

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING DRAMA PLAYS IN ADVANCED ACADEMIC ENGLISH CLASSES IN PROMOTING LEARNER COOPERATION, CREATIVITY AND AUTONOMY

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Abstract. *Students attending Advanced Academic English classes are high proficiency students. There is plenty of space and opportunities to do many interesting activities with them. One of the most interesting, time consuming and learner autonomy enhancing one is using drama plays in the classroom. It gives a learner plenty of space to be creative, original and authentic. It also promotes learner cooperation, since the students work in groups and have to prepare the play together, they meet, write the scenario, and rehearse a lot. This leads students to using English outside the classroom as well. Drama plays showed to be an effective way of enhancing learner creativity, autonomy and cooperation. The study involved 80 Advanced Academic English students, from different ages and all of them being non-native speakers of English, from different nationalities. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis was employed in the study. The objectives of the study are the following: to: a) enhance learner cooperation, by dividing tasks, roles, etc; b) promote learner autonomy through plays, since most of the activities are done outside the classroom; and c) investigate whether the play triggered students creativity and originality.*

Key words: *play, autonomy, cooperation, creativity, teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to adults requires a lot of preparation, it is time consuming, but interesting and very challenging. This applies especially to teaching students of Advanced Academic English level whose language proficiency is very high. They are well-prepared for the classes and like to be challenged. Hence, it is very important for the teachers to do things in the classroom which meet the students' needs and requests. Using drama in the EFL classroom with adults whose English is very good is a great idea. Drama plays are a perfect way to give the students the opportunity to express themselves freely, to give them space to become creative and make up their own scenario, they cooperate with their peers, and they do most of the work themselves, which fosters learner autonomy.

As already mentioned, there are plenty of advantages to using drama plays in English classes, especially because students use the language at their disposal, they use vocabulary, grammar, they feel free in the communication with their peers, which gives them the self esteem that learners need. It is a very rich experience for both the teacher and the students, it is fun and entertaining and thus motivating.

The most important role of drama in the classroom is that students are required to work in groups, this enhances learner cooperation. Learner cooperation plays an

important role in the process of acquisition, since not rarely do learners learn more from their peers than from the teacher. Drama enhances creativity, learners are required to write the scenario themselves, they will decide on the role they are going to act out. It up to them to decide, this at the same time gives them the autonomy, which is so much wished from teachers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

William Shakespeare claimed that:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

As You Like It, Act 2, scene 7, 139–143

There are many advantages and many scholarly opinions in favor of the usage of drama plays in English as a foreign language classes. Drama is closely related to the process of teaching and learning. Learners have the opportunity to practice many skills at once, and it activates other skills that students have or may want to develop. Drama enables students to speak, which is the main goal of teachers who want student centered classes, and the speaking skills is the best way to see what our students produce, and we can draw the conclusion of how much the learner has acquired and what still remains unclear and needs further clarification.

The students practice their speaking skills, they use the target language with their colleagues while preparing for the play, which is very important. It is the aim of almost all teachers to make their students use the target language outside the classroom as well.

Drama plays enhance learner cooperation, since learners are put into groups to work on the play, they need to work with their colleagues, divide the tasks, and work, both individually and together as a group in order to succeed. While the learners are working together writing the scenario they use authentic materials and language, they are more autonomous, creative and gain more self confidence which plays an important role in second/foreign language acquisition. While the students are working on the scenario, they are working independently, the teacher's role in this case is only the role of a guide and facilitator, by no means is the teacher the only source of information in this case. The students need to use their creativity in order to carry out this project. They think of interesting, funny and entertaining things to do during the play so that they gain the interest and attention of the audience. It must be said, that using drama in the EFL classroom includes absolutely most of the most important aspects of teaching that teachers strive to achieve in their everyday work, like enhancing learner creativity, autonomy, motivating students and making them participate actively in their own learning.

Combs (1988) defines and explains what drama really is and he argues that:

“While drama is informed by many of the ideas and practices of theatre art, it is principally valued as learning medium rather than as an art form, and is governed and validated through criteria other than aesthetics. Informal drama's goals are

based on pedagogical, developmental and learning theory as much or more than they are arts-based; its objectives are manifold, but they are all directed toward the growth and development of the participant rather than the entertainment or stimulation of the observer.” (Combs,1998: 9) Susan Holden (1982) says that drama can be taken to mean "any kind of activity where learners are asked either to portray themselves or to portray someone else in an imaginary situation". As Benjamin Franklin said: "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn". Drama play is the tool that gives learners the opportunity to acquire and learn by participating actively, it is "where students are involved in experimentation in order to arrive at knowledge" (Harmer, 2007: 20).

Drama has been used for a long time, it is not a new method used in the process of teaching and learning. However, the way it is used nowadays differs a lot compared on how it was in the past. Along these lines McCaslin (1998) claims that "The use of drama as a tool for teaching is not new. Historically, both drama and theatre have long been recognized as a potent means of education and indoctrination. The ways they are used today however are new, and they differ in a number of respects from the ways they have been used in the past" (Mc Caslin, 1998: 271).

Modern teaching is mostly organized around the fact that classes must be learner centered so that they gain the most from the classroom, the teacher talking time should be minimized so that the learners have a chance to express themselves and practice the language. Fleming (2006) argues that there are no doubts that drama in student-centered, because it can only be carried out through cooperation of students. This method enables learners to use the target language in different contexts depending on the topic of the drama play. It makes the situations that the students are playing out concrete and specific.

Harmer (2007) suggests that it is the teachers' duty to make students interested in the subject, make them want to participate, in a word motivate the students. He goes on by saying that if we "involve the students or excite their curiosity and provoke participation, we will help them to stay interested in the subject" (Harmer, 2007: 20). The importance of drama is also discussed by Hamilton and McLeod (1993). They discuss and claim that drama gives the learners and the teachers all the possible ways using all language functions possible, from monologues to disagreeing and requesting, depending on the type of play they are preparing. "It is hard to imagine anything else that offers to language teachers such a wide variety of types of talks, for example monologues, paired speaking, role-plays, group discussions, reporting, talking in response to other stimuli, problem-solving, developing scenarios, acting out, etc. From explaining, complaining, praising, disagreeing to exhorting, apologizing and requesting – there is no language function that drama is not capable of easily encompassing" (Hamilton and McLeod, 1993: 5).

As it is already mentioned above among all the other benefits and advantages of using drama, one of them is motivation, which is a very important thing in inciting students to participate and learn. Furthermore, authors see a link between drama and motivation. Along these lines Maley and Duff discuss the link between drama and motivation and they say that "If drama is motivating – and we believe it is – the reason may be that it draws on the entire human resources of the class and that technique, in its own way, yields a different, unique, result every time it is practiced" (Maley and Duff,1982: 13).

However, Harmer (2007) claims that the learner's motivation mostly depends on the activities that the teachers prepare for the students to participate in. They repeat that

learner motivation is divided into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic motivation is the one which is directly linked to what happens in the classroom, based on the methods used and the activities prepared by the teacher, whereas the extrinsic factors that affect motivation are society, family, etc. Harmer (2007) says that extrinsic motivation “may be influenced by a number of external factors such as attitude of society, family and peers to the subject in question (...), and intrinsic motivation is generated by what happens inside the classroom; this could be teacher’s methods or activities that students take part in” (Harmer, 2007: 20).

There are some other scholars besides Harmer, who discuss the importance of drama in learner motivation. The fact is that while acting out a play learners act, play, move around the scene. The activities that drama offers to teachers can enhance learner’s motivation, and it is not only limited to learners’ motivation, it can also motivate teachers as well (Maley and Duff, 2001; Phillips, 2003). While using drama in the classroom many things take place at the same time, the acting, the playing, moving, speaking, cooperating, being creative, and above all being autonomous. Maley and Duff perceive dramatic activities as “... Activities which give the students an opportunity to use his own personality in creating the material in which part of the language class is to be based” (Maley and Duff, 1979).

Another feature of using drama in the classroom is that students enjoy it, it is fun and entertaining. One of the most important features of drama is that “in drama the complexity of living is removed temporarily into this protected area so that students not only can learn it and explore it, but also enjoy it” (Dorothy Heathcote, 1983: 701). Hoetker (1969) warns teachers that in drama there is no space for the teachers authority, it is not a true/false activity used in the classroom. You must leave it to the students’ imagination and creativity and not ruin the real value of drama, and especially not ruin its educational values by making the mistake of using teacher’s authority. There are certain prerequisites as far as the role of the teacher is concerned when using drama in the classroom, and one of them is that the teacher is the guide and the facilitator, because “the teacher who too often imposes his/her authority, or who conceives of drama as a kind of inductive method for arriving at preordained correct answers, will certainly violate the developmental values of drama and possibly its educational values as well” (Hoetker, 1969: 28).

Maley (2005) is one of the scholars who is pro the use of drama in the classroom. He is supportive of using drama plays and activities because he is aware of the effect those have on the teaching and learning process. The following are the points pro drama which Maley (2005) as cited in Mitul Trivedi’s (2013) paper titled ‘Using Theatre Techniques to Develop Effective Communication Skills: A Theoretical Perspective’.

1. It integrates language skills in an obvious way. Careful listening is a key tenet. Natural verbal expression is integral to most of the communicative activities; and many of them require the skills of reading and writing, both as part of the input and the output.
2. It involves verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, thus bringing together both mind and body (intellectual as well as physical), and restoring the balance between physical and intellectual aspects of learning.
3. It vocalizes upon both cognitive and affective domains, thus restoring the importance of sentiments as well as rationality.

4. By fully contextualizing the language, it brings the classroom the desired interaction to real-life situation through an intensive focus on 'semantic value' of interaction.
5. The emphasis on whole-person learning and multi-sensory inputs helps learners to capitalize on their strength and to extend their range. In doing so, it offers unequalled opportunities for catering to learner differences.
6. It facilitates self-awareness (and awareness of others as well), self-esteem and confidence; and through this, motivation is developed.
7. Being motivated is likewise fostered and is sustained through the variety and sense of expectancy generated by the activities.
8. There is a natural transfer of responsibility for learning from teacher to learners which is where it actually, in situation, belongs.
9. It heartens an open, rationally exploratory style of learning where subjective creativity and the personal imagination are given enough exposure to develop. This, in turn, promotes risk-taking, which is an essential element in effective language learning.
10. It definitely has a affirmative result on classroom dynamics and atmosphere, thus facilitating the formation of a acquainted group, which learns together.
11. It is an ever-remembering experience.
12. It requires limited resources. For most of the time, all a sincere teacher needs is a 'roomful of human beings'.

3. METHODOLOGY

Two types of data collection were employed in the analysis of the results, which consisted of one questionnaire for students. This study was conducted at South East European University, Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia, in the academic year 2012-13.

The study answered the following research questions:

1. Do drama plays enhance learner cooperation?
2. Did the usage of drama play assist learner autonomy?
3. Did the play trigger the learners' creative thinking?
4. Were the students motivated?

4. PARTICIPANTS

The participants that participated in this study were 80 students attending the Advanced Academic English course. The students involved were from different departments, and at different stages of their studies. All of them were aged from 18-30 years old. The participants of this study were all non-native speakers of English, from different language, national, religious backgrounds.

Procedure:

It was part of the student evaluation criteria to prepare a play and act it out in front of everybody in the classroom. The students were asked to form groups with people they could meet more often outside the classroom, to write a short scenario, to learn and rehearse their parts, and then finally, to act it out in front of their classmates and the teacher.

The teacher was there to guide the students, help them, but it was their responsibility to do everything else. They were asked to use their imagination and creativity, to come

up with something original and authentic. It could be something serious, it could be something funny, this was left to students' imagination.

It was made clear that all of them had to participate by saying their parts, no one was allowed to participate in the play without speaking. They had to work together at all stages so that the whole group does not suffer because of one student. Students were in touch with the teacher at different stages of the play, but never giving up too much information on what the play will be about.

After the play was carried out, the students were given a questionnaire to fill in, they were asked about their impressions, and the difficulties they went through during the preparation of the play.

Results:

The analysis of the students' answers from the questionnaire led to the following results. As far as the first research question is concerned 'Did the drama make you work together?' - the analysis of the students' answers showed that drama does enhance learner cooperation. Namely, 92% of the students claimed that the preparation for the drama made them work together, they divided the tasks and then wrote the scenario. They rehearsed together. To the question 'How many times did you rehearse before playing it out?' - 87% of the students claimed that they rehearsed together minimum 5-8 times. All the participants in the groups had done something, had contributed to the success of the drama. This was proved by the results, because to the question 'Did you all participate in the preparation of the play' - 96% percent of the students claimed that they did so. To the question 'Did you face any trouble working in groups?' - 84% of the students said that they did not have any problems at all. The rest faced problems like learner schedule, and the meeting times.

Second research question 'Does the drama play assist learner autonomy', the results showed that it really did enhance and foster learner autonomy since the students did almost all the work themselves. According to the questionnaire, 95% of the students strongly agreed that the play helped them become autonomous learners.

Third research question was 'Did the play trigger the learners' creative thinking?' It definitely did. All the students had prepared something original, interesting and almost all plays were funny. They attracted and held the attention of the audience to the maximum until the end of each play. The questionnaire results showed that all students agreed that this technique triggered their creative thinking, because they all had come up with different ideas.

The last research question 'Were the students motivated' was proved by the students responses who argued that they were very motivated and that they enjoyed all the stages of the play. To the question 'were you motivated?' 98% of the students said that they were motivated to work on the play, and 91% claimed that they enjoyed all the stages of the play.

The students were motivated because they would earn points which would affect their final grade, but that was not the only motivation. When asked 'did you do this only because of the grade' 78% claimed that they did not do this because of the grade solely, when asked to add more reasons why they were motivated they went on and said that it was because it was fun, entertaining, they spend a lot of time with their friends, and that they felt happy at the end, when the play went as planned.

5. CONCLUSION

Teachers have a variety of duties, among which they not only have to teach learners, but also to find the best ways to make the teaching/learning material understandable and easy. But, they also have to motivate learners, to make them autonomous and to trigger their creative thinking, their problem-solving skills, and give them enough space to practice the target language.

Using drama in the classroom with high proficiency students proved to be a very efficient method in enhancing learner cooperation, autonomy, creative thinking and motivation. The learners had the opportunity to use the language at their disposal, practice their speaking skills, and thus gain self-confidence. The questionnaire results showed very satisfying results in terms of using drama plays in the EFL classroom. There are many benefits and advantages to this. The learners get to use the target language even outside of the classroom, which is a very desirable thing by most teachers.

All in all, using drama in the classroom was a good decision, it turned out to be exactly what most scholars described it to be, and it had that an amazing effect on making learner's work together, it fostered learners' autonomy, it triggered learners' creative thinking, and it motivated them. The learners were satisfied, they had fun and enjoyed the whole experience.

Limitations of the study

As almost any study conducted, this study has its limitations, too. One of the limitations would be that less proficient students should have been involved in the study to see whether it would have had the same effects on them too. A larger number of participants could have been included, including teachers. Observations during the plays could have been used, however we have to bear in mind that it might affect learner performance.

Recommendation for further research

The recommendations for further research are the following:

Students from other Basic Skills English levels should be involved in another study, more students should be involved in the research, and other methods of data analysis should be included.

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