

**Language Acquisition through Drama
Reading Recovery Conference
Columbus Ohio
Feb.5, 2006**

I am very pleased to be here today. Thank you all for coming

I believe that Drama can be used as an excellent tool to build some of the communication skills necessary for language acquisition. One of the primary objectives in Drama education is effective verbal and non-verbal communication. This includes listening and receiving information, expressing ideas, analyzing situations and developing connections, reading, writing and dramatizing situations and stories, and working in an environment which promotes cooperation, trust and respect for all participants. To me, Drama is an obvious fit for the EFL and ESL Classroom.

I explored this idea in my Masters thesis. I have also taught English as a Second Language classes in both elementary and secondary school. Through my studies and in my practice, I have developed an understanding of the connection between whole language learning and dramatic activity. Researchers such as Wells (1992), Freeman (1992) and Rogers (1993) articulate three basic principles of the communicative method which have direct correlation to drama based practice. The communicative principle is exemplified in Drama class when situations are staged or enacted to facilitate verbal and non-verbal communication. Task solving (the second principle) happens in Drama class, not in isolation, but within an active context and the meaningfulness principle is supported as students spontaneously produce language already acquired and search for more as they progress through a dramatic situation. Many researchers speak in varying degrees to the importance of “meaningful” dialogue, “genuine” communication, and “social interaction.” Drama offers the opportunity for these kinds of interactions.

Some elements of learning language through Drama include: A Dramatic pedagogical approach to teaching language allows students to use language rather than be told about it; improvised dialogue is important in Drama class and requires and supports the development of thought and language; Drama is verbal cooperation which includes negotiation between parties in their meaning making; the discussion about the Drama that occurs before, during and after the work is just as important as the work itself; Drama activity provides the context for the acquisition of vocabulary; in Drama the children and the teachers can take on roles which make a wide variety of language and social interaction possible.

I sincerely believe in the dignity of the discipline of Drama, and in the importance of active participation when learning new concepts. The acquisition of language requires a movement from the reception of vocabulary and grammatical skills (objective knowledge) through to the subjective possession of a language.

To that end, even though we are a large group. I am going to ask us to try out a few of the exercises and activities that illustrate the fundamental concepts of Drama and language acquisition. It will at times be loud, perhaps even unruly, but in the end, you will have had an experience that I hope, has an intellectual and a kinesthetic memory. Research states that memories embedded in mind and body are retained longer. To help with retention, I have placed a hand out on the conference website which outlines most of the seminar.

I have developed a 8-step program for developing language acquisition through dramatic activity. Given our time, we will be able to address the first five of them. (I hope!)

Steps in planning for EFL Drama (On overhead)

L. Strive for an environment that promotes comfort. This is a class that may be different from others. There will be active participation. You will be asking students to “learn” in a different way, through their bodies, voices and their minds. You must set up rules of conduct such as respect for all suggestions and for all presentations, encourage everyone to participate, but allow for students to engage in the activities at their own pace. Some students will be “natural” actors, will want the spotlight. Others will be

more shy. There must be an opportunity for all students to be part of the learning.

I like to start Drama classes in a circle and with enough room to move. How can we arrange this room to resemble a Drama class?

It's important to get students starting to talk, even if it is by simply saying their name: this first exercise starts building some vocabulary. Have the class help each other if necessary.

Name and alliteration (ask them to say their name and an alliterative word to the three people nearest them.)

2. Start with non-threatening, non-verbal, communicative activities that: build trust, boost self-esteem, encourage group building and community building, and lower inhibitions and encourage risk taking.

(Arrange a signal for freeze).

Intergalactic Shake: Whole group moves throughout the room, meeting and greeting others by shaking the body part of the inhabitant of that world. Eg. Martians, shake elbows.

Spot and Say: good for vocabulary building, self-confidence (no one can hear your mistakes).

What do you hear?: Listen very carefully. Try to pick out three separate sounds. Once I've called time, compare the sounds you heard with others around you.

(If time: Mirrors: to provide context of concentration)

3. Incorporate small group (e.g. pairs) activities where there is no class presentation necessary, and some verbal discussion is necessary. You are now continuing to build vocabulary, but you are adding elements of story telling which includes sequencing, character development, imagination and

dramatic tension. The risk is a little greater than before, but because you are in pairs, it is less inhibiting than full class presentation.

Examples:

This is my Ear: in pairs, point to a part of your own anatomy and call it by another name. Partner then points to what ever is called, not pointed at and calls that part of his/her anatomy another name. Game continues as quickly as you can.

Fortune Teller: in pairs with hands create a story using the lines in the palm as a map.

Rhyme Ping Pong: in pairs try alternating words that rhyme: e.g. tall, ball fall crawl, the winner is the one who supplies the last word.

Story Telling with Direction: Working with your partner, tell a story starting with: "you would not believe what happened to me on the way to the university today". Continue talking until I stop you. Then your partner must continue from where you stopped. You are working on listening, imagination and story development.

4. Leading the class to group discussion games.

Examples:

Groups of 4 or 5:

I spy: one person tries to describe something in the room and other try to guess what they are describing.

Professions: one person leaves the room, group decides on a profession and the person tries to guess based on the one-sentence descriptions.

The adverb game: person leaves room , others decide on a way to do things, person must ask someone to "walk that way", "talk that way", "sit that way"(sleepy, shyly, sadly, angrily)

5. Eventually, you can lead into small group mime and improvisations. These should be presented to the class because most students will want to have some appreciation for their work after they have been practicing for 15-20 minutes. Some examples (we won't be able to have time to try them today: are tableau, one word dialogues, tension improvs)

6. Readers Theatre

Working with short scripts, develop subtext analysis, character choices, vocal interpretations, awareness of vocal technique such as inflection, intonation, pacing and emphasis.

With your partner: How many ways can you say?

Where are you going?

You owe me five dollars.

He lives next door.

With your partner: work on **subtext sheets** from handout. (have extras ready)

What vocabulary skills are we working on?

Where could we take the class from here?

Working on a Readers theatre script.

Work with groups of 2 or 3. Work specifically on three main dramatic objectives. 1) clarify meaning

2) highlight rhythm

3) make vocal choices to match animals

10 minutes to rehearse. Volunteers can present to group.

An animal alphabet

**Alligator, beetle, porcupine, whale,
Bobolink, panther, dragon-fly, snail,
Crocodile, monkey, buffalo, hare,
Dromedary, leopard, mud-turtle, bear,
Elephant, badger, pelican, ox,
Flying-fish, reindeer, anaconda, fox,
Guinea-pig, dolphin, antelope, goose,
Humming-bird, weasel, pickerel, moose.**

(anonymous)

What did we learn? Where could we go from here?

How will you assess?

Thank you and acknowledgements.

7. Take **cultural tales** from the class and develop from tableau work to presentations in mime and then with dialogue.

8. **Playbuilding:** Use the themes explored in the cultural literature to inspire original tales that can be presented to other classes.

Exercises we will not have time to do:

Tableau: Working in small groups, establish frozen pictures which best represent an issue or situation. EG. Dinner at home. Driving in a car with noisy children. Waiting for a bus in the rain. At the dentist.

Tension Improvs: e.g. bank robber, ordering in a restaurant, movie going with a noisy person behind you, (work scene out in mime and then add words) Class can see presentations twice.

One Word Dialogues: give out pieces of paper with short dialogues. In pairs, they figure out who they are, where they are, what is happening and why, then compare their interpretations with another pair, and rehearse and perform for the class. Samples:

Hello.

Hello.
Are you in?
I'm not sure.

Or Kidney?
 Liver!
 Kidney!
 Why?
 Why not?

Prompt Scripts: Objectives: to develop character, plot, inflection, energy and emotion from the subtext of the lines. Learning to understand what is not said.

Hand out and put in pairs and rehearse.

Every day scenarios: waiting for the bus, eating in a restaurant, waiting for the principal, not having the homework done, working after school. All these scenarios can be explored to highlight specific objectives: e.g. where, conflict, characters.

Use beginning, middle and end cards to help with structure of plot.

Language Acquisition through Drama
National Reading Recovery and K-6 Classroom Literacy Conference
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Sharon Wahl
Simon Fraser University



Steps in Planning for Language Acquisition

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2. Start with non-threatening, non-verbal, communicative activities that: build trust, boost self-esteem, encourage group building and community building, and lower inhibitions and encourage risk taking.

Name and Alliteration

Intergalactic Shake

Spot and Say

What do you Hear?

3. Incorporate small group (e.g. pairs) activities where there is no class presentation necessary, and some verbal discussion is appropriate:

This is my Ear

Map of the Hand

Rhyme Ping Pong

Storytelling in Pairs

4. Leading the class to group discussion games.

I spy

Professions

The Adverb Game

5. Eventually, you can lead into small group mime and improvisations. These should be presented to the class because most students will want to have some appreciation for their work after they have been practicing for 15-20 minutes.

Tableaux
Tension Improvs
One Word Dialogues
Prompt Scripts
Every day scenarios

6. Readers Theatre: working with scripts

Working with short scripts, develop subtext analysis, character choices, vocal interpretations, awareness of vocal technique such as inflection, intonation, pacing and emphasis.

How many ways can you say?

Subtext sentences (see attached)

An Animal Alphabet (see attached)

7. Working with cultural tales solicited from the class, perform mime (non-speaking) variations in small groups. Showcase in the class, and re-perform with dialogue added.

7. Playbuilding: Use the themes explored in cultural literature (e.g. picture books, fables and fairytales) to inspire original tales that can be presented to other classes.

Subtext and Vocal Coloring

(Surprised) Well, hi! I didn't know you were coming tobogganing!

(Wistfully) I wish she'd let me have one more piece of birthday cake.

(Bellowing) Get out of there...and don't come back, do you hear me?

(Angrily) I told you to go to your room. Now will you do as you're told?

(Frightened) Who is it? Who's there? Don't come near me...Don't! Don't!

(Whispering) What's the surprise? You can tell me. I won't tell.

(Quiet, secretive voice) Be quiet. I don't think they can hear us, but we'd better be sure.

(Eagerly) You mean it's my turn now?

(Hysterical with worry) I didn't mean to hurt her. She's my best friend!

(Hysterical with joy) I won! I won! First prize...I won!

(Nervously) We're going to get caught. I tell you. Come on, let's get out of here. It's dangerous, I tell you. Come on!

(Aghast) It's been hit. That car ran right over that deer.

Reproducible Master from:

Learning with Readers Theatre: Building Connections

Neill Dixon, Anne Davies, Colleen Politano

1996, Peguis Publishers

An animal alphabet

**Alligator, beetle, porcupine, whale,
Bobolink, panther, dragon-fly, snail,
Crocodile, monkey, buffalo, hare,
Dromedary, leopard, mud-turtle, bear,
Elephant, badger, pelican, ox,
Flying-fish, reindeer, anaconda, fox,
Guinea-pig, dolphin, antelope, goose,
Humming-bird, weasel, pickerel, moose.**

(Anonymous)

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