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Using Drama in ESP: The Interdepartmental Language Centre as a Learning Community

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present article will describe and discuss the use made of drama in two ESP courses run at the interdepartmental language centre at the University of Turin (CLA-UniTo). I will suggest that these two courses, through their use of drama and modern technologies, represent interesting examples of the use of collaborative learning in the creation of a stimulating and polyphonic learning community.

The first of these courses was for students in their third year of a five-year course in primary education. Their target CEFR level was B2. The second was for first year students in social work, who had a target CEFR level of B1. The trainee primary school-teachers focused on the use that might be made of drama in the English language classroom, with a particular focus on cross-curricular/CLIL activities. The trainee social-workers considered the use of drama in peer-education, considering sex education, mental health, substance abuse prevention, immigration and racism, domestic violence, homophobia and bullying. They also role-played various social-work professional/service-user interaction scenarios.

Both groups made use of subscription and open-access resources available online to read a selection of articles and carry out independent research on the educational uses of drama and role-play. As well as these “authoritative” academic texts, the social work students in particular were also invited

to explore some of the darker corners of the internet, considering “Pro-Ana” and “Pro-Mia” websites, the vitriol directed at social workers by the tabloid press in the wake of the Baby P case and Youtube videos and blogs made by angry parents involved in Child Protection proceedings. The learning process, then, was seen as involving an individual critical engagement with a vast variety of discourses, rather than the passive reiteration of a singular authoritative narrative. The students subsequently prepared a short scripted play on a subject of their choice, following brainstorming, discussion and free improvisation activities. They introduced their plays with a brief PowerPoint presentation in which they outlined the theoretical framework behind their projects (see Appendix for some samples of these projects).

2. DRAMA AND THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

All of the course participants made creative use of the technological facilities available in the classroom (the LIM, the projector, the stereo and online resources) to provide visual “special effects” and a suitable soundtrack for their performances. Student expertise (i.e. the superior technological know-how of these classes of digital natives) was tapped into and foregrounded as an integral part of the collaborative learning process. Videos of the plays and the files of the Powerpoint presentations were shared on an online platform, where students could offer comments and suggestions about each other’s work. Trausan-Matu *et al.* (2007) have emphasized how modern technologies can be used to render the learning process dialogic and polyphonic, in a Bakhtinian sense, through Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), and these specific courses were certainly illustrative of ways in which modern technology can enable the dialogue within the learning process to retain a horizontalist, non-hierarchical trajectory and a polyphonic character.

A great deal of research has been done into the advantages of drama in collaborative language teaching. To summarize some of the key advantages:

- a) Drama integrates the four skills: reading and writing of the script and listening and speaking with the production (Zyoud 2010, 2).
- b) Drama facilitates a natural integration of acquired language skills with a functional setting (*ibid.*).
- c) Language practice through drama is communicative, bringing together the verbal and non-verbal, cognitive and affective aspects of language

production. Acquired language thus passes from being a dry academic exercise to being part of a complex communicative interaction (*ibid.*). To quote a useful summary by Freeman *et al.* (2003, 131):

Drama [...] is a total activity, concerned with the inner self and surroundings, the physical and the mental self, the individual and the community, and the human situation and potential. In general, drama is concerned with the whole person.

- d) Drama is inclusive, since it allows for the participation of students with different levels of language competence.
- e) Because of its inclusiveness and because it necessarily involves teamwork, drama fosters good classroom dynamics and the creation of a fertile “learning community”. In a useful definition to which I will return below, McMillan and Chavis (1986) define sense of community in terms of four core dimensions: “Membership”, “Influence”, “Integration and Fulfilment of Needs”, and “Shared Emotional Connection”.
- f) Drama harnesses student creativity, engaging students imaginatively and making them agents in a constructivist, collaborative learning process.
- g) Drama not only facilitates but also motivates memorization (Zyoud 2010, 2).



Figure 1. – The four dimensions of a learning community.

Drama is, in many ways, a natural choice for the primary classroom, since it draws on children's natural proclivity for imagination and pretend play (Vernon). As such it is a big motivator. It also disrupts the traditional hierarchies of the classroom, since the teacher comes to act as a facilitator, whilst the learners become the agents in the learning process. This is refreshing for children, who are often forced into a passive role in their own education and marginalized in any decision-making processes. To quote Sewell (2006, 2), in a traditional school environment "Teachers as knowledge holders are authorized to control and make decisions about children's learning, and children as passive consumers are required to perform set tasks".

In a learning community, by contrast, pupils and teachers share agency ("Membership" and "Influence") and thus both have a vested interest in outcomes ("Integration and Fulfilment of Needs", "Shared Emotional Connection").

3. DRAMA IN PEER-EDUCATION PROCESSES

This democratizing facet of drama is also a key factor in its success in peer education in the social services. Like the younger children taught by primary teachers in the traditionalist, hierarchical classroom, the individuals involved in peer-education processes typically feel themselves to be in some sense marginalized and disenfranchised. Again, empowerment through creativity and the nurturing of participants' sense of "Membership" and "Influence" within the group is a key advantage of this approach. The space which dramatic activities give to participants' own voices and experiences avoids them feeling that they are being somehow "infantilized" or "colonized" by the intervention underway. To quote Gay and Stone Hanley (1999, 366), with specific reference to peer education in a multiethnic educational context:

Issues of ethnic and cultural diversity can be examined through experiences of the students' own creation, rather than depending entirely on print materials produced by other authorities. Validation of cultural knowledge empowers students to strive for greater individual and collective achievement. Through the integration of facts and feelings, knowing and doing, individuality and collectivity, drama activates intuition, creativity, community, caring, commitment to social change, and the imperative for excellence.

The consideration and simulation of both of these kinds of dramatic activities in the ESP classroom yielded some very positive results. Interestingly, as in

the educational settings being simulated, the traditional hierarchy between the university teacher as “expert” and “authority” and the students was in many ways dissolved. This re-empowerment of the students was useful, since students in non-language departments are often somewhat resentful of the obligatory language modules on their syllabi. For the students, these courses are often seen as an unwelcome outside imposition which places them at a disadvantage. Some even go so far as to refer to their non-elective English modules as an example of cultural imperialism, resenting the fact that the cultural-political hegemony of Anglo Saxon culture resulted in their being forced to study in a language in which they were not at their ease – in a silencing of their own authentic voices. In the case of both of these degree programmes, moreover, university study itself is in many cases seen as an unwelcome imposition, since, in Italy, both primary teachers and social workers were able to practice with a specialized high-school diploma (the “diploma magistrale”) until 2002. Thanks to these activities, however, the students became highly motivated, because they were learning in an empowering, constructionist and creative manner, defining and developing their own activities based on their own professional expertise and experience and building up their language knowledge as they responded to challenges which they had set themselves. Much was made of the fact that the students held professional and technical knowledge and expertise in which the teacher was lacking. The teacher was no longer “the only expert in the class”¹.

4. CONCLUSION

I would suggest that this experience of language acquisition might ultimately have professional applications which are broader than those of the grammar and lexis acquired. As I have already suggested, the trainee teachers and social workers undertaking ESP training shared something of the initial sensation of disadvantage and marginalization which might have been initially felt by their young or socially marginalized pupils and clients. Through the interactive, student-led approach adopted, they were able to experience for themselves the efficacy (and perhaps the potential limitations) of the methodologies being tried out.

¹ To quote Alex Gitterman, “For collaborative learning to evolve, the teacher must be willing to give up the role of being the only expert in the class” (Gitterman 2008, 62).

It is interesting to observe, then, how blurred the boundaries between CLIL and ESP become during this kind of course. The traditional understanding of ESP within vocationally oriented degree courses such as those with which we are here concerned would have been that there existed a clear distinction between language and content – between language training, which offers lexical and grammatical communication tools, and the more vocational courses, which further cultural awareness, specific knowledge and cultural skills. I hope that the above discussion has demonstrated the extent to which Do Coyle’s “Four Cs” (Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture) came to be integrated in the learning process that took place during these courses. Content and Communication are closely linked: the students are at once “learning to use language and using language to learn” (Coyle 2005, 5). The development of Content and Communication go hand in hand with that of Cognition. Learning is collaborative and constructionist, and the traditional hegemony of the “expert” is absent:

For CLIL to be effective, it must challenge learners to think and review and engage in higher order thinking skills. CLIL is not about the transfer of knowledge from an expert to a novice. CLIL is about allowing individuals to construct their own understanding and be challenged, whatever their age or ability (*ibid.*).

Finally, what Coyle terms “self and other awareness”, or Culture, is always in the foreground and is the subject of constant renegotiation.

To conclude, these two courses developed and tapped into a variety of different “networks”. Most obviously, the language centre becomes a hub wherein different disciplines (language, social work / pedagogy, drama, art and technology) come together to work towards a shared learning objective. During lessons, an egalitarian network or “learning community” is built up between teacher and students. Finally, and crucially, the traditionally disparate areas of language and content become intermeshed, enhancing the development not only of lexical and grammatical knowledge, but also of the cognitive skills and cultural awareness which are innate to communication and crucial to professional and personal development.

APPENDIX: EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT PLAYS

1. Primary Education: *Alice's Adventures in Discoverland*

Scene 1

Alice sits at her desk, staring at her science book.

ALICE: Why I can't remember all these scientists that I have to study? I'm so bored.
I think that I will go to sleep.

Alice is snoring. While Alice is dreaming, she sees a lot of people in white coats, dancing in the fog.

NARRATOR: Hi Alice, Welcome to Discoverland. I'm here to be your guide and let you meet the most important scientists of all history. Now follow me.

Scene 2

Alice comes into a café, where there are people sitting at tables, talking to each other.

ALICE: Where are we now? It looks like a bar.

NARRATOR: That's right. This is the "Scientist's bar", here you can ask for information about inventions. Let's start with this table.

G. MARCONI: Hi young girl, a long time ago, my invention was the only way to listen to music and to the news. Now you can use my invention when you are in the car with your parents on a long trip. What is my invention?

ALICE: I know it!!! It's the radio, but I don't know your name.

MARCONI: My name is Guglielmo Marconi (*project photo*), I'm Italian and I was born in 1874 and I died in 1937.

P. FARNSWORTH: And do you know who I am?

ALICE: No I don't, I'm sorry.

P. FARNSWORTH: Try to guess: My invention is in almost every house, some families have more than one. All over the world, millions of people watch me for hours, sitting on their sofas. My invention is really important for Homer Simpson. What is my invention?

ALICE: I think I know what you invented... It is the television!!

P. FARNSWORTH: Yes, my name is Philo Farnsworth (*project photo*), I was born in 1906 in California and I died in 1971. My invention is really useful, but remember to play outside every day with your friends and don't watch to the television for too many hours.

[...]

Scene 5

Alice and the narrator leave the table and start to talk. The narrator sees that Alice seems sad.

NARRATOR: Alice you look sad. I thought that you would be happy, after this trip.

ALICE: Yes I am, but I notice something: there are only men in this bar. Why there aren't any woman?

NARRATOR: Yes I know that's because a long time ago, women were considered subordinated to the men. So they have no chance to study. Fortunately now times are changing, and women are really important for research and science. (*Project pictures of famous female inventors with basic information*)

ALICE: After this trip I understand the importance of studying to creating something new for society! When I grow up I want to be an inventor.

Cooper enters with his mobile phone and the music starts. Everybody dances.

2. Social Work: Sara, Sophia and Ana

A girl stands in the middle of the stage, staring at her mobile phone.

SARAH: I want to be loved.

ANA: You need to be beautiful. You need to be thin. Look – thinspiration! (*project thinspiration photos*).

SOPHIA: Here you are! I missed you! Come and have lunch with me.

ANA: You can't have lunch. You'll get fat (*project body image dysmorphia "fat" photo*).

SARAH: I can't have lunch. I'll get fat.

SOPHIA: Don't be silly. I'm worried about you. You're too thin.

ANA: She suspects you. I have tips and tricks to hide our secret (*project and read aloud "Tips and Tricks" page from pro-Ana website*).

SOPHIA: I'm worried. I care about you.

SARAH: I'm frightened. I want to be free.

ANA: I'm your only real friend. You are not special without me.

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to illustrate how the Interdepartmental Language Centre of a university can come to represent a fertile and dynamic learning community. Its specific focus is the use of drama in two ESP courses run by the interdepartmental language centre at the University of Turin (CLA-UniTo). The first was a third-year workshop for trainee primary school teachers, the second a first-year module on a degree course in social work. Both of these courses might be said to bridge the rather ill-defined boundaries between CLIL and ESP, as in both cases language is taught through content and content through language. This cross-curricular focus disrupts the traditional verticalist hierarchy of the teacher-pupil relationship, since the course participants frequently have content-based knowledge and experience in which the "teacher" is lacking. The use of dramatization proved particularly useful in engaging and empowering each individual student in these classes, transforming the learning process into a dynamic, collaborative enterprise.