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The Drama Project: Concept to Performance

Paul Howl

Drama is a wonderful tool in the EFL classroom. It can provide students with opportunities to write, communicate, express and perform an activity. It allows students to work together as a group and create spoken dialogue. It also enables students to create a script from their own life experience. In addition, drama also gives students the opportunity to utilize concepts, ideas and vocabulary that they have learned from their textbook and apply it directly to a theater activity or exercise. It can build confidence, motivate students and shift focus from the teacher to the students. Drama allows students to express a great deal of imagination when concentrating on an exercise; students can involve themselves in a variety of short and interesting activities. These activities can provide students with instructions to communicate short sentences to more advanced dialogue relating to more complex topics. Students complete these activities in a fairly short period of time depending upon their level. Teachers can move on to a different activity and keep the student's attention. Even though these activities are simple, some teachers feel uncomfortable with the idea of using drama in the classroom. They may feel even more uncomfortable using a semester to create a drama project. They may feel they don't have enough resources or knowledge to keep their students focused and interested in a larger scale activity. This article suggests how teachers with limited drama experience can feel comfortable guiding students through a semester long drama project. It allows teachers to feel more confident in using ideas, concepts and suggestions to help students start a drama project from a concept to the actual performance. If properly utilized, these suggestions can help teachers succeed in any type of activity. It is

important to note that a drama project can succeed on a smaller scale. Teachers can help students create a short scene and limit rehearsal time. This article suggests nine ninety minutes classes but the project can be done in three or four classes.

Before beginning a drama project, it's important to understand what drama truly means. Simply put, it means telling a story live with dialogue and characters. It means people communicating with each other through spoken words, gestures, emotion, expression and imagination. Drama also means writing, rehearsal and performance. Anne F. Burke and Julie Sullivan in their book, *Stage by Stage, A Handbook for Using Drama in the Second Language Classroom*, proposes, "Drama combines dialogue and action. It can be both invented and interpretive language." Within the ESL/EFL drama classroom, dialogue and action are the main keys which develop any type of dramatic activity. Students take written words and speak these words with emotion and motivation; it is the springboard which allows students to move forward. Actions are the decisions that students make from the written word. These decisions allow the dialogue to come alive through directed movement. Finally, the language can be invented or interpretive. Invented language means that through improvisation- made up dialogue and characters-students can create and perform a scene. Interpretive language means that the students utilize published work and rehearse and perform it. All these elements allow students to understand the basic drama process.

A drama project can be developed after understanding what drama means. To begin a project, you need a script with characters and plot. This project can be created by using different methods. You can have the students write the script, you can develop an outline for a script or you can utilize a published script. For this article, we are going to have the students write the script.

From this point, we will break down the information from class to class. It is important to note that planning lessons and creating materials are critical to the success of the project. The teacher must be well prepared for each class; this preparation will truly help the project succeed.

Day 1: It is suggested that you put the class into groups of three or four.

From there, choose a leader for each group. That person makes sure the group is motivated and moving in the right direction. Give the students an example of a dramatic and a comedic short play. This is something that you as a teacher can create from scratch. You only need to create a title, list of three or four characters, plot summary and conflict. The plot summary can be a paragraph and the conflict can be one sentence. The short play only needs to be two pages, typed. Make enough copies for each student in the class and hand them out. Explain to the students that you will perform a short play. Tell the students the title of the play, the characters, the summary and the conflict. The student's assignment for that day will only be to choose whether they want a comedy or a drama. Next, they will write a title for the play, assign character names and write a one paragraph summary. Finally, they will write the conflict. It is important to note that the short plays must have substance. Students have a tendency to create plays that are very surfaced. The characters have no depth and the plot is very limited. Encourage them to stretch their imagination and move out of the student world. They will then hand it to you at the end of the class. It is important for you to keep the work because some students will be absent or someone will forget to bring the work.

Day 2: For the next two weeks, the students will write their play. It is important that the students understand that a play has a beginning, middle and end. It also has different scenes. Make sure that the students understand this structure and they use it when they create the play. Alan Maley and Alan Duff claim in their book entitled, *Drama Techniques in Language Learning-A resource book of communication activities for language teachers*, states, "Dramatic activities utilize imagination, spontaneous creation and chance discovery, which depends on the students working together." This is definitely true when it comes to creating a drama project. It is imperative that the students work together. This will allow them to use their imagination and spontaneity. In turn they can discover new and creative ideas for their project. Students will begin creating the first scene in their play which will establish character and plot. It allows the play to move from a solid starting point. The characters must have a balance of dialogue. Don't allow a limited number of

characters to speak while one or two other characters are silent. Move from group to group and guide them in the right direction. Give them small suggestions; this will spark ideas and they can move forward. Make sure you give them a time limit and periodically tell them how much time they have in the class to finish one half of the play. Once again, at the end of class, gather the work and keep it with you.

Day 3: The students will finish their play. Once again, make sure they understand that the play builds to a climax because of conflict. The students then have a choice of providing a resolution or allowing the problem to continue. Help them understand that transitions are important as well. There should be a logical sequence from one setting to another and the plot should make sense when those transitions occur. Students may also ask you about words, phrases, slang, or idioms. You can guide them and help them with these ideas by giving them the correct words or phrase that would fit within the context of the plot. They may also be stuck at some point in the plot of the play and you can help guide them in the right direction. When they are finished, they need to hand in the work to you. For the following week, you will make copies for each person in the group and an extra copy for you.

Day 4: At this point in the project, allow your students the opportunity to explore what they have written. Normally, students sit and talk about what they will do before they stand and move. This is normal because it gives them a chance to plan in their minds the blocking, the movement of the actors and dialogue. What is important is to limit this time; tell them they have thirty minutes for table work. Then they must stand and move around. When they are ready to stand, make sure they have a pencil in hand to write exactly what movement they will do from beginning to end. Many of the students have a difficult time with this instruction because they want to move and get the flow of the scene. Please make sure they write the movement when they complete it so that it will be fresh in their minds. It is all right to give small suggestions at this point but allow them to discover their creative work. By the end of this class the students will finish the movement. If they have time, they can begin to practice what they have written down. Finally, tell them they must

memorize four or five lines each week. At the beginning of each class, each group must speak those lines to you without the script. Do this each week. It is very important for their success and motivation.

Day 5: At this point in the project, students will develop the blocking and add emotion to the play. Before they begin this process, it's important to make sure they understand a few basic concepts that will guide their work. Students should always use volume and articulate when speaking. Students have a tendency to speak quietly because they are shy. Encourage them to speak twice as loud as they normally would. They may think it's strange, but it will sound normal to the audience. Please explain that the students should never turn their back to the audience. Always make sure that they cheat out. This means they should always turn their body at a 45° angle toward the audience and turn their head to the other character when speaking. Next, the students need to be aware of the setting and props for each scene. They need to place chairs, desks, tables and objects in appropriate locations, depending upon the setting of the scene. They also need to take the time to use their space; this includes understanding the location of entrances and exits. Students have a tendency to enter the scene, stop and speak their dialogue. They don't take advantage of the furniture and space in front of them. They need to move, sit, lean or pick up an object on the furniture. Dialogue is essential to communicate, but movement also conveys a great deal of information. Body language is a powerful tool for the student. It can speak much louder than words, for example: the students need to be involved in some activity during a scene. This activity will once again add a great deal of texture and believability to the scene through the body language. Maybe a character is seated on a couch watching television using a remote or a character is sipping on wine as they listen to another character. This activity is secondary to the scene but it adds so much depth. It helps the student connect to the scene and the setting. Finally, encourage the students to express their feelings through emotion. Ask them how their character feels during the scene? Why do they feel this way? By answering these questions, students begin to understand that emotion adds believability to the scene. It connects the character to the plot and other

characters.

Day 6: This is the point in the project where the students can begin to allow the work to come to life. They have done all the homework; now it's time to let the written word and movement shine. At this point, most of the lines should be memorized. They will begin to move and interact with each other. Gillian Porter Ladousse in her book entitled, *Role Play*, suggests, "Role play develops fluency in language students, which promotes interaction in the classroom, and which increases motivation." Role play is a major part of the drama project because the students create a character and they use role play as a performance tool. Role play allows students to interact and work together and the motivation is strong because they have created the script, the characters and emotion. They are ready to allow the characters to come to life. The challenge is to combine dialogue, listening, movement and emotion. This is a new experience for many of these students; give them a chance to explore and they will find new and interesting experiences. This exploration may move in positive or negative directions. Some groups are very motivated and build on their successes; others may become a bit lazy. Make sure they are working. Some will tell you they are ready for performance. Tell them you would like to see their work. It will be obvious that they have created very basic movement and limited emotion. Guide them from the beginning of the scene using the concepts I have previously mentioned. Tell them they can enter the scene with no speaking. One character can look at another character and react with no words. This can set the tone for the scene. Again, body, facial language and pauses communicate so much.

Day 7: At this point all lines need to be memorized. The students need to take more risks because they are confident with the dialogue and they know the movement. They must try to raise the level of communication and emotion. Tell them to open their hearts and allow themselves to truly express what they feel; allow them to communicate that feeling. Tell them to listen to the other character and respond accordingly. This is the time to take chances! Move from group to group and watch their blocking and characters. Help them find that commitment to their characters, to each other and to the scene.

Day 8: This is the final rehearsal. Tell the students to use their props and practice with them so that they will feel confident during the performance. Tell them to be aware of their movement. They need to be aware of where they are standing, making sure they are in complete view of the audience. The movement should also feel natural to them; practice their entrances and exits. They must know exactly where to go and their motivation when they enter the scene. What do they want to do? Do they want to change or manipulate a situation or character in the scene? This is critical. Sanford Meisner, the great acting teacher, wrote in his book, *On Acting*, posits, "Acting is living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." That's so very true. The students are striving to bring the scene to a truthful life. They must use their imagination to create a scene that is believable under circumstances that are not real.

Day 9: The day of the performance is always fun, interesting, challenging and very rewarding for the students. Make sure the students have a list of props, furniture, costumes or any other items or objects they may need. The most important point is for them to have fun! Give the students time to prepare some rough spots. When you are ready, begin the performances. After each group, give the class time to respond to each scene. What did they think about the scene, characters, rhythm, acting or any other thoughts they may have? This is a time for reflection and evaluation.

Final Thoughts: This project can be creative, enjoyable and successful if the teacher keeps the class focused and organized. The students must complete a portion of the project for each class. Guide them and keep them moving forward. Make sure each group works together to reach their goals for each class. If there are problems or differences of opinion, discuss what is happening and resolve it. Students are flexible; they will compromise for the sake of the project. The final performance will be something they can enjoy and remember for years to come.

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