

EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF DRAMA TECHNIQUES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Mg. ANDREA LIZASOAIN CONEJEROS & Dr. AMALIA ORTIZ DE ZÁRATE FERNÁNDEZ
UNIVERSIDAD AUSTRAL DE CHILE

According to the national results of the English diagnostic test (2004) applied to Chilean 8th and 12th graders, the current English teaching methodology used in this country is not efficient nor effective. Consequently, a different methodology is urgently needed, particularly in a context where students primarily come from rural areas and will be the first generation in their families to attend university. The present pilot study was an attempt to find a way to systematize and analyze data coming from a larger project¹ through the measurement of the efficiency and effectiveness of drama techniques in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It was partially based on a study by Kunihiro and Asher (1965) in which the effectiveness of TPR in the teaching of a foreign language (FL) is demonstrated. Their rationale is that for any approach to be effective, it must follow the three principles of first language (L1) acquisition formulated by Asher (1982): listening must precede speaking, comprehension develops by observing language through body movements and listening skills prepare learners for speaking (Solé 1987). Drama techniques not only adhere to these principles, but also put into practice Krashen's (1985) theory that a FL is most successfully acquired under conditions similar to those of L1 acquisition, when the focus of instruction is on meaning rather than on form and when there is plenty of opportunity to use language meaningfully. «In order for the group to become deeply involved in acting-out, they need a 'sense of significance' in what they are doing. They need to feel that what they are doing is important for them.» (McGregor, Tate & Robinson 1977: 88-89)

An experimental group (n=19) of Spanish-speaking learners of English performed an interview and a role play activity to learn a given grammar structure (present continuous in its affirmative, negative and question forms), while a control group (n=17) was taught the same structure through the traditional formal teaching method in Chile, primarily based on textbooks and the chalk and talk method. The procedure took two 45-minute sessions: one for a pre-pretest and another one for the treatment and post-test. A pre-test was administered to both groups in order to check their previous knowledge of the present continuous –paying attention not to spoil the students' naivety– and to then compare the results with those of a post-test. The experimental group was expected to acquire the given structure more efficiently, which was quantified in terms of accuracy by means of a written test, based on the percentages of correct answers. A t-test was applied to compare the means and check their significance.

Key words: EFL, English teaching methodology, TPR, drama techniques, L1/FL acquisition

1. Introduction

The English diagnostic test (an ESOL examination) applied to 8th and 12th graders in 2004 by the Chilean government and Cambridge University aimed to report on the English teaching policy in Chile, to learn more about Chilean students' current knowledge of English, and to identify the characteristics of Chilean English teachers and their classes. A representative sample of 11,000 8th and 12th graders from 299 Chilean schools was administered the same English test, plus a questionnaire to be answered by both students and teachers. The assessed

¹ This study was developed as part of the project «English: Acting Out Language. Methodology approaches to create a favourable setting for effective EFL learning and acquisition in Southern communities of Chile» (DID S-2009-16) subsidized by the *Universidad Austral de Chile* Research & Development Department.

skills were reading and listening in English. The results yielded, on the one hand, that when finishing high school a low percentage of students reached the autonomous level, which means that they were far from commanding the necessary English level to perform appropriately in their jobs or upper educational settings (only 5% of the 12th graders reached the Threshold level, while 45% stayed in the Lower Breakthrough level). Table 1 summarises the different levels evaluated.

Table 1. Summary of English command levels evaluated by the University of Cambridge ESOL examinations².

Academic achievement	Students can:
Autonomous (Threshold/ ALTE 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand main ideas about familiar topics related to work, school or leisure. Manage in travel situations.
Upper Basic (Waystage/ ALTE 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand everyday sentences and expressions. Understand simple descriptions about their environment and themselves. Use information about familiar and routine topics.
Lower Basic (Breakthrough)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand everyday expressions and basic sentences to express concrete needs. Understand if they are spoken in a slow and clear manner. Understand the gist of a text.
Elementary (Lower breakthrough)*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand simple oral and written expressions. Read short messages. Recognise words and expressions produced orally.
No understanding in English (Pre breakthrough)*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not understand anything.

*These two levels were developed by the ESOL examination agency especially for the Chilean context.

At the same time, the study revealed that teaching methods make a big difference. Students with the highest academic achievement had teachers who made them speak in English, practice reading and listening comprehension, and who used different assessment tools. However, that is not what Chilean English teachers generally do in practice, which means that the current English teaching methodology used in our country is not efficient nor effective. Consequently, a change in the methods used to teach the foreign language is urgently needed. This particular problem has been diagnosed by a group of ELT specialists in the School of Philosophy and Humanities at the *Universidad Austral de Chile*, located in Valdivia, which is a southern area of the country, where most students come from low-income families³. Therefore, they are prone to have weak social skills and tend to be shy and uncommunicative.

At present, classrooms in Chile only «stimulate the body activity of being sat in rows, [and] suppose the activities of reading, writing, listening and answering to the teacher's questions» (Contreras 2002: 2) –apart from raising their hands once in a while,– which means that students do not have many opportunities to actively participate. In a typical English class, students are required to use their receptive skills far more than their productive skills, which leads students to be deficient in writing and speaking skills. Furthermore, teachers tend to base their teaching on textbooks only, leaving little time to creative experiences.

Some teachers have experimented with more creative and fun activities –specifically relating to theatrical techniques– in the English teaching classroom with enthusiastic results. For example, Walker (1977) used improvisation in an English fluency course for EFL teachers and found that the method helped them improve their speaking skills and become aware of the nature of their mistakes. Bird (1979) also used several drama techniques to teach a second language and came to the conclusion that the activities were very useful especially in helping

² Retrieved on November 26th, 2008, from http://www.rmm.cl/usuarios/jriva/doc/200609251337550.cambridge_resultados_simce.pdf. My own translation into English.

³ About 70% of the students have either food, housing or tuition grants.

students overcome their fear of public speaking. In a more recent example, Miccoli (2001) used theatrical techniques in a Brazilian university to develop her students' oral skills. She employed different stages such as warm-up activities, getting to know each other activities, dialogues, and role plays. She found that students not only improved their English proficiency, but also developed their collaborative learning abilities, became more comfortable with their own bodies, and learned to socialize and cope with their shyness, among other advantages. Torres (2004) has also worked with theatre in his high school classrooms claiming that «there exists a direct relationship between theatre and language learning» (p. 408) and that implementation of drama techniques would improve vocabulary acquisition, fluency, communication, pronunciation, shyness, etc. (p. 411). O'Gara (2008) conducted a two group pre-test post-test quasi-experimental study similar to the present one, in which he compared the efficiency and effectiveness of drama techniques and the traditional formal method in the teaching of English tenses in a bilingual Italian school, and found a significant difference that placed drama techniques above most traditional methods.

However, there is not enough empirical evidence that supports the use of theatrical techniques in the English classroom, particularly in Southern Chile, with students who come from rural schools and who have shown low achievement rates. Currently, the use of dramatic techniques to teach English is based primarily on intuitions and opinions. Kunihiro and Asher (1965) showed the effectiveness of TPR –a kind of precursor of drama techniques in the sense that it uses the body as the main means of communication– in the teaching of a foreign language. Inspired by their experiment, the present paper exposes the development of a piece of research in which two teaching methods are compared: a traditional formal method and a methodology based on drama techniques, seeking to show the effectiveness of the latter.

A theoretical background for the use of drama as a teaching method is presented below. After that, Kunihiro and Asher's experiment is described, followed by the explanation of the present experiment. Finally, results are offered together with some conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. On First Language Acquisition

It still remains unknown what triggers the language acquisition process of children: it could be changes in their environment or their maturational development. Independently from the latter, it has been commonly accepted that language is a kind of natural behaviour and that, as such, it presents some patterns controlled by processes related to maturity. Language acquisition is characterized by specific regular milestones related to age and developmental stages, which means that, although under normal circumstances there are continuous external stimuli that encourage children to speak, they do not start doing so until they are ready or “mature enough”.

Speech onset is a gradual development of a series of abilities that take place during the second and third year of age (Lenneberg 1967). However, there is evidence that language exists before production takes place (Lenneberg 1967, Asher 1982, Krashen 1985), a stage known as the “silent period”, in which children receive information and start understanding the expressions they are exposed to, eventually beginning to imitate sounds. When infants reach a “state of readiness” (Asher 1982), they start speaking. They first begin babbling, and then they use one-word expressions, combinations of two words, and so on, until they have an adult command of their language, without requiring any kind of formal instruction (Bley-Vroman 1990).

2.2. On foreign language acquisition

Although most human skills need to be trained in order to develop, and they develop slowly, being mastered most commonly in adolescence, language –in general– does not need to be trained. Besides, it is mastered much before adolescence and basically everyone has the ability to learn it (Lenneberg 1967). Nonetheless, that does not seem to be the case for adults when referring to foreign language acquisition. Bley-Vroman (1990) compared adult FL acquisition to child L1 acquisition and came to the conclusion that the latter must be guided by a specific language faculty, while adult FL acquisition follows the patterns of the general learning processes followed by adults. In other words, learning a foreign language requires active training and practice.

Bley-Vroman mentions two fundamental differences between L1 and FL acquisition that are particularly relevant to this study. In relation to the importance of instruction, the author defends that adult learners need to be exposed to and practice the foreign language. On the contrary, children do not require formal instruction to acquire their mother tongue. Secondly, and it is in this aspect where theatrical techniques become especially relevant, he recognizes the role of affective factors in learning: while children learn to speak independently from affective factors (they learn to speak anyway), in the case of adults, motivation, attitude and socialization are crucial.

In spite of these differences, L1 and FL acquisition share some features. Firstly, both L1 and FL learners develop grammaticality intuitions, which means they can determine if an expression is grammatical or ungrammatical. Secondly, it has been shown that both young and adult learners follow a similar grammar pattern in the acquisition process, advancing from simpler to more complex structures. Thirdly, in both processes there is a silent period or comprehension development stage preceding production (Bley-Vroman 1990).

2.3. On the Use of Drama Techniques in Foreign Language Teaching

Although Asher (1982) used a different method to teach foreign languages, TPR, his method sheds some light on English teaching by means of drama techniques. The hypothesis underlying the use of TPR is «that the brain and the nervous system are biologically programmed to acquire a language, the first or the second, in a particular sequence (speaking after understanding) and in a particular way (synchronizing language with body movements)» (Solé 1987: 92). According to Asher, both L1 and L2/FL learning follow the same stages: a silent period, the development of understanding, and a readiness state. Therefore, any foreign language teaching strategy should follow the biological programme; that is, it should develop comprehension before making the student speak; comprehension should be developed through body movements; and a state of readiness should be facilitated before making students produce on their own. Asher argues that during childhood children learn to decode language through the stimulation of the right hemisphere of the brain (Solé 1987). However, we know that the speech centre is in the left hemisphere. According to Asher, before speaking, children do not use the left hemisphere but rather decode language through body movements. In other words, although the right side of the brain does not express itself with words, it can express itself through movements. The left side of the brain starts expressing itself with words after hundreds of hours of exposition, when it is ready to speak. Therefore, following this idea, the starting point of any adequate instruction of a FL should be focused on the right hemisphere. In relation to this:

The best everyday comparison to right-hemispheric teaching strategies is the manner in which actors create the feeling of reality in a play or movie. Actors do much more than simply read lines from a script. [...] Good actors create a mood of believability in the audience, a relaxation of the critical thinking in the left hemisphere and a heightened sensitivity of the right hemisphere, with their talk, behaviour, props and costumes. (Solé 1987: 95)

Thus, the foreign language teacher's goal should be to create a sense of reality or, following the communicative approach: to facilitate situations of real communication.

2.4. Advantages of the use of drama techniques in foreign language teaching

When using theatre techniques –such as role plays, improvisation, dialogues, interviews, etc.– students have the opportunity to use language to cope and react to different real situations, «unselfconsciously creating their knowledge of the real world and developing their ability to interact with other people» (Porter 1989: 5). This way, they use what they learn almost simultaneously, same as in the case of their L1, because instructional contexts are very similar to real contexts. For example, in his book *Teatro Inglés para Estudiantes Españoles*, Torres (1995) suggests exposing students to a scene in which some of them play the role of Spanish people while others play as Canadians and they must all try to communicate in English. Thus, all students are obliged to use the foreign language they have learned in a context emulating reality, with a clear objective, which increases their motivation to learn and use English. In this sense, a methodology using theatre techniques is very similar to the communicative approach in that it focuses on meaning and in oral expression, which is supported by Krashen's theory (1985) that a FL is most successfully acquired under conditions similar to those of L1 acquisition, in which the focus of instruction is on meaning rather than on form and when there is plenty of opportunity to use language meaningfully. However, theatre techniques go a step further because they also centre on other meaning conveyors, such as grammar structures, and pronunciation and intonation.

3. The study

3.1. Kunihira and Asher

The present study is inspired by Kunihira and Asher's (1965) experiment to show the effectiveness of the TPR method. Let us remember that their rationale was that in order for any approach to be effective it must follow the three principles of first language acquisition formulated by Asher. They randomly assigned 88 monolingual English college students with no previous exposure to Japanese to one of four groups. The three control groups received formal instruction, while the experimental group went through different stages: they were first exposed to a voice on tape who uttered one-word commands in Japanese. They had to listen to the tape and do what the teacher did. After an eight-minute training, students were given a retention test. Twenty-four hours later, students received a new retention test followed by a 10.5 minute training with expanded instructions to which they had to physically respond. After that, they were administered a new retention test. The following day, they were taught even more complex sentences during seven minutes and a half. Two weeks later they took a new retention test. Retention tests were mostly acted out by the experimental group, whereas the control groups took written examinations. Results yielded that retention was significantly higher for the experimental group, which exemplifies that TPR improves comprehension and retention.

3.2. Our study

Although the above referred study demonstrated the effectiveness of TPR for comprehension, we want to go a bit further and show that theatre techniques are effective in terms of both comprehension and production. The present continuous structure was chosen to test drama techniques effectiveness because students typically show difficulties in acquiring it and using it. The following are examples extracted from the diagnostic tests:

- (1) What are you study?*
- (2) They showing Valkiria.*
- (3) The city are growing.*

(4) I do writing.*

We believe that by applying what they have just learned in a meaningful context, after listening and “watching” the present continuous tense, students will retain the new piece of knowledge.

3.2.1. Methodology

Sample: 36 Spanish speaking students (age 18 to 21) from the English Communication Teaching degree at the *Universidad Austral de Chile* participated in this pilot study. They all belonged to the compulsory subject English Language I. Students were divided into 2 groups on an alphabetical basis according to the distribution made by the University at the beginning of the first term (March 2009).

Experimental group: After the pre-test (given to both groups), the students of this faction (19) worked with the present continuous – a content included in the institutional syllabus – mainly through drama techniques: an interview game and a role play. The structure was first presented through a PowerPoint presentation introducing the present continuous in its affirmative, negative and question forms in which students saw people doing things accompanied by a written description of what they were doing. The structural formulas were then written on the board for students to copy them into their notebooks. After that, students were given a handout to perform an interview activity walking around the classroom asking their classmates questions using the present continuous. Some answers were written on the board for correction in terms of grammar, pronunciation and intonation. Then, role cards were distributed to be performed in pairs. Finally, a written post-test was administered.

Control group: After the pre-test, the students belonging to this group (17) were introduced to the present continuous in its affirmative, negative and question forms using the same PowerPoint presentation as the experimental group. The structural formulas were then written on the board for students to copy them into their notebooks. After that, students looked at a picture for a few seconds and then wrote some sentences describing what the people in the picture were doing. The teacher then elicited some questions and checked their accuracy on the board. Students had further written practice by filling in an exercise sheet. Finally, they answered the same post-test as the experimental group.

To sum up, the treatment applied to the experimental group consisted of the interview and the role play activities, while the control group completed a grammar exercise handout and orally answered the teacher’s questions. Table 2 shows a summary of the different methods applied to each group.

Table 2. Drama techniques vs. Formal teaching

Experimental group	Control group
Pre-test (diagnostic)	Pre-test (diagnostic)
<u>Lesson</u> (45 minutes) PowerPoint presentation (5 min.) Present continuous formula (S + be + verb-ing) (5 min.) Interview (group work) (5 min.) Feedback (5 min.) Role play (pair work) (15 min.) Post-test (10 min.)	<u>Lesson</u> (45 minutes) PowerPoint presentation (10 min.) Present continuous formula (S + be + verb-ing) (5 min.) Writing sentences (5 min.) Feedback (5 min.) Filling in exercise handout (10 min.) Feedback (5 min.) Post-test (10 min.)
Learner-centred teaching	Teacher-centred teaching
Students develop language skills (integrated) through tasks and cooperative learning	Teacher delivers content, students are the recipient of content
Audiovisual and kinaesthetic setting	Visual and writing activities
Use of techniques where students practice their oral skills	Use of traditional methods where students mostly write and answer questions of the teacher

The control group developed all the activities the experimental group did, except the ones related to drama.

Pre-test: The pre-test was administered three weeks before the experiment was carried out, containing 16 items measuring students' knowledge of the structure and use of the present continuous in its affirmative, negative and questions forms. These items were in disguise among other items assessing students' knowledge of other structures such as the present simple, the past simple, the present perfect, and conditionals, among others. This test was also used to measure the general command of English of these first year students. The 16 present continuous items were included in four sections of the diagnostic test: I. Answer the following questions in a complete manner; II. Translate the following paragraphs; III. Write the questions for these answers; IV. Turn these sentences into their negative forms.

Material design: The interview and the role play activities were designed for students to realise how useful these structures are in real life, believing that «they will retain them all the more easily because they are rooted in a meaningful context» (Porter 1989: 9). Besides, we are convinced that students learn by doing things, and «one aspect of 'doing' of language is 'talking'» (*ibid.*: 8). We also had in mind Asher's principles that listening prepares learners to speak and that comprehension develops by observing language through body movements. The PowerPoint presentation introducing the present continuous tense provided the students with listening and reading practice. Furthermore, it allowed them to match body movements with actions since texts were accompanied by pictures showing the actions described. The interview and the role play activities served as additional opportunities to match actions with body movements, which should lead to better comprehension and subsequent use of the tense. Finally, these activities focused on meaning rather than on form, since the teacher repeatedly highlighted that the present continuous was used to speak about actions taking place at the moment of speaking. In the end, students practiced the four language skills. In contrast, although activities for students in Group 2 included all the languages skills, speaking was less practiced, since their lesson focused more on form than on meaning and use.

Post-test: The post-test was administered immediately after the lesson and it contained the same sections mentioned above, although this time items were not in disguise since students knew they were being assessed with respect to the structure and use of the present continuous. Both groups received the same test and had the same amount of time to answer it. A written test was

administered for the sake of practicability, since it would have been more time-consuming to assess all 36 students orally.

4. Results and implications

The English diagnostic test applied to 8th and 12th graders in 2004 by the Chilean government and Cambridge University yielded that when finishing high school a low percentage of students reaches the autonomous level (only 5% of 12th graders reaches the Threshold level, while 45% stays in the Lower Breakthrough level). However, based on the diagnostic test applied in this study and through informal assessment, it could be said that most of the students in the *Universidad Austral de Chile* a) understand everyday sentences and expressions, b) understand simple descriptions about their environment and themselves, and c) use information about familiar and routine topics, which would place them in the Upper Basic/Waystage level. Nonetheless, it must be taken into account that these students could have a greater flair for the English language, since they are studying to become English teachers.

In the case of the pre-test and specifically related to the present continuous, an average of 67% of the items was answered correctly (SD 26.6), which reflects a previous knowledge of the structure. The experimental group (Group 1) yielded better results than the control group (Group 2) at this stage, although the difference was not significant (t -test (34) = 0.4, $p > 0.05$).

Let us remember that after the pre-test students were taught the present continuous form and use by means of different methods. The experimental group practiced it through drama techniques, while the control group did it through a more traditional approach. The post-test yielded positive results in both cases, with Group 1 answering 93.7% (SD 7.6) of the items correctly and Group 2, 92.7% (SD 13.6). A t -test yielded that the difference between the pre-test and post-test means of both groups was significant (Group 1: t -test (36) = 0.005, $p < 0.05$; Group 2: t -test (32) = 0.007, $p < 0.05$). However, a t -test showed that the difference between groups was not significant (t -test (34) = 0.4, $p > 0.05$). Table 3 summarizes pre-test and post-test results, together with their differences.

Table 3. Pre- and post-test results for the experimental and the control groups.

Group	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Difference (%)
Experimental	74.3	93.7	19.4
Control	72.1	92.7	20.6

As Table 3 shows, there was a slight improvement in the control group with respect to the pre-test, but the difference was not significant either (t -test (34) = 0.4, $p > 0.05$). There were a number of factors that spoiled our data. Firstly, we thought that the level of English of freshmen of this cohort was going to be similar to previous years, which was not the case. Now we think that we could have solved that setback by having applied the pre-test after the diagnostic test in order to choose the grammatical structure which showed to be the most difficult for them. Secondly, we should not have included images in the PowerPoint presentation of the control group, so as to make a more drastic difference between both approaches to teaching. Thirdly, the study should have been conducted for a longer period.

5. Conclusions

Seeing that the difference between the experimental and the control groups' results was not significant, it can be said that drama techniques show to be as efficient and effective as the formal teaching methods in the Chilean EFL classroom, although further research is required to be certain.

It has been widely demonstrated in a drama technique provision classroom, students are more motivated and learn in a realistic communicative environment having plenty of opportunities to use language meaningfully, which accomplishes one of Krashen's principles

(1985). Bearing in mind that «in order for the group to become deeply involved in acting-out, they need a ‘sense of significance’ in what they are doing. They need to feel that what they are doing is important for them» (McGregor, Tate & Robinson 1977: 88-89) – and this is thoroughly achieved with this teaching method –, through informal assessment, it was noticed that the experimental group was more enthusiastic and motivated than the control group from the very beginning, which resulted in increased participation.

At this point, it seems relevant to show the significant achievement of some students who had had poor results in their pre-tests in both Group 1 and Group 2, which is represented in Table 4.

Table 4. Representation of some students’ achievement.

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Pre-test %</i>	<i>Post-test %</i>	<i>Difference %</i>	<i>Group</i>
1	43.75	91.6	47.85	1
3	37.5	93.75	56.25	1
7	25	81.25	56.25	1
16	6.25	72.9	66.65	1
17	43.75	93.75	50	1
10	50	93.75	43.75	2
12	50	87.5	37.5	2
14	0	43.75	43.75	2
16	6.25	81.25	75	2

As you can see, most of these students improved their results with respect to the pre-test by almost 40%. Observe that students in the experimental group (1) had a more noticeable improvement than the ones in the control group (2). It has been suggested that students with weaker learning abilities benefit more from less formal teaching methods like the ones proposed through drama techniques, a claim that this study validates.

The available literature on research related to teaching methods is mainly qualitative and provides little quantifiable evidence to support the effect of drama on language learning. Although, this study was an attempt to find a way to systematize and analyze data coming from a larger project, it also provides statistical data.

Finally, we want to add that a method involving drama techniques echoes what is as of recently becoming expected of the teacher. When drama techniques are used in the EFL classroom, the teacher becomes a learning facilitator, in charge of creating a structured and organised environment, setting goals, planning tasks, defining the physical distribution of elements in the room, determining groups and giving students their roles, selecting materials and assigning time for every task (Johnson & Johnson 1998). In an environment like this, students feel comfortable and confident, which propitiates the state of readiness Asher talks about. In relation to this idea, the experimental group was given a directed activity so that they did not feel stressed (the interview and the role play were guided), which is advisable when starting to use these kinds of techniques. Besides, they started with pair work rather than group work because it is easier to talk to only one person as no one else is looking at you. Language learners are very sensitive to mistakes and an activity like this helps students forget about them. The standpoint that «mistakes are an integral part of the language-learning process, and that an opportunity to make them in a free phase in any lesson ultimately enhances learning, rather than hinders it» (Porter 1989: 15) is central to our project, since we consider that students must be conscious about mistakes in order to monitor themselves, but should not be inhibited by them when producing the language orally.

Future work will involve the effect of higher motivation derived from drama techniques on language learning, error analysis, students’ and teachers’ appreciation of the method, and the effect of drama techniques on different skills. We are aware that «the connections between drama and F/SLT have long existed [... but] further research on the subject is imminent» (Dinnapoli 2003: 8).

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