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FORMULATING A LEARNING CONTEXT USING TEACHER IN ROLE FOR READING FLUENCY IN ESL STUDENTS

Chipo Marunda-Piki

Introduction

In this essay I share principles formulated from my own classroom experience with drama teaching and learning strategies. I make use of these theories to direct my action in class and explain the reasons for these actions. Pedagogical knowledge served as an element of my personal practice as I discussed my findings from my classroom experience with TiE. I identify the elements of drama that are closely linked to the performance culture that my learners are familiar with. My learners’ family traditions, morals and lessons have been passed on through narrative, and I knew I could not deny its transformative learning power or TiE. This essay is an excerpt from an examination of the dynamics, concerns and potential of the use of process drama in the teaching and learning of English to diverse learners. In this essay research I highlight the context within which I developed the research specific to teacher in role (TiR).

This chapter demonstrates how I embarked on a research journey that developed into a practical personal theory that looked at how strategies such as TiR, song and poetry can work to build learner vocabulary, connection forming and meaning-making for reading in learners of English as second language. Through an action research project I focused on the use of various strategy combinations of TiR that a teacher can deploy in the processes of teaching and learning phonemes, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Consequently, I was guided by the conviction that drama can scaffold language for learners who can make connections between the reading text presented to them and the physical presence and use of the body in class. In addition to my convictions, I was also guided by the beliefs of Dewey’s progressive theory and Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory that helped in formulating my learning framework. Using my grade one classes, which consist of 21 pupils, I was able to draw data from my class journal, learners’ class work and audio and visual recordings of lessons. The data were used as input into the formulation of my learning framework. I sought to explore the dynamics of using movement, sound and imaginative play in language learning.

Transforming text to performance

In the development of my students’ learning cycle, I introduced a functional model of language learning when I explored the relationship between language, text and the context...
while they listened to me read in TiR and conduct the lesson using various forms of TiR. As the learning cycle progressed, I introduced learners to other forms of text using choral speaking and poetry. Golombek and Roberts reinforced my teacher’s belief that the body of the teacher and its presence are important to the learning process. The body’s placement in the classroom and the body movements contribute greatly to language learning. This belief was formed on the basis of my own experiences as a young learner. I remember itching to move from my seat and to physically experience the imaginary world while my teacher recounted reading a story in class. Reading nursery rhymes such as ‘Little Miss Muffet’ ignited my imagination, but I experienced and understood the story more vividly when I performed a dance routine and movement piece in ballet class using the same poem. Almost two decades later, I combined these two approaches while teaching my learners the same nursery rhyme. This inspired my selection and application of TiR as I explored imaginary worlds with my learners.

I taught my students vocabulary, fluency and phonics for reading. I created opportunities for ‘weaving a social fabric in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place’ (Campbell 12). I also examined how Gardner’s multiple intelligences strategy can be implemented in the classroom while formulating ways of deploying TiR in my teaching and learning. To implement Gardner’s theory in an educational setting, I organised my teaching and selected my TiR activities based on the multiple intelligences trajectory. The process began with a study of a book by Julia Donaldson, titled The Gruffalo.

Learners bring with them intertextual resources to the teaching process that can be harnessed using TiR. Intertextual resources refer to different understandings and experiences of a text based on the learner’s own context, and these resources can be used in the school context (Lexis Education).

I wanted my learners to connect to the texts that I presented to them. I introduced the learning cycle and I prepared for the intertextualities that would emanate from the use of TiR. As I took on the role of the Gruffalo, language became the principal semiotic system that linked visual play in the form of drama to language acquisition. TiR allowed me to explore various dramatic activities with a modelling and deconstruction phase where learners watched me and engaged in embodiment of the text. At this point, learners made visible predictions about the text as I went in and out of role, thus developing a shared meta-language with them. The last phase for the reading cycle is joint construction. This includes activities such as choral reading where I took on the role of a director or camera crew and learners would work jointly to transfer written text into performance demonstrating their shared understanding about the topic, the genre and the shared meaning. Jackson and Bailey state that a teacher’s beliefs play a central role in teacher development. My general belief that TiR can transfer reading skills, such as meaning-making, phonics and expanding learners’ vocabulary, continued to contribute to the learning framework.

**Oral vocabulary learning for reading through TiR**

Pretend play is a dramatic approach to play that uses fantasy, character and plot (Erikson). In this case TiR embodies play which is related to learning objectives, thus making a worthwhile teaching approach. Pretend play is one of the forms of play which makes human actions multidimensional in that learners can develop different approaches to learning and create dramatic representations that are suitable for learning. In my study, I used TiR approaches as contributors to my delivery of a creative curriculum framework that explored vocabulary building for reading through play. Vocabulary knowledge and oral skills are among the most crucial aspects in the development of reading skills for my learners. In my study I noticed
how oral vocabulary is important when teaching reading fluency and comprehension, and while in role I was able to embody the relevant vocabulary and model language for my learners. TiR extended my learners’ vocabulary, and I observed that they read and made use of these words more confidently after we played with them. I could introduce them to more literary texts and provide vocabulary instruction in a nonthreatening way. Central to my study was the analysis of the extent to which TiR contributes to the realisation of vocabulary learning components such as word connection, a word-rich environment and context clues. When scaffolding learning, learners need to be able to connect the words they are trying to acquire with the words and concepts with which they are already familiar. Putting new words into themes is useful in delivering effective vocabulary learning, and embodying them through TiR contributes further to learners’ meaning and connection-making.

By using TiR to introduce words I was able to formulate a context in which learners would understand the text presented to them. In most of my TiR play I adopted a dialogic reading approach; this involved my learners and I having a dialogue around the text (Folsom). This strategy proved useful because it helped my learners to make use of their verbal fluency skills to build vocabulary and demonstrate their understanding of structure and learning. My discussion on the importance of pretend play using TiR with children is reinforced by scholars such as Chitambire, Chivandikwa and Makumbirofa. They note how pretending is valuable to learners’ cognitive development and knowledge acquisition and retention. TiR experiences offer opportunities for teachers to share their interests and experiences while learning, and both teacher and learners can freely explore challenging topics. I also observed that my learners became more comfortable with texts as they interacted with them in a more dramatic way. Learners developed important complex social skills and higher-order thinking skills required for vocabulary learning, and they engaged as students in role. Using this form of imaginative play my learners cultivated a social and emotional intelligence that aided in the transfer of reading skills. As my learners learnt to read social cues, recognise and regulate emotions, negotiate and take turns, and engage in a long-term activity, we developed common cultural experiences that aided in meaning-making and added to the development of their reading skills.

**TiR in vocabulary synthesis for reading**

This section looks at the role of TiR in the systematic synthesis of knowledge for reading skills and its contribution to the learning of vocabulary and fluency. Research presented by Kreutzer reveals the benefits of learners’ participation in pretend play. She highlights the cognitive benefits of using pretend play in language acquisition. Russ highlights the different cognitive and affective processes that are associated with pretend play. Russ’s research on play involves fantasy, make-believe, symbolism, organisation, cognitive integration of seemingly separate content and divergent thinking, which I harness to meet the academic goals for teaching reading using TiR. Folsom places value on a strong oral vocabulary in the development of both reading fluency and comprehension. Folsom’s and Russ’s contributions are reflected in my study where I look at TiR as a pretend play process that contributes to vocabulary building and strengthens my learners’ reading skills. During pretend play, the learner is in control of the amount of incoming stimuli (Erikson), and thus TiR allowed for power sharing and contributed greatly to the dynamic in the classroom.

As my learners engaged in pretend play with me, no one form of play prevailed; instead it offered multiple play facets. TiR contributed to the creative curriculum, which, according to Dodge et al., focuses on active learning through play. TiR was able to enhance my learners’
receptive vocabulary when we engaged in themed play and language production through chanting song and poetry, and during the use of TiR. Using TiR allowed for the development of print awareness, an attribute of pretend play (Dodge et al.). TiR allowed my learners and me to pursue our own interests and take advantage of their natural desire to communicate. In the context of this study I engaged TiR as a form of pretend play for the development of my learners’ receptive vocabulary, because I observed that the more words my learners heard, the better they would cope with reading tasks assigned to them. I implemented a creative curriculum based on an oral approach intended to prepare learners for reading and meaning-making. Inspired by views held by Vygotsky and Dewey, I examine play in TiR as a contributing factor to learners’ success in literacy. There is more to this study, and I seek to explore the link between pretend play and growth in memory for reading English and symbolic recognition for letter identification leading up to an extended vocabulary. As Emfinger describes, pretend play is a precursor for divergent thinking, and as TiR is imaginative play that allows learners to think and reason, it is an important component of the curriculum.

Cultural practices influencing my learners include a strong oral tradition which combines embodied learning and the use of social and cultural knowledge, as discussed by Shizha. From this, I knew I needed to find ways to transform literary text into performance so that my learners would engage with the material more deeply, which would foster positive behaviour in the classroom. As I made use of TiR I was able to accommodate my learners’ need for a performative approach to learning; this also involved teaching students to learn in ‘noise’ and in ‘silence’. I also knew I could foster a natural way of learning that borrowed from African oral traditions such as storytelling, where the storyteller often uses strategies such as call and response to engage learners.

**Conclusion**

TiR offered a multidimensional, interactive and participatory approach that encouraged varied noise levels and experiences of silence. As I became more deliberate when enforcing TiR I observed that my learners developed varying levels of creative self-awareness and social consciousness that, in turn, helped to directly regulate the noise level and quality of noise in my classroom, resulting in positive behaviour. In my experience of teaching my learners to read aloud through TiR, I was able to help my learners connect with the text. Learners took ownership of their learning and freely gave feedback. I observed that learners corrected each other during the playing process and often in a nonthreatening way. I was able to delve into group and classroom management using TiR, thus enriching my learners’ dramatic experience. This inspired me to further explore the use of other drama strategies in the teaching of phonics and phonetic awareness so that my learners could read more independently and we could enter the world of learning using other forms of written text such as song and poetry.

**References**


