

**April 1994**

## **Creating Drama with Poetry: Teaching English as a Second Language Through Dramatization and Improvisation**

*April 1994*

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Creating drama with poetry is an exciting language learning experience. The technique employs a multi-sensory approach to language acquisition by involving second language learners physically, emotionally, and cognitively in the language learning process. The use of poetry as drama in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom enables the students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text without concentrating on the mechanics of language. Students are able to develop a sense of awareness of self in the mainstream culture through the dramatic interpretations of the poems.

Second language acquisition becomes internalized as a direct result of placing the learners in situations that seem real. The students use the target language for the specific purpose of communication. They experiment with non-verbal communicative aspects of language (body language, gestures, and facial expressions), as well as verbal aspects (intonation, rhythm, stress, slang, and idiomatic expressions), while interpreting the poems. The students begin to feel the language and gain the confidence to interact outside the classroom using the target language. Some poems are mini-dramas, often written in dialogue form, and are suitable for dramatization because they are short and usually have one simple, but strong emotional theme. "Poems which express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions, or ideas are usually more 'productive' than those which are gentle, descriptive, or neutral" (Tomlinson, p. 36, 1986). Students become engaged in free flowing extemporaneous conversations as they interact with one another prior to the dramatizations and during the improvisations. The students compare and contrast cultural behaviors and attitudes, analyze and explore the linguistic and conceptual differences between the written and spoken word, and interact cooperatively to orchestrate the dramatizations and improvisations.

### **The Role of the Teacher**

In this technique, students have more responsibility for their own learning. However, this does not diminish the importance of the teacher in the instructional process. It is the responsibility of the teacher to guide the language learning process by:

- modeling pronunciation, intonation, stress, rhythm, and oral expression;
- facilitating comprehension of vocabulary, idioms, cultural aspects, and plot;
- stimulating interest and conversation, and interacting with the students;
- establishing an acting workshop atmosphere;
- creating a student-participatory language learning experience.

### **Implementing this Technique in the Classroom**

In this approach, the teacher provides students with the background to the poem and introduces difficult or unusual vocabulary. The teacher then reads the poem aloud to the students. After the poem is read aloud, the class discusses it together. Students then listen again as the teacher re-reads the poem. In the next step, the students read the poem chorally and then take turns reading it aloud individually.

The students then prepare to dramatize the poem by selecting character roles and discussing scenery, props, lighting, and costumes. Students rehearse the dramatization of the poem and then do an improvisation based on the poem. After experimenting with character interactions and dialogues, the class discusses the improvisation.

### **Examples of Poems that Have Been Used Successfully in the ESL Classroom**

One dramatization of a poem that has been used successfully and is recommended for high intermediate or advanced adult ESL learners is John Wakeman's *Love in Brooklyn*. Students portray characters in a love relationship and compare and contrast cultural views [..."I love you, Horowitz," he said, and blew his nose. She splashed her drink..."]. They can experiment with colloquialisms, epithets, and slang and learn to use language appropriate for different interpersonal situations [..."The hell you say," he said.] [..."You wanna bet?" he asked.]. Dramatization also allows students the opportunity to interpret and practice using body language as a means of non-verbal communication [..."She took his hand in hers and pressed it hard. And his plump fingers trembled in her lap."].

*Why Did the Children Put Beans in Their Ears?* by Carl Sandburg is one poem that is recommended for beginning and low intermediate adolescent and adult ESL learners. Students portray a husband and wife who ask two rhetorical questions about why children do things that they are expressly told not to do ["Why did the children put beans in their ears..."] [..."Why did the children pour molasses on the cat..."]. Through the dramatization, students can utilize intonation, rhythm, stress, body language, facial expressions, and gestures to convey the frustrated interchange between the disgruntled and bewildered characters [..."when the one thing we told the children they must not do was..."].

*Woodpecker in Disguise*, by Grace Taber Hallock is recommended for advanced beginner and low intermediate level young children. Students take turns being the narrator ["Woodpecker taps at the apple tree."] ["...says he."] ["Little bug says..."] ["Woodpecker says..."]. Students portraying the woodpecker practice using body gestures ["Woodpecker taps at the door."] and asking questions ["...Who is it, sir?"].

*Read This with Gestures*, by John Ciardi, is recommended for advanced beginner and low intermediate level young children. During the dramatization, one student speaks to one or more people ["It isn't proper, I guess you know,..."] In the improvisation, students may cooperatively dialogue the four actions; the students read, dramatize, and improvise the poem with gestures as indicated by the poem's title [..."dip your hands--like this--in the snow..."] ["...make a snowball..."] ["...look for a hat..."] ["...try to knock it off--like that!"].

## **Suggestions For The Teacher**

The ESL teacher needs to create a poetry file by carefully selecting and categorizing a substantial variety of poems. In selecting poems, special consideration must be given to appropriateness of the following:

- students' language level skills
- students' ages
- students' interests

Categorizing poems makes them easy to reference and integrate into other instructional disciplines (i.e., science, health, math, and citizenship) and themes (i.e., holidays and seasons). To further facilitate the communicative approach to second language acquisition, the ESL teacher can record the dramatizations and improvisations. A great deal of conversation will be stimulated when the students relive their experiences through tape recordings, video recordings, and still photography.

The teacher should plan follow-up activities about the dramatizations and improvisations that allow for individual expression of the cooperative experience. The students can illustrate and write about the activity or poem. Future lessons can also include the dramatization and improvisation of short stories, fables, and plays. The same techniques and follow-up activities should be employed.

## **Conclusion**

The use of poetry in the ESL classroom enables students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text without concentrating on the mechanics of language. The dramatization of poetry is a powerful tool in stimulating learning while acquiring a second language because the learners become intellectually, emotionally, and physically involved in the target language within the framework of the new culture.

Poetry rich in dialogue provides students with a dramatic script. Drama places the learners in situations that seem real. Learners use the target language for specific purposes, language is more easily internalized and, therefore, language is remembered.

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This report was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education, under contract no. RR93002010. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.