

Introduction

Who is this book for?

Children

Nearly all the activities in this book have been used in the classroom with children between the ages of five and twelve at different levels. Of course, other factors affect the suitability of the individual activities for different children: the amount of drama they have done before, the kind of teaching environment they are used to, their gender, the atmosphere in the classroom, and cultural attitudes towards physical expression. The teacher is the best person to decide how these factors affect his or her class. Therefore, the recommended ages and levels in each activity are given for guidance only.

Teachers

This book is for both inexperienced and experienced primary-level language teachers who are interested in introducing, or developing, drama as an extra dimension in their teaching. It provides practical introductory activities for teachers who have never used drama in their classrooms before. There are also more ambitious activities, like plays and improvisations, for those who feel more confident about using drama as an integral part of their lessons, or who want to prepare a performance such as an end-of-term show. The aim is to provide a practical introduction to dramatizing in the classroom and to provide a starting-point from which teachers can develop ideas of their own.

Dramatizing not drama

The word drama may produce the image of an end-of-term play, staged by nervous children, organized by overwrought teachers, and watched by fond parents. I want to replace this image with a much less dramatic one. Drama is not only about the product (the performance) but part of the process of language learning. It allows children to own the simple and mechanical language they use by involving their personalities. It gives those children who are shy when speaking a foreign language another character to 'hide behind'. 'Dramatizing' is perhaps a better word for this than drama: dramatizing is much simpler than that nerve-racking end-of-term

play. Dramatizing means that the children become actively involved in a text. This personalization makes language more meaningful and memorable than drilling or mechanical repetition can.

Why use drama activities?

Using drama and drama activities has clear advantages for language learning. It encourages children to speak and gives them the chance to communicate, even with limited language, using non-verbal communication, such as body movements and facial expressions. There are also a number of other factors which make drama a very powerful tool in the language classroom. Try thinking about the ways in which reading a dialogue aloud from a textbook is different from acting out that same dialogue. You will find that the list is a long one. This is because drama involves children at many levels, through their bodies, minds, emotions, language, and social interaction. Some of the areas where I feel drama is very useful to language learners and teachers are outlined below.

Motivation

Dramatizing a text is very motivating and it's fun. In addition, the same activity can be done at different levels at the same time, which means that all the children can do it successfully. The end product, the performance, is clear and so children feel safe, and have a goal to work towards (even though this may not coincide with their teacher's aims). Children are motivated if they know that one or two groups will be asked to show what they have done, or if they are being videoed or putting on a public performance.

Familiar activities

Dramatizing is part of children's lives from an early age: children act out scenes and stories from the age of about three or four. They play at being adults in situations, like shopping and visiting the doctor, which are part of their lives. Many of these day-to-day situations are predictable. Children try out different roles in make-believe play. They rehearse the language and the 'script' of the situation and experience the emotions involved, knowing that they can switch back to reality whenever they want to.

Such pretend play prepares children for the real-life situations they will meet later on: it is a rehearsal of the real thing. Make-believe encourages their creativity and develops their imagination, and at the same time gives them the opportunity to use language that is outside their daily needs. Language teachers can use this natural desire to act out situations. You can ask them to be Little Red Riding Hood, Aladdin's Magic Carpet, or a bank robber and then use all the language that grows out of that personality or role.

Confidence

By taking on a role, children can escape from their everyday identity and lose their inhibitions. This is useful with children who are shy about speaking English, or don't like joining in group activities. If you give them a special role it encourages them to be that character and abandon their shyness or embarrassment. This is especially true when you use puppets and masks. The teacher can use roles to encourage children who would otherwise hold back, and control children who dominate the weaker ones.

Group dynamics

Children often work in groups or pairs when dramatizing. This group work may be very structured, where children reproduce a model, or it may mean children taking responsibility for their own work. Children have to make decisions as a group, listen to each other, and value each other's suggestions. They have to co-operate to achieve their aims, find ways of settling their differences, and use the strengths of each member of the group.

Different learning styles

Dramatizing appeals to all kinds of learners. We receive and process information in different ways, the main ones are through sight, hearing, and our physical bodies. One of these channels tends to be dominant in each of us. If we receive new information through this channel, it is easier for us to understand and use; if it is presented through a weaker channel, we tend to find the ideas more difficult. When children dramatize they use all the channels, and each child will draw on the one that suits them best. This means they will all be actively involved in the activity and the language will 'enter' through the channel most appropriate for them.

Language personalization

Dramatizing allows children to add an emotion or personality to a text that they have read or listened to. Take any word, sentence, or short dialogue (two to four lines) and ask the children to practise saying it 'in character'. It is surprising how the meaning of something as simple as 'What's your name?' can be changed according to how and where you say it. Think about how a policeman asks a robber and how Father Christmas asks a hopeful child this same question. By interpreting the words, the children make them their own. This also makes language memorable.

Language in context

In the classroom, we often expose children to small bits of language such as individual words, rather than whole phrases or 'chunks'. When speaking, children are not often asked to combine the

different structures they are learning. Drama is an ideal way to encourage children to guess the meaning of unknown language in a context which often makes meaning clear. Similarly, children will need to use a mixture of language structures and functions if they are to communicate successfully.

Cross-curricular content

When using drama your aims can be more than linguistic. You can use topics from other subjects: the children can act out scenes from history, or the life cycle of a frog. You can work on ideas and issues that run through the curriculum, such as sexism, respect for the environment, and road safety. Important messages can be conveyed and explored through sketches and role play. Drama can also be used to introduce the culture of the new language, through stories and customs, and with a context for working on different kinds of behaviour.

The pace of a lesson

Drama can add a change of pace or mood to the classroom. Dramatizing is learner-centred so that you can use it to contrast with the more teacher-centred parts of your lesson. It is active and so you can use it to make a class more lively after quieter or individual work.

Practical advice on using dramatization in the classroom

Choose the right activity

When you plan a drama activity you need to know your aim. There are activities for accuracy and fluency work, and others that practise language skills. Your aim may be to revise and practise language from previous lessons, or it may be to change the pace of the lesson. Look at the focus column of the contents page at the beginning of the book.

The children's age affects the kind of activity you plan. Younger children find it more difficult to work in groups and so whole-class activities, or very guided activities, are better for them. Older children may work better in smaller groups, though this depends on the style of teaching they are used to. They may take more initiative, contributing their own ideas about characters and situations, and if they have been attending English classes for some time, will perhaps only need the teacher to help with language. The more dramatization the children do, and the more they reflect on what they have done, the better they will become at it.

Start small

Not all children are good at acting, especially if drama is not part of their first language curriculum. Introduce drama into your classroom in small steps. Start with easy, guided activities, such as 1.1 'Mime a monster', and move on to less controlled activities, such as the plays, as the children gain confidence. You may be surprised that you need to teach them simple things like stretching out their arms, taking big and small steps, and using their faces and whole bodies to show emotion. 'Total Physical Response' activities are an excellent way into dramatization: the children respond to language with their bodies, a first step to miming and acting. Children often don't realize that they can say things in different ways: simply asking them to say words or sentences loudly, quietly, angrily, or sadly can be a good way for them to explore the power of their voices. The children need to see that you are enthusiastic about dramatizing and enjoy doing the activities you propose. You serve as a model, and encourage them to be active in the classroom.

Organize the classroom

The children stand up in most of the activities, and usually the space at the front of the classroom is enough. If the children stand in a circle or work in groups you need more space: push the tables and chairs to the edge of the classroom, or take the children to the gym. If you use drama activities often, train your children to move the tables and chairs quietly to one side. Give each child one thing to move and practise a few times: make it a competition, they should be as fast and as quiet as possible! If you have real space problems, puppets may be a solution.

Give feedback

You are not training professional actors and actresses but giving children an enjoyable way of practising and using their English. You need to give feedback on what the children have done, not only the end product and language, but also the process that they went through, the way they co-operated with each other, and how they came to decisions. Find something positive to comment on. There will be areas of the children's work that can be improved and this should be part of your feedback to them. While the children are doing the activity, watch and listen to them, try not to interfere, and take notes on what you are observing. The process is your main aim, but the children will see the 'performance' as the most important part of the lesson. You need to value their performances. When they have finished, you can ask some groups to show their work and then give them feedback. There are many ways of doing this: you could prepare a feedback sheet for them to do (see 'Reflection and Feedback', page 96) and use this. If constructive feedback becomes a regular part of dramatization activities, the children will gradually improve their dramatizing abilities and their language.