

Something Happens: Process Drama in the Language Classroom

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Résumé

Pour qu'un enseignement de langue soit efficace, il est préférable qu'il ait la qualité d'un dialogue ordinaire. Or, dans les classes de langues, il est rare de trouver des dialogues authentiques et des fonctions de langue complexes. En effet, ces caractéristiques dialogiques émergent dans la durée lors de vraies rencontres. C'est ce type de rencontres que le *Process Drama* vise à instaurer en classe. Le *Process Drama* est une invitation à imaginer en action un monde commun, c'est là sa force pédagogique. En sollicitant leur imagination et leurs capacités langagières pour co-créeer un monde fictionnel, les élèves établissent de nouveaux rapports avec leurs camarades et leur enseignant. Le *Process Drama* est à la fois susceptible d'avoir un impact positif sur les relations entre élèves et professeur et de créer des contextes riches pour la pratique et l'apprentissage des langues.

Abstract

Effective teaching is likely to have the quality of a dialogue. Authentic dialogue and complex language functions rarely arise in second language classrooms, since these functions arise from necessary and sustained encounters. It is these encounters that Process Drama aims to generate. The power of Process Drama lies in its invitation to active participation in an imagined world. As students use their imaginations and exercise their existing language capacities to co-create the dramatic world, they will respond to the teacher and to their classmates' contributions in a different way. Process Drama is likely to have a positive impact on the relationship between students and teacher as well as providing rich contexts for language use and development.

Mots-clés : *Process Drama*, contextes, imagination

Keywords : Process Drama, contexts, imagination

HAMLET ACT I

Scene I. Elsinore. A platform before the Castle.

[Francisco at his post. Enter Bernardo.]

Bernardo: Who's there?

Francisco: Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.

Bernardo: Long live the king!

Francisco: Bernardo?

Bernardo: He.

Francisco: You come most carefully upon your hour.

Bernardo: 'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.

Francisco: For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.

Bernardo: Have you had quiet guard?

Francisco: Not a mouse stirring.

Bernardo: Well, good night.

Dialogue is at the heart of drama and theatre and since the time of Socrates we have known that effective teaching is also likely to have the quality of a dialogue. Any authentic dialogue will have a context, participants and interaction between them. The dialogue above immediately establishes with great economy a dramatic world, an 'elsewhere'. Well, we'd expect that of Shakespeare! From this eleven-line dialogue we manage to pick up a surprising amount of detail. We learn that two men are fulfilling their task of keeping guard in a kingdom. It is midnight and extremely cold. The night has been quiet, but there is an atmosphere of growing tension and foreboding. All this is revealed to us, not through clumsy exposition, as might be the case in the hands of a lesser playwright, but by simple but highly dramatic dialogue. The scene immediately provokes in us a powerful interior dialogue between imagination and expectation. We try to piece together the clues in the unfolding drama as we struggle to find meaning in what we see and hear on the stage.

Is there a way in which we can elicit from our students the same kind of effect, whether in their first or second languages, in order to promote communication in the classroom? The challenge is to generate in our classrooms the kinds of dialogues that invite imagination, expectation and speculation, and that demand all the students' linguistic resources. I believe that Process Drama is the most effective way to achieve our aims. (O'Neill, C. 1995 ; Kao and O'Neill, 1998). The power of Process Drama lies in its invitation to an immediate and active

participation in an imagined world. It engages us in a very similar mental effort to that which is asked of us at the theatre. It is essentially a social event, one that depends on debate and dialogue. The students in a second language classroom will suffer from some very obvious limitations in terms of language competence. Classroom discourse, even when conducted in the students' first language, rarely offers opportunities to exercise complex language functions, since these functions arise from personal, sustained and intensive encounters. It is these sustained and intensive encounters that Process Drama aims to generate.

Theatre and process drama both depend on imagination – the imagination of those who watch and those who perform in theatre, and the imaginations of all the participants who become involved in Process Drama. Like theatre, Process Drama relies on our ability to pretend. Actors, audience and participants all pretend that the fictional worlds they are engaged with possess some reality. It's worth remembering that 'to pretend' has another meaning – it means to aspire to something, to have pretensions beyond the actual state of events. Involvement in drama turns participants into pretenders-'pretendants'. The purpose is not just to involve them in imaginary roles and situations, but also to give them a sense of their own potential and to encourage their aspirations. The same thing is true in a more limited way when we engage in role-play.

Theatre and drama are acts of social engagement. The harder we must work to discover emerging meanings, the greater will be our commitment to the event. Shallow scripts, banal themes, an explicit 'message' and the absence of any irony or ambiguity will all limit the space in which the imagination can operate. Perhaps most importantly, teachers themselves must be imaginatively engaged in what they are offering their students: Kieran Egan (1992) even suggests that learning how to engage students' imaginations in every aspect of the curriculum should have a "central place in teacher-preparation programs" (p. 114).

Key Features of Process Drama

- The purpose of Process Drama is to generate a dramatic world, a fictional context.
- The experience does not depend on an existing script or scenario.
- Process Drama involves an extended exploration of the context.
- It is built up from a series of episodes.
- It occurs over a time-span that allows for elaboration.
- It involves the whole group in the same enterprise.
- There is no formal audience; participants are the audience to their own acts.
- Outcomes are not determined in advance.
- The teacher will function actively both inside and outside the dramatic context.

It is this last characteristic that gives Process Drama much of its power. The invaluable strategy of Teacher-in-Role is a hallmark of this approach to drama and clearly distinguishes it from other more limited methodologies. Brief role-plays and task-based activities are likely to leave the teacher on the outside, working as a facilitator, organising the class, setting tasks, and supporting and evaluating the students' efforts. However, as well as these valuable functions, working INSIDE the drama in role enables the teacher to support the students in many more flexible ways. The willingness of the teacher to enter and build the fictional world

with the students can profoundly alter the atmosphere, relationships and balance of power in the classroom. What Paulo Freire (1970) has described as a horizontal relationship among students and teachers is likely to develop.

When the teacher takes on a role it immediately sends signals to the students that the teacher regards the activity seriously and that input from both teacher and students is equally valid. Teacher-in-Role is both a strategy for learning and a significant principle of teaching, in which power relationships between students and teacher are tacitly perceived as negotiable. Process Drama is likely to alter the classroom dynamic. Students will listen to the teacher with a different kind of attention, and they will also be required to attend to their classmates in a different way as they co-create the dramatic world. An environment develops in which the students' contributions are valued not only by the teacher but also by their classmates. Process Drama works towards the creation of a community of learners, co-operating and pooling its linguistic and imaginative resources.

The purpose of taking on a role in the drama is emphatically NOT to give a display of acting, but instead to invite the students to enter and begin to co-create the dramatic world. It is not a performance, but an act of conscious self-presentation, that invites the students to join in and respond actively in the target language. They are encouraged to 'read' and interpret the status, attitudes and intentions of the role adopted by the teacher, and to extend, oppose or transform what is happening. It is a complex strategy that operates to focus the attention of the participants, unite them in their linguistic efforts and engage them in action, interpretation and contemplation.

Process Drama has the power to transform classrooms into places where *something happens*. When the usual classroom context is temporarily suspended in favour of new contexts, new roles and new relationships, unique possibilities of language use, development and diagnosis are opened up. There is the potential to change the more familiar and limited patterns of communication and interaction in the classroom. Perhaps more importantly, Process Drama alters the teacher's functions within these patterns. Working in role does not mean that the teacher abandons her usual skills or purposes. But instead of being content to remain mere 'transmission devices', teachers working in role can become what Jerome Bruner calls 'human events' (Bruner, 1986, p.126)

Teachers may be afraid that taking on a role in the drama will reduce their authority in the classroom. It will certainly be altered, but not necessarily diminished. What kinds of roles are most effective for the teacher to adopt? Well, they may not be too far removed from the more usual classroom roles. In fact, the roles teachers adopt in the drama may give them greater power than they had as class teachers. Dorothy Heathcote says that she builds respect for the role through the teacher and for the teacher through the role. As Heathcote puts it :

For me, the most secure authority has always been from within the drama situation – the authority of role. I can be more flexible in the use of registers. The role-authority gives me shifting power and a variety of registers to be at the service of the class. I may suddenly gather authority to deny or accede to requests, or lack power but have strong opinions, or resist a class in order to strengthen its opinions and decisions. My belief in my attitude supports their belief in theirs. (Johnson and O'Neill, 1984, p.69)

I find that in setting up the drama world, I often begin by calling a meeting. I may be a kind of chairperson, indicating the kind of fictional situation in which we find ourselves. In other words, I am focusing attention and giving information. The purpose of the meeting may be to address a particular problem that affects all of us. The meeting doesn't have to be boring even if it is a very formal one – we might be the advisers to the dying king, the police chief briefing police officers on the latest crime, the mayor planning a civic reception for a very important person. But there will always be something at stake. And the location of the meeting may be a very atmospheric one – midnight in the forest, a cellar where the secret tribunal is gathering to pass judgement. The key thing is that the roles with which the participants are endowed have power and responsibility. The most important characteristic of their rather generic role is that the students can ask questions. They begin as the same kind of person, although individual characteristics and attitudes are likely to develop later.

A key feature of Process Drama is that although it may appear a risky procedure to ask students to engage in, paradoxically it protects their self-esteem. It provides enjoyable reasons for speaking 'differently' in what appears to be a non-serious activity. It offers the protection of role, of being someone different. It enables the teacher to correct the 'role' rather than the student. And it releases the teacher momentarily from the need to be all knowing – the source of all expertise in the classrooms. Withholding expertise can be a tremendously powerful incentive to students to activate their own knowledge and resources. But using Process Drama does not mean that the teacher abandons all her usual strategies. In the language classroom, she may have prepared her students by introducing vocabulary that is likely to be useful in the drama. She may suspend the drama at appropriate points, to check comprehension and clarify or re-focus the task. She is likely to pause for reflection on the work and draw students' attention to various linguistic or non-verbal elements. However, her purposes will be involvement, communication, and fluency. Errors can be addressed outside the fictional context.

A School Trip to France

In a drama session with 11-year olds, I worked alongside their French teacher. I took on the role of a substitute teacher who had unexpectedly to accompany a school trip to France. The role allowed me to use my extremely limited ability in speaking French – the students often corrected me – and to challenge the students, not through my language as through my role. The students could not rely on any expertise from me, so they had to fall back on their own linguistic resources. The teacher had done some preparation for the drama session in class, developing vocabulary, planning the journey and making a map of the places they were to visit on their imaginary trip.

The fictional visit began, with me in the role of the incompetent and linguistically challenged leader of the group. Various mishaps occurred along the way, as we encountered passport officials, visited a garage and a café and asked for directions to our destination in the mountains. Eventually the bus broke down and the driver (imaginary) was sent for help, as there was no signal for our mobile phones. Soon night was falling but the bus driver hadn't returned. Two students volunteered to help by visiting a lonely house we had noticed in the middle of the woods. We rehearsed what the volunteers should say to the occupant, who

turned out to be a strange old lady (their teacher in role). Unfortunately she had no telephone or any mode of transport. There was no alternative but to accept her invitation to spend the night in her spooky house.

Verbal, Non-verbal and Written Reflection

The class teacher narrated the next part of the story – describing how the children settled down for the night. She asked them to imagine what they might have heard or seen during the night, and the kinds of dreams they might have experienced when they finally fell asleep. In the next session, the teacher began by narrating the story of the school trip from the very beginning, with the children's help. Next, she asked them to work in groups of five or six, and create a dream-like piece of movement depicting the events of the journey and ending with their night in the spooky house. This activity operated as a non-verbal reflection on the journey. A further reflective activity was asking the children to end the story by expressing succinctly in a newspaper headline the fate of the schoolchildren and their incompetent teacher. The final activity, undertaken in pairs, was to write the story of their ill-fated trip in English, either in the first or third person. Finally they translated their account into French.

When language teachers work in role they are able to:

- Initiate the fictional context with clarity and economy.
- Give status to the activity by active involvement.
- Draw the group together.
- Model appropriate language and behaviour.
- Endow students with roles that invite immediate and relevant responses.
- Set relevant tasks.
- Support and affirm the students' communicative efforts.
- Diagnose their linguistic competence and understanding.
- Extend and challenge their responses.
- Guide the development of the work.

We know that in most classrooms teachers do most of the talking. Even in second language classrooms where there is naturally a focus on the language produced by the students, the teachers' greater competence in the target language means that their input must necessarily be considerable. Perhaps the question should be not 'how much teacher-talk is there in a lesson?' but 'what kind of teacher-talk is there?' The kind of language produced by teachers using Process Drama is likely to be noticeably different from usual classroom discourse. Working in Process Drama, teachers' language will be distinguished by a number of very important characteristics.

It will:

- Establish an atmosphere of trust.
- Generate interesting contexts.
- Be inviting, exploratory and speculative.
- Demonstrate respect for students' efforts.
- Elicit and affirm students' contributions.
- Respond positively to unpredictable or inaccurate responses.
- Promote different perspectives.
- Communicate commitment to the work.

- Model appropriate language registers.

This last feature of Process Drama is highly significant. Through the use of different registers, which may be verbal or non-verbal, it is possible for the teacher in role to indicate status and attitude, and bring other time frames, other cultures and other values into the classroom.

Conclusion

Process Drama shares a number of the features of other approaches to language learning, most obviously Communicative Language Teaching, Problem-based Language Learning and task-based approaches. It is interactive and collaborative, with a focus on dialogue and socio-linguistic competences. But perhaps the approach that most nearly conforms to the features of Process Drama is Dogme (Thornbury, 2000). Dogme is an interactive, dialogic and communicative approach to language teaching. It is founded on the belief that the most direct route to learning is to be found in the interactivity between teachers and students and amongst the students themselves and a recognition that students are most engaged by content they have created themselves. Learning is seen as social and dialogic, where knowledge and skills are co-constructed. A large part of the teacher's function is to facilitate the emergence of language. All of this is true of Process Drama in the language classroom.

But the extra and vital ingredient that Process Drama includes is an imaginative approach to the kinds of context in which students encounter language. Instead of being restricted to role-playing real-life situations, useful as these are, the use of imaginative pre-texts can over-ride students' anxieties about accuracy and place them in a no-penalty zone, where fluency, resourcefulness and communication are given priority. Kao and O'Neill (1998) found that less realistic situations produced greater communication and fluency, perhaps because the fantasy element freed the students' imaginations and they were less anxious about accuracy. Language learners are using their imaginations to navigate a new culture and language, and make sense of the world. In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* Jerome Bruner (1986) claims that education becomes a part of culture making when the materials of the curriculum are chosen for their openness to imaginative transformation and are presented in a light that invites negotiation and speculation. This seems to me an excellent definition of Process Drama.

As a language teacher your imagination will assist you in creating contexts of communication in which your students enjoy newfound skills. Your imagination will allow you to give students the power to trust and utilize their own imaginations as they learn and live in a new world of language.

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Biographical information

Cecily O'Neill is an Associate Professor Emeritus at The Ohio State University, where she established the programme in drama education. She now works internationally with students, teachers, directors and actors and is a visiting lecturer at several universities including New York University and the University of Winchester. Dr. O'Neill is the author of several influential books on drama including *Dorothy Heathcote: Essential Writings on Drama and Education* (2014), *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama* (1995) and *Worlds into Words: Learning a Second Language through Process Drama* (1998). *Structure and Spontaneity: the Process Drama of Cecily O'Neill*, edited by Philip Taylor and Christine D. Warner was published by Trentham Books in 2006. In 2011 Dr. O'Neill was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by the University of Winchester.

Notice biographique

Cecily O'Neill est Maître de Conférences émérite à l'Université d'Ohio State où elle a mis en place un programme d'éducation par le théâtre. Elle travaille avec des étudiants, des enseignants, des metteurs en scène et des acteurs internationaux. Elle est chercheuse invitée dans plusieurs universités, telle l'Université de New York, ou celle de Winchester. Dr. O'Neill est l'auteur d'ouvrages majeurs dans le monde du théâtre : *Dorothy Heathcote: Essential Writings on Drama and Education* (2014), *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama* (1995) et *Worlds into Words: Learning a Second Language through Process Drama* (1998). *Structure and Spontaneity: the Process Drama of Cecily O'Neill*, édité par Philip Taylor et Christine D. Warner, a été publié par Trentham Books en 2006. En 2011, Cecily O'Neill a reçu le titre de membre associé honoraire de l'Université de Winchester.