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43
OUTCOMES OF USING DRAMA-BASED PEDAGOGY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Jenna Nilson

Introduction

The field of language teaching and learning offers substantial opportunities for connection to drama education. An ongoing body of research documents the positive effects of drama-based methods of teaching on increasing language learners’ linguistic abilities in literacy, writing, speaking, and listening (Podlozny 2000; Stinson and Winston 2011). In order to further inquire into this realm of work, I synthesized the results of 14 previous studies published within the last 15 years in order to identify and describe the outcomes of using performative language-teaching methods in foreign and second-language classrooms within schools and universities. These studies include research from North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania in teaching English, German, Korean, and Italian as foreign or second languages. From this research survey, I found that recent studies highlight increased learner motivation and self-confidence through the use of drama-based methods in the language classroom, as well as a reduction in learner anxiety. Moreover, studies point to the positive impact on the intercultural factors of the language class (Nilson 2019). In this piece, I aim to further explore drama’s significance for intercultural learning in the language classroom through a discussion on theory and research. Finally, I offer a lesson plan integrating key concepts in intercultural and drama-based teaching and learning.

Intercultural outcomes

Both theory and research relating to second language acquisition (SLA) emphasize the need for complex cultural encounters within language learning. Sociocultural theory in SLA adds a further dimension to the relationship between culture and language learning. In her book Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives, Sonia Nieto (2010, 3–5) asserts that language teachers need to recognize students’ agency and individual identities in order to build community in the classroom in culturally responsive pedagogy. Language scholar Anthony J. Liddicoat (2004, 18) connects theories with practice by outlining principles for intercultural language teaching and learning. Because language and culture are so deeply intertwined, Liddicoat (2004, 18) argues they cannot be taught separately, nor can culture be simply introduced as a skill in addition to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Intercultural language pedagogy
needs to provide opportunities for students to take a personal and comparative perspective on their own culture and the culture(s) of the languages that they are learning and to socially interact and reflect on differences within cultural encounters (Liddicoat 2004, 21).

So what can drama do? Kim and Kim (2017, 51), Gualdron and Castillo (2018, 220), and Bournot-Trites et al. (2007, 19) all found in their studies that students increased their appreciation for or their understanding of the culture of the target language studied through the use of drama-based methods in the language classroom. In addition to helping students gain awareness and understanding of other cultures, drama can also offer opportunities for perspective-taking and reflection on cultural difference. Rothwell (2015, 591) observes in her study in a German as a foreign language middle-school class in Australia that process drama allowed students to connect Australia’s cultural context to that of Germany’s through exploring themes of migration in both countries. Similarly, Marunda-Piki (2018, 112) describes how in her experience of teaching English to primary schoolers in Zimbabwe, students compared their own cultural experiences through the dramatization of narratives told in the English language. Finally, Salopelto (2008, 71) concludes in her study in a Finnish middle-school English class that through role-taking as well as watching dramatic situations unfold amongst their classmates, drama provided students opportunities to empathize with others’ situations, a key factor in gaining intercultural competence. In these studies, the ability to discuss and take on perspectives of others remains key. Moreover, in an analysis of Anja Jägers’s research study on the use of drama in a German middle-school class in English as a foreign language, Küppers (2011, 5) describes how, for intercultural learning to take place through drama-based methods, teachers need to offer learners sufficient background knowledge on the cultural contexts explored in the class. In conclusion, drama-based approaches of language teaching need to include opportunities for perspective-taking, comparison, and reflection and offer the necessary context on what culture is and why culture matters.

An intercultural performative praxis thus evolves from an understanding of the crucial role that culture plays within language learning and the ways in which embodied work and performance in the classroom provide an avenue into meaningful cultural explorations. From my investigation into theoretical literature and practical research I have concluded that there are seven key components of engaging with culture in a drama-based language class. These components are:

- Establishing community in the language classroom and acknowledging students’ agency.
- Creating contexts for meaningful task-based social interaction focusing on cultural content in the target language.
- Incorporating and respecting students’ individual identities.
- Recognizing identity and culture as action. Neither is static.
- Recognizing and addressing existing power structures.
- Providing opportunities for students to explore and share about their own cultures, not just that of the target language, and providing opportunities for students to reflect on differences.
- Using meaningful and relevant cultural material as learning resources.

In order to further contextualize my work with a practical example, I offer a sample lesson plan incorporating key elements discussed in the list above. This lesson plan targets students in a secondary/high school intermediate-level English as an Additional Language (EAL) class. By discussing both “seen” aspects of culture such as food and music and “unseen” elements such as values and relationships to power, this lesson plan aims to address what the literature stresses as the need to further include direct and in-depth explorations of culture within the language class.
Outcomes of using drama-based pedagogy

As an introductory session that provides a broad context for both cultural values and ensemble, image, and movement work, this lesson plan would be ideal for facilitating at the beginning of a drama-based residency or curriculum in a language course. The lesson begins with a collective drawing activity and an overview of cultural values to establish a sense of community and ensemble as well as offer the necessary context on the importance of different layers to culture and the ways culture affects our identity. Then, through group and individual image and movement work, students explore, compare, and reflect on different “seen” and “unseen” cultural facets.

Cultural values lesson plan

Goal: Students will build a shared understanding of cultural values and explore similarities and differences among their individual and collective cultural values.

Objectives

- Students will reflect on their own and their classmates’ cultural values through a continuum activity and image work.
- Students will build vocabulary skills relating to cultural values and engage in spontaneous communication in the target language.
- Students will build skills in image work through creating images of “seen” and “unseen” cultural items.

Materials

- Blank sheets of paper, pens/markers, large piece of poster paper, poster paper with an image of a “Cultural Iceberg,” image prompts for collective drawing and continuum activity, ball of string.

Vocabulary

- Culture, values, risk, power.

Mechanics/procedure

Anticipatory set: naming

- Students go around in a circle and state their name, and the circle repeats back. Students then go around the circle and state their name along with a movement, and everyone repeats back their name and the movement.

Warmer/focus: collective drawing

- Teaching Artist places a large blank piece of poster paper on the ground.
- Students respond with either a picture or a word as Teaching Artist offers words and images related to “seen” and “unseen” cultural values. For example: food, music, time, family, power, relationships, religion, and expression of emotion.
• Teaching Artist plays music as the group works on their collective picture. When finished, students do a “walk-around” to view their work.
• Teaching Artist asks the group to name what images and words they see in the collective picture.

**Lesson input: what are cultural values?**
• Teaching Artist introduces and reviews the term “cultural value.”
• Teaching Artist introduces a “Cultural Iceberg” to the class on a large piece of poster paper with a drawing of an iceberg. The top of the iceberg is labeled “What I can see,” and the bottom is labeled “What I cannot see,” with a few examples of each.
• Students add with either a drawing or a picture to the “Cultural Iceberg” in each of the two sections.
• Teaching Artist reviews still-image work with the group, asking for volunteers to give an example of a still-image.
• In pairs, students choose two items from “What I can see” and two items from “What I cannot see.” Students work together to create a still-image of each item. Pairs share their four images with the class. The group must try to guess what each of the images represent, and if that image is a “seen” or “unseen” cultural item.

**Guided practice**

**Continuum**
• Teaching Artist invites students to stand in a horizontal line facing one side of the room.
• Teaching Artist introduces the concept of a continuum and assigns one side of the room “strongly agree” and the other side of the room “strongly disagree.” Students walk to either side or somewhere along the continuum according to how strongly they agree/disagree with the following prompts. Teaching Artist assists with vocabulary through images, miming, or flashcards as needed.
  • I like to take risks.
  • I like to be on time.
  • It is important to follow rules from people in power.
  • I show my emotions to other people.
  • I like competition.
  • I like change.
  • I tell people what I think.
• Teaching Artist either prompts students to discuss in a pair about why they placed themselves where they are on the continuum or asks for a volunteer to share out to the group for each of the prompts.

**Cultural Iceberg Movement Pieces**
• Students create their own Cultural Iceberg on a piece of paper. They can draw or write four items about themselves that are “seen” and four items that are “unseen,” drawing on the previous continuum and collective Cultural Iceberg activity. Students individually come up with a movement to represent one “seen” item and one “unseen” item.
Outcomes of using drama-based pedagogy

- Teaching Artist prompts students to share their individual Cultural Icebergs in a group of four, comparing and contrasting any differences and similarities. Students share their movements with the group. The group then works to create a short piece combining each other’s movements. Teaching Artist provides suggestions/examples of how they might work to combine their movements. Groups create a title for their piece.
- Groups share out their short performances to the class. Teaching Artist asks: *What did you notice about other people’s Icebergs in the activity? What surprised you? What do you think these movements represent?*

Reflection: perspective web

- Teaching Artist provides students with the prompt, “I learned about…” and students can respond with either something they learned about another classmate or something they learned about themselves.
- Teaching Artist starts with one end of a ball of string and offers a starting statement, tossing the ball to another student in the circle to respond. Students continue passing the ball around the circle until everyone has had a chance to share their reflection statement.
- Teaching Artist identifies how the strings create a web, connecting each of the students in class together.

Assessment

Formative

- Students show an understanding of the differences between “seen” and “unseen” aspects of culture and cultural values in the still-image, Cultural Iceberg, and continuum activities.
- Students engage in spontaneous communication in the target language in the continuum activity and in creating still-images/movements in groups.
- In the reflection activity, students are able to identify cultural values that they learned about.

Conclusion

As a whole, the preceding lesson plan attempts to synthesize my discussion on the literature and the key components that I highlighted. Through creating a movement sequence based on the “seen” and “unseen” items from the Cultural Iceberg activities, students not only work together on a specific task related to cultural content but also engage in reflecting on differing cultural knowledge and perspectives, a factor in the language class that Liddicoat (2004) asserts is essential to intercultural learning. In the continuum exercise, students share and reflect on the relationship between culture and power. Throughout the lesson, students draw from their own and each other’s cultural backgrounds, providing relevant and meaningful material to use as resources to create their final movement sequence; students’ unique identities are centered in the process. Moreover, this lesson plan incorporates what Rothwell (2015), Marunda-Piki (2018), and Salopelto (2008) conclude is drama’s distinctive ability to allow students to take on differing viewpoints. In the above lesson, students share and “try on” their classmates’ cultural perspectives through embodiment; students pull from their collected drawings in the group Cultural Iceberg to create images and combine their
individual icebergs in their movement sequences. Thus, overall, the lesson plan underscores drama as an integral method of language teaching that offers students the space to reflect, to share, and to embody cultural elements in meaningful and contextual social interaction.

References


