may be decreased so that they learn to live through and become at home in their new language.

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