

Drama in the development of oral spontaneous communication

Vanesa Alonso Aldavero

Primary Education

British Council – MEC bilingual project

Abstract

Using drama activities has clear advantages for language learning. It helps students to communicate in the foreign language including those with limited vocabulary. Drama activities involve children at many levels, not only on the language and literacy one but also on the kinesthetic aspect. There are some areas where drama can be very useful in order to develop students' communicative competence.

This research shows how beneficial drama activities are in order to develop oral communication. Section 1 presents the problem I noticed in my student's productive skills and participation. Section 2 deals with methodology, the action plan followed, data collection and activities. Section 3 explains the results of the project in detail. Section 4 draws the final conclusions from the investigation.

Key words: drama activities, oral communication, kinesthetic aspect, communicative competence.

Resumen

El uso de las actividades de drama tiene claras ventajas para la adquisición de la segunda lengua. Ayuda a los estudiantes a comunicarse en inglés incluyendo aquellos que tienen un vocabulario limitado. Las actividades de drama involucran a los niños y niñas en muchos niveles, no solamente en el lenguaje sino también en el aspecto kinescético. Hay algunas áreas donde la dramatización puede ser muy útil a la hora de desarrollar la competencia comunicativa del alumnado.

Esta investigación muestra el beneficio de las actividades de drama en el aula para desarrollar la comunicación oral en lengua inglesa. La sección 1 presenta el problema que percibi en la participación de los estudiantes y en su habilidad para hablar en inglés. La sección 2 trata sobre la metodología, el plan de acción seguido, la recogida de datos y actividades llevadas a cabo. La sección 3 explica los resultados del proyecto y por último, la sección 4 presenta las conclusiones finales de la investigación.

Palabras clave: actividades teatrales, comunicación oral, aspecto cinético, competencia comunicativa.

1. Initial reflection.

Bilingual students in the 4th year of Primary Education (Project British Council-MEC) have a good oral understanding of the second language and they also present a high development in listening skills. However, they sometimes present lack of communication skills. They understand every single word they listen to and sometimes they produce language at the same level. If they are asked, they will answer you back.

The problem is that they show certain difficulties when they have to produce natural and spontaneous oral communication. I decided then to provide my students with more encouraging situations in which they had to create and make more use of their English and vocabulary.

I thought of presenting the students specific and varied activities in speaking and creative drama that could be used to help children learn, practice and improve communication skills. In addition, these activities would also help them to develop oral spontaneous communication. My question was, then, what impact would a drama project have on the development of oral communication? Would this project encourage the students to speak spontaneously in the second language? Would they make the effort to improve their vocabulary and speak in English during the time required? Since effective communication depends on one's speech patterns, the use of drama would show whether there is a significant impact on spoken language or not.

I designed a two weeks drama project where they had to negotiate the dialogues in groups in order to create their script and perform it in front of the class. The study would provide the specific teaching methods needed to develop effective oral and physical communication skills through a theatre game in students. I collected information through camcorders and a video camera.

2. Action plan and methodology

The project was divided into three different stages: creative process, rehearsal and performance.

Creative process

The first activity was to introduce the students to the story of *Thanksgiving* and some specific vocabulary so that they became familiar with it and they could use it appropriately. This activity took two sessions.

Once I made sure that all the students had comprehended the story and learned some vocabulary, I divided them into groups of five. I explained to the children that we would be writing the script for a play about *Thanksgiving*.

They had to decide, first, in each group who was doing what. I previously told them that the play should have two pilgrims, two Native Americans and one narrator. The decision-making process and the discussions of the script which they wrote in subsequent sessions were to be in English.

Once each team had their characters assigned, students had to write their scenes and dialogues. They could make up their own version of the play. I told them to concentrate on dialogue rather than acting and to be clear about how the text should be: easy for them to remember when they had to perform it and simple in structure but meaningful. In a few cases the four groups involved took the written scripts home to rehearse. Some of them typed them out on the computer without being told to do so. That showed me that the children were really motivated by the play. They felt confident as they could use the language they had already learnt. They had the need to use that language to communicate. When a child spoke in Spanish, most of the students said: "In English, please!"

The students were much more engaged and serious about learning their lines than they usually are during other activities. Even the children that are usually shy and do not participate too much in class were willing to do it. I am certain that was because of the responsibility they felt for the project and all of the hard effort they made.

After three sessions in the writing process with the students, they started the process of performing the play. We created a big ship that represented the Mayflower. As for the costumes, students brought different things they had at home to get into their characters in a proper way: Indian costumes, feathers, hats, etc. They were ready to rehearse the play in front of the class. They could be heard and watched.

Rehearsal

This part was quite successful, and reinforced both the specific information they had learned about their individual characters and more general ideas about oral communication techniques. I also encouraged them to improvise the dialogue in case they got blocked when performing the play. They had to make use of their knowledge of the language in order to continue the dialogue if they failed to remember the script. They could show that their oral production was natural and in some cases they had to improvise because they forgot part of the lines. This made them become more confident about their competence in English and they proved to themselves that they were able to produce more spontaneous oral language than they think they could. They also learned from classmates how they performed the play in terms of movement, body language, etc. They got some feedback from their peers sharing ideas and changes for the final performance.

Performance

The performance was very good. For the first time at school, everyone could be heard and understood. We took turns in order to share the play with other classes. I filmed all the plays so that we could watch them afterwards, discuss the success of the project and use it for feedback in later projects. Generally, all the students spoke clearly, loudly with nice English. It was good to see that all students participated, even those ones that usually do not contribute in class and keep quiet.

3. Data analysis

The project showed an important impact on the development of communication skills. The students improved self-confidence, use of language, vocabulary, and a good capacity for cooperative work in the classroom. They were very motivated because these types of activities were different from what they do every day.

It was sometimes difficult for me to get the whole class to hold a give-and-take conversation without it being chaotic, but there were times where it worked well with all four groups. At the end students got involved in the play and they developed a nice and warm atmosphere.

I could see that each child used the language they felt comfortable with: those with a higher level of English were able to hold more elaborate dialogues, while those who felt less confident could just develop a basic dialogue. The students chose their own characters in the play. Some characters were suitable for children with

limited knowledge of English, and there were others that encouraged children at a higher level to be creative and to use language they knew in an unpredictable and spontaneous situation.

The students increased their awareness of the importance of using the language and vocabulary they already had in order to communicate in a second language. The children had the opportunity for active participation in the construction of meaningful language learning. Communication was improved as well. The learners had to use their speaking resources to communicate the dialogue that each group created for the play.

4. Conclusion.

The final purpose of drama techniques –to foster oral communication– is not achieved simply producing a theatre play for an audience but contributing to students' personality growth and facilitating their learning by having them respond to situations, episodes, or conflicts assuming the role of faked characters. It should be also noted that almost all students, regardless of their artistic skills for acting, can perform and benefit from this type of drama activities. For example, some of the techniques used in creative drama such as mime, improvised language, movement exercises or invented dialogue give every child an opportunity to be actively engaged.

I have discovered that classroom drama techniques are a highly valuable as well as an instructional tool. Children learn to use language effectively and creatively while they are experiencing different points of views, looking for solutions, and discussing ideas. This helps them also to view some new approaches to language teaching different from the traditional drama activities as role plays, imitations, and it is also more challenging since they take part in their own learning.

As I have already indicated, drama activities can provide students with an opportunity to use language to express various emotions, to solve problems, to make decisions, to socialize. In addition, drama activities, as it is shown, are useful in the development of oral communication skills and reading and writing as well.

Through drama children may discover different styles and registers which are very different from their everyday speech as well as the use of verbal and non verbal devices. Drama is also helpful for reading and writing skills and vocabulary building. The oral language skills developed through drama show that students are able to use the language they know in situations where they are to communicate successfully.

With this little project contribution I would like to encourage educators to incorporate drama activities in their language classroom as a support for the development of oral communication. I found that the project motivated the students and encouraged them to draw on all the language they know.

Vanesa Alonso Aldavero. Primary English Teacher since 2001 when I started to work in a British Council –MEC bilingual project school. I finished a Master in Teaching English through Bilingual Education in Alcalá University in 2008. I am currently working on my PhD in Alcalá University as well.