



Using Dramatic Role-Play to Develop Emotional Aptitude

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ABSTRACT

As university educators, we need to prepare students for the transition from the information age to what Daniel H. Pink (2005) calls the conceptual age, which is governed by artistry, empathy and emotion, by including in the curricula activities that stimulate both hemispheres of the brain. This can be done by promoting activities that energize what Daniel Goleman (1995) refers to as emotional intelligence, and it further maintains that, as Paul Ekman (2003) suggests, the ability to detect feelings improves communication. Recognizing the need to include in the curricula procedures that help develop students' right brain aptitudes and enhance their communication skills, I have endeavoured to introduce dramatic scene study as a sustained activity in my English for Specific Purposes courses at the Universidad de Valencia. My aim was to energize the students' creative and emotional aptitudes, as well as to dynamize effective teamwork. This article sustains that dramatic role-play, based on scripted scene study and related improvisational activities, is one way of achieving this.

KEYWORDS: ESL, EFL drama, scene study, affective, role-play, emotion, creativity, emotional aptitude, reading.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since Roger W. Sperry won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1981 for his research into the right and left hemispheres of the brain, the notion of right-brain centred intelligence has undergone a reassessment. Pink (2005: 51) sustains that we are moving away from the age of information and entering a whole new era, a conceptual age in which emotional, left-brain focused behaviour is measured on a par with cognitive, right-brain stimulated action. He suggests that university graduates today must be equipped with “high concept and high touch” know-how skills that allow them creatively to combine apparently dissimilar ideas in innovative ways, and he further observes that this may be one reason why increasingly more companies are hiring people with art studies in their university curriculum, pointing out that there has been a significant increase in the number of Master of Fine Art degrees programs in the United States as a result (p. 86).

This article holds that both right and left brain thinking are indispensable to second language acquisition, and that an effective L2 learning methodology needs to take this into account. It is suggested that drama is one way of balancing the cognitive and affective attributes of genuine communication. The article also maintains that activities based on getting students to react instinctively to others in emotional circumstances can stimulate learner creativity, communal awareness and personal growth.

The trouble with the process of learning another language in the current Spanish college setting is that the classroom environment often decontextualizes language for the sake of streamlining the learning process. As a result, verbal act meaning is commonly linked exclusively to left-brain centred components, such as grammar, syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation and functional aspects.

Because classroom pedagogy is often geared to planning left-brain focused language production, rarely does the productive execution phase provide right-brain affective or emotional experience. This is a shortcoming that needs correcting.

I believe it is necessary to furnish learners with settings in which contextual conditions are invoked in a way that makes language more of a personal reality for them. I hold that in addition to left-brain stimulation, more activities are needed to induce right-brain brain activity. Towards this end, I propose using drama, in the L2 learning process.

Years of experience in the L2 teaching field have shown me that in the classroom setting interaction tends to be unnaturally mechanical. In order to offset this left-brain driven

preference for diagrammatic performance, the right-brain needs to be stimulated. Drama is one way of achieving this.

Drama is not new to second language teaching. In the literature, well-known works on the subject include books by Parry (1972), Via (1976), Nomura (1982), Smith (1984), Maley & Duff (1984), White (1984), Schewe & Shaw (1993), Di Pietro (1994), Whiteson (1998) and Kao & O'Neill (1998).

Because so much information is available online, reading in English has become a primary necessity among university students. In teaching reading, EFL teachers often rely on combinations of two reading methods. One method emphasizes the cognitive process, focusing exclusively on textual components, such as vocabulary, grammar, and the formal aspects of discourse. The other method combines the data driven "bottom up" view and the "top down" perspective, with its reliance on the readers' previous knowledge of, and experience in, the field covered by the text, and underscores the individual reader's personal interpretation as it is manifested in interactive encounters with other readers.

The reading process in second and foreign language learning often includes role play activities, which Kao & O'Neill (1998: 6) have placed on a continuum ranging from closed or controlled, to open communication. They are organized in accordance with the teaching and learning perspectives they offer.

Over the years I have found that reading passages found in L2 learning textbooks often do not motivate students to generate real communicative performance in a Spanish college classroom setting. The problem is that the texts are too literal. Furthermore, in Spain, technical English programs in particular are generally locked in a narrow, non-literary confine. This is one of the reasons why Algarra (2000) makes a case for including humanities in the ESP curriculum at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, where she uses literature, such as Rosario Ferre's novel *The House of the Lagoon*, in her technical English courses at the School of Architecture. Similarly, Kelly and Krishnan (1995) used literature in their English for engineering courses at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, only to find, however, that their students felt more at ease in the narrow-angled (vocation-oriented) confines of technical English. I will return to this matter later in this paper.

Because L2 learning textbook dialogues are often schematic, the characters portrayed in them tend to perpetuate social stereotypes. Hence, there is frequently an absence of personal implication in student performance, which is strictly cognitive, left-brain focused. Students concentrate almost exclusively on the factual contextual explicitness of texts, with hardly any implicit personal environment involved.

The introduction of role-playing as a methodology in university L2 learning courses in recent years has done little to alter this pattern. To some extent, this stems from the fact that textbooks frequently provide functionally rhetorical dialogues and information focused role-play tasks, which rarely take human sentiment into consideration. Following is an example from a textbook I used in a Business English class: “Work in pairs (Student A and Student B), Student A should look at the information below and Student B at the information on page 146”, after which Student A is told to read the profile and “be ready to play the role of Susan Robertson” (Lannon, Tullis & Trappe 1993: 11). The aim of the role-play was for students to simulate dialogically the functional criteria outlined in the textbook chapter.

The shortcoming of this sort of activity is that students focus on repository facts and strategic functions, without addressing the potential meaning that arises from sentiment. Attending exclusively to the lexical, grammatical, functional and strategic aspects of language substantially reduces the performers’ communicative options. The construction of meaning is limited by the overly cognitive objectives of the task, the problem-orientedness of which reduces the chances of genuine human contact.

To counter the prevalence of rhetorical–responsive function tasks commonly found in university L2 learning textbooks today, I suggest that more affective strategies be included in the curriculum.

In his outstanding work *Drama and Intelligence*, Courtney (1990: 6) sustains that drama is in essence a process of solving problems that are fictionally created by acting “‘as if’”, which responds to “the nature of human intelligence and cognition”, further suggesting that it is “the self’s fictional mode of operation”, being functional “an imaginative ‘enactive’ activity”. Possibilities derive from imagining things, and it is the process of acting upon possibilities, externalizing them in action, that makes ideas creative. Courtney further submits, “We do this in many spheres of life, not all of which are as obviously dramatic as role-taking or theatre” (p. 50), for it is only natural for humans to switch into an as-if mode of thinking to test hypotheses in reality and thereby “create a dramatic world that provides a valid perspective on the actual world”.

In a manner not unlike that which is employed by actors in the theatre, scientists test their imagined theories in laboratories. Similarly, students, when they are asked to role play, are expected to try out their hypotheses in a classroom setting. “In this frame, the student player, in tandem with at least one other player, uses logic, personal beliefs, attitudes and empathy when testing imaginings. The subsequent dramatisation is grounded in empathy, identification, association, mutuality and dialogue”. (DiNapoli, 2001: 105).

Other authors have proposed using this as a second language teaching method. In the literature, Smith (1984) and Via (1987) advocate using the creative ‘if’ as a tool for stimulating the imagination in the L2 learning process.

It is not uncommon for textbook authors, like dramatists and other fiction writers, to use what the language philosopher John R. Searle (1975: 324) calls “as if” or pretended reference in fiction discourse. So if textbook authors commonly use fictional dialogues, it seems that well-selected texts, written by established playwrights, could also be employed in L2 learning. Short (1981) suggests using Harold Pinter’s play *Trouble in Works*, in which a factory owner and a foreman grapple over how best to motivate workers.

Pinter’s play is not unlike a case study, in which a problem is presented and possible solutions are discussed. For the same purpose, I would also recommend other dramatic works, such as Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* or Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, both of which I have used in Business English classes.

In dramatic dialogue, meaning is dynamically exchanged between people in a context that includes subjective and emotional aspects, which enhance learning because the language is, as Di Pietro (1987: 2) described it, less “canned”. The author further holds that only by interpreting roles can a student’s individualism as a second language speaker be developed. He adds that this is not possible using “semantically empty dialogues” or by playing “stereotyped roles”, concluding that only by “thinking dramatically about discourse” can interaction be enhanced in the classroom (p. 6).

The more meaningful the dialogue is for students, the more personal the experience becomes for them. To be truly meaningful, the connection must be affective. For, as Hegman (1990: 305) suggests, “The fusing of affective and cognitive elements in teaching benefits both affective and cognitive components of learning, and both are critical to mastery of L2”. Without an empathic link between the students and the text itself, the endeavour becomes a left brain centred activity, a simulation. Jones (1995: 18) holds that it is an event played out “in which the participants have (functional) roles, duties and sufficient key information about the problem to carry out these duties”. This, of course, is currently standard procedure for role-plays. The problem, however, is that the principal aim of such undramatic role-plays is the correct performance of grammatical structures, language functions, and conventional discourse. As a result, the students’ concentration is primarily fixed on form and their performances often lack affective commitment. In other words, the exercises are short on what Gragg (1980: 4) describes as a natural “process of active thought and feeling”. As a result, communication, such as it is, is stunted. Paul Ekman (2003) suggests that the ability to

detect feelings improves communication. In dramatic role-plays feelings are expressed and detected. This affective quality of drama is precisely what differentiates it from undramatic role-play. Dramatic role-play “fosters empathy in the participants” (Stern, 1980: 82).

II. METHOD

In a Business English course I taught at the Universidad de Valencia, my students were mostly between the ages of 18 and 21. The ratio of males to females was about equal, the majority being Spaniards, with about ten percent of them coming from other countries, mostly in the European Union.

I took the role-play task earlier referred to (Lannon *et al.*, 1993: 11), and I rendered it dramatic for the students by having them focus on both the factual information and the potential for conflict. Susan Robertson and Giancarlo Peretto were the designated roles, to be played in pairs by Student A and Student B respectively. From the text we learned that Peretto was a middle-aged man and Robertson was in her late twenties. They were both university educated, and reasonably successful in their fields. She was American, and he was Italian. She worked for an American company and he was an Italian bank manager. A picture in the textbook revealed that they were both physically attractive.

The tasks provided by the textbook author did not illicit potential areas of emotional conflict between the two characters. Yet, they could easily be imagined. Perhaps Susan and Giancarlo were cross-culturally in disaccord over certain matters of behaviour. For example, as an American business person, Susan might be accustomed to grabbing a quick bite to eat for lunch at 12 o'clock. The Italian, however, might want to mix business with pleasure, preferring to have lunch at 2 o'clock and converse over a glass or two of wine. Perhaps Susan was not used drinking wine at midday. She might even think that Giancarlo was trying to flirt with her. For his part, Giancarlo might have difficulty getting Susan to accept the fact that if her company set up an office in Italy, it would not be able to fire workers for their political views.

The students discussed these and other potentially dramatic possibilities. One student even suggested that Susan Robertson became nonplussed when Giancarlo kept glancing at her breasts.

To broaden the range of textual input in the class, I presented students with scenes from plays. Students read a dramatic scene, analyzed the content, and discussed the potential underlying meaning of the text. I brought to the students' attention the fact that the linguistic

configuration alone does not govern the dramatic quality of a scripted scene, explaining to them that it is also to be found in the sum total of the speech acts involved in the event. On one occasion I asked them to read the following lines from Odets' (1935/1979: 7-8) play *Waiting for Lefty*:

JOE. Where's all the furniture, honey?

EDNA. They took it away.

JOE. When?

EDNA. Three o'clock.

JOE. They can't do that.

EDNA. Can't? They did it.

As an example of the linguistic potential of Odets' apparently simple text, I explained that when Edna said to Joe, "Three o'clock," she was not simply imparting factual information. I asked the students to think about what she in fact had really meant when she said it, and that prompted a class discussion, in which imagination and cognitive thinking were used to explore the inner life of the character.

By discussing the complexity of simple lines of dialogue, it was brought to the students' attention that language was not merely about imparting factual information. But rather, as discourse analysts would indicate, the circumstance itself defined the status of the speech act. Looking back at the beginning of the scene by Odets, I pointed out to the students that even before Joe had asked about the furniture, he would have probably been stunned by what he saw upon entering the flat. I explained to them that how he felt and what went on in his mind just then was not described by the playwright. Rather, it was up to the reader, and to the player interpreting the role, to imagine that part. I asked the students to reflect on what the characters might have felt, and suggested that, in so doing, they refer to what Golemen (1997: 289-290) called the "primary" human emotions: anger, fear, happiness, love, surprise, disgust, sadness, shame.

In discussing the implications of the scene, I asked the students to delve deeper into the reality of the characters. I told them to discuss the characters of the scene in small groups. To help them, I gave them the six following character building questions, adapted from Uta Hagen's (1991: 134) book on acting, *A Challenge for the Actor*: Who am I? What are the circumstances? What is my relationship to the other characters? What do I want? What keeps me from getting what I want? What can I do to overcome the obstacle? Then in groups I had them present their characters in the first person, and answer questions put to them by other students, who were not members of the same group.

On another occasion, I asked the students to read scenes from Miller's (1949/1976: 21) play, *Death of a Salesman*. Following is an example:

HAPPY. What's the matter?

BIFF. Why does Dad mock me all the time?

HAPPY. He's not mocking you, he—

BIFF. Everything I say there's a twist of mockery on his face. I can't get near him.

HAPPY. He just wants you to make good, that's all.

The students discussed possible underlying meanings in pairs, and then an open discussion on the subject ensued in class. I asked them to imagine themselves as one of the characters, and to make the part their own, suggesting that they ask themselves questions about their respective characters, such as, 'What would you do if you were a travelling salesman and found you couldn't drive anymore?'

III. RESULTS

I was able to get the students to use logic and imagination to interpret the characters that appeared in some of the dialogues in their textbooks. Their responses were fairly fluent, especially when they had prepared their performances in writing first. Following is an example of one student's presentation:

The company is NISSA. NISSA is a very important English company that produce and sell cars all over the world. Bill is one of two hundred workers of NISSA. He works in the Marketing Department. Now he has to sell cars in Russia and he does not know how to do this. Alice works with Bill. She is a colleague. And she knows a Russian business man who can help Bill. She looks for a telephone number and she calls Bill. Bill and Alice were friends at university. Bill is married now and Alice is not, but Alice likes him a lot and always wants to help him. Bill likes Alice also. Bill is happy. He and Alice go and have drinks together.

The students used Uta Hagen's (1991: 134) six character- building questions to interpret textbook dialogue personae. Following is an example of the written answers to the questions that one student later orally read to the class.

1. *Who am I?*

I am Jane West. I am an American. I work for a multinational company in London. I am 35 years old. I am married. But my husband is Bob. Bob and me do not get along now. I have a child. Her name is Janey. She is six years old.

2. *What are the circumstances?*

It is Friday morning. I have a headache. I am sad. Bob and I argued again last night. Mr South is the other assistant manager. He just came into the office to talk about our important client, Compass International, PLC.

3. *What is my relationship to the interlocutor?*

Mr South and I are work colleagues. He is younger than me. He is handsome. But he is too formal with me. He makes me nervous.

4. *What do I want?*

I want to do my job good and I want to be successful. I want Bob and me to get along again. I want Mr South to be nice to me.

5. *What keeps me from getting what I want?*

I have a headache. I can't concentrate. Bob and I don't talk. I don't see Janey enough time because I work. Mr South and I don't agree about the eastern region. I feel stupid now.

6. *What can I do to overcome the obstacles?*

I can take an aspirin. I can play with Janey when I arrive home. I will be patient.

I also had students use the six questions to interpret characters in scenes from plays. A student, interpreting a scene from *Death of a Salesman*, wrote and later orally read his answers to the questions about Willy Loman:

I'm Willy Loman. I'm a salesman. I've got two boys and a wife. I'm popular in New England... I arrived home early today. I almost had a car accident. I can't concentrate when I drive. I am tired. My wife is worried... I love Linda. But she asks many questions... I want to be successful. I want everyone to admire me. I want respect from my sons. I want Linda to stop asking questions... I'm old and tired. I have too many bills. I am a failure... I must be honest with my sons. I need their help. I must tell my wife I love her.

Although the students' performances were less fluent when done without relying on a previously written text, the results were emotionally more expressed. The students seemed to empathize more with the character when they were not reading. Following is an example of an improvised speech given by a Spanish student who had made his own the part of Biff:

eh, i'm the oldest son of the family- eh, i'm a boy- eh- man- eh- not-eh-i don't have- eh- self-confidence- eh- i- eh- lost my self-confidence time ago- eh- when i find my father with an-a woman- eh- because I believe that my father is- eh- was the best and, i- eh, think lost- eh- losed then- i losed the- eh- the affectivity i have to him- and i'm, eh, looking for my, eh, to find me because since then- eh- i am lost- eh- i have working in farms in every place- but nowhere I find that comfortable- i- eh- i need change every day of work and i- eh- this time i- eh- come back home because I want to be with my

fathers again- eh- but he is always- he- eh- shouting at me- eh- he- he never- eh said- eh- believed in me... .

Another Spaniard gave the following improvised speech based on a scene from *Waiting for Lefty*:

i am edna,-uh- the- a taxi driver's wife- called joe- i have a discussion with my husband- and we are talking about- uh- the circumstances of the- uh- we- uh- we don't earn money to live a normal life- to survive- because the conditions of the work of my- uh- the working conditions of my husband are very bad and- we- we- we dare to go on strike to react to- to earn more money- I want a happy life- for- for my children- because we- we are- in a very bad situation... . i intend to persuade him to react- to go on strike- to-to do something to-... . yeah but- yes but- if he works it- it don't- it doesn't change the situation- it doesn't have more- he doesn't have more money- but if he- if he goes- if he goes on strike- he- he intends to- he will intends to change the circumstances- the working- cond- the working conditions- the living conditions and more- more things

IV. DISCUSSION

By using drama, my L2 students became aware of the fact that without a dramatic perspective of the context, the characters in their textbook dialogues were too schematic. The students appeared to have acquired the habit of looking for the possible underlying meanings of texts and identifying the emotions of the personae. The ensuing class discussions, and subsequent role-play performances, seemed to indicate that their understanding of the texts was broad and empathic.

Drama gave the students more opportunities for encountering contextualized exposure to the language, in which they could experience the signalling value of natural and more spontaneous communication. Dramatic enactment helped them realize that outward signs of semantically significant categories were not readily defined. Students saw that even in the simplest of written and spoken texts numerous factors, including emotionally related aspects, were involved in identifying embedded and implied meaning.

The learners came to appreciate that getting at the underlying meaning of texts, and emotionally responding to it, was an essential part of all acting, whether it was on the stage in a theatre, at the conference podium or in the meeting room. They understood that underlying emotional features were part of all manner of discourse. Analyzing discourse meaning, whether in fiction or case studies, and dramatic role-playing helped learners become aware of

the speech acts and sentiments of dialogue characters. Using their imaginations, the students transformed third person personae into first person singular characters of their own devising.

In so far as getting students to think about the embedded meaning of dialogic texts and the underlying emotional aspects derived from conflict, the experience of using drama was, therefore, a success. Their analyses served as a starting point for class discussion on topics related to history (e.g., the Great Depression), psychology (e.g., love, fear, inhibitions), and sociology (e.g., male-female roles in marriage and society), and eventually, role-plays were undertaken.

However, when not directly read from a text that they had previously written the role-play performances tended to be rather uncomfortable ordeals for many of the students. The problem was not exclusively the result of shyness. But rather, when having to improvise, students were often too tense to perform to their full potential, largely because their concentration seemed to focus more on getting things right than on interpreting their personae. They often seemed more focused on the mark they would receive for their performances than with the experience of performing itself. Their overall preoccupation with the final grade was, of course, consistent with academic reality. Our respective roles were dictated by the circumstances inherent in the classroom setting: I was the teacher and they were the students; the subject of the course was technical or business English, and they would eventually have to be graded on their performances.

As was the case reported by Kelly and Krishman (1995: 80), who after experimenting with literature in a college English for Engineering course in Singapore found that their students preferred technical material to novels (the former materials seeming to them more useful), the endeavour on my part to include dramatic role-play in a technical English course at the tertiary level did not fare as well as I had hoped, owing, I suspected, to the limitations of the classroom setting itself. It was with this in mind that I presented a drama workshop proposal to the Vice-chancellor of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, where I subsequently taught two drama-in-English scene-study courses, one at the college of Telecommunications and another at the College Fine Arts that included students from the School of Business and the School of Architecture. The experience has thus far shown me that when transferred from a classroom setting to a workshop environment, in which artistic rather than linguistically focused performance was the main objective, and the technical English academic subject itself matter was of secondary importance, students were better able to cope with dramatic creativity when the matter of grades was no longer an issue. They were more prone to listen and react instinctively to each other in emotional circumstances than had

previously been the case in the classroom setting. Students were more relaxed and spontaneous when performing in front of others. They were able to focus less on themselves and more on what their partners were doing and saying, and responding in a more truthful and instinctive manner, not only becoming less self-conscious and more spontaneous as performers, but more confident readers after having engaged various literary text types, including scenes from Chekov's play *The Seagull* and poems from Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*.

The students' final dramatic role-play performances were recorded in the Instituto de las Ciencias de la Educación audiovisual studio, and subsequently posted on the university Politube cite, a video sharing website, which is available to the faculty of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, allowing the university community access to recorded documents of academic or pedagogical interest.

V. CONCLUSION

Some people would be surprised to know that Adam Smith, widely considered the founder of economics as a discipline, was a firm believer in the union of human reason and emotion. Recent studies on left- and right-brain activity, however, seem to support his claim, and advise developing both hemispheres in the educational process. This underscores the need to include in the university curricula studies that lend themselves to the enhancement of creativity and emotional expression. This article has suggested that right-brain directed aptitudes can be developed among university students working from different curricular content areas, including Business, Economics, Telecommunications, Architecture and the Fine Arts, and that drama is an excellent tool for achieving this. The article further pointed out that an acting technique based on listening and reacting instinctively to others in a workshop environment can stimulate spontaneous creativity, communal awareness and personal growth by energizing emotional intelligence.

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