

6 Process drama and theatre in the learning of Italian. The case of ‘I Promessi sposi di Birmingham, un “romanzo criminale”’

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the use of two language-teaching and learning methods (process drama and theatre) in a class of Italian. Process drama is based on improvisation, over-identification, and dramatisation from a short set of coordinates that students can read just a few minutes before the activity that will be later performed in class (see [Dunn, 2016](#); [Giebert, 2014](#); [Hulse & Owens, 2017](#); [Jun, 2001](#); [Kao & O’Neill, 1998](#); [O’Neill, 1995](#); [Piazzoli, 2010](#); [Pirola, 2011](#)). Theatre, on the contrary, is based on a script; it involves actors, a director, costumes, set, props, and an audience (see, [Fonio, 2012](#); [Guerra & Militello, 2011](#); [Marini-Maio & Ryan-Scheutz, 2010](#)). These methods promote different learning experiences and through reflection on my teaching experience I demonstrate how both process drama and theatre can enrich the student experience and foster a creative and imaginative use of the foreign language in and outside the classroom.

Keywords: process drama, theatre, engagement, learning by doing.

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1. Introduction

This paper describes activities from two language-learning methods, process drama and theatre, conducted with first year advanced students of Italian. In process drama, students experience an event through improvisation rather than rehearsing or presenting a final performance (Hulse & Owens, 2017). At the beginning of the class, students receive a short text in which the initial moments of a situation along with location and roles are presented. After having taken their roles, students will improvise the developments of the events (Piazzoli, 2010; Pirola, 2011). For a positive outcome of the process drama, the tutor needs to determine the context on which the instructions will be based, taking into account the learners' linguistic abilities, sociocultural backgrounds, and skills.

In addition, theatre, intended as a didactic method, contemplates a script, students/actors who rehearse their roles, a tutor/director who instructs the actors, along with an environment created concretely through costumes, make-up, scenery, and props (Marini-Maio & Ryan-Scheutz, 2010; Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004,). Staging a play is very useful for foreign language students as they can at once enhance their linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences, as well as enjoy an intercultural experience (Fonio, 2012).

2. Method

In 2017-2018, in the first semester, I worked with six first-year advanced students – across two oral hours over two terms of ten weeks each – on process drama activities². At the beginning of every class, students received a set of instructions on which the outcome is always unpredictable, leaving them free to imagine and invent any possible development³. Most importantly, as they

2. The Core Module is structured in six weekly teaching hours: one hour lecture, one hour seminar, two hour analytical skills (based on a grammar book), and two hour communicative skills (based on process drama and theatre).

3. Topics of pre-texts used include: dinner invitation; murder in the university; probable suicide; marriage proposal with misunderstanding; lies or truths; problems in holidays; cheating on your partner; wrong booking; and mad scientist who switches brains (see supplementary materials, Part 1 for an example; <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/n7d27peyclx74bflhofzfx51lxqllu>).

do not have time to rehearse, language is used in a spontaneous way (O'Neill, 1995; Piazzoli, 2010). Like in real life circumstances, speakers need to cope with unpredictable developments of events and consequently students are pushed to use the language effectively with the resources they possess. The benefits of improvised dramatic activities are particularly relevant to the unpredictability of language, which is by its very nature unplanned, and every statement is open to any response (Hulse & Owens, 2017).

Based on improvisation and dramatisation (Hulse & Owens, 2017; Pirola, 2011), the other essential trait of process drama is that it is not intended for any audience (DICE, 2010), except students and tutor. In this way, students feel more relaxed in class during the activities.

Indeed, process drama helps “to bridge the gap between the [safe] and controlled world of the classroom and the seemingly chaotic composition of language in the [outside] world” (Dougill, 1987 cited in Carson, 2012, p. 51). Therefore, students are able to practise the language and the appropriate behaviour to complex situations in the safety of the classroom, where drama activities lower affective barriers and enhance the benefits of a collaborative task (Giebert, 2014).

I implemented the use of process drama in the first semester to offer the students the possibility of being more creative in their use of Italian. At the end of the semester, the students were enthusiastic about process drama because it helped them improve their confidence as well as their linguistic skills, especially fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Process drama was also very successful as it promoted students' active and central role in the learning experience.

At the beginning of the second term, we moved from process drama to theatre in order to enhance other language competences, i.e. writing an original script in a foreign language. Taking inspiration from Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1827-1840), a set text in the core module, students rewrote the characters of the novel, changing the essence of the characters as well as the city where the story was set.

In the first part of the class, students wrote cooperatively an original script using Google Docs, while in the second part they performed the scenes. My role was to facilitate their work, giving advice on the development of the plot and then on the performance. In particular, I checked the linguistic accuracy, leaving the structure and the content of the plot to the students⁴. During the performance, I gave them suggestions on acting – based on my previous experiences and studies in theatre – specifically on body language and pronunciation.

As shown in end of semester questionnaires, students enjoyed the classes because they had the chance to put into practice skills such writing, speaking, and performing in Italian⁵. Every week, students had sufficient time to rethink the evolution of their characters, along with the development of the plot, actions, and dialogues.

At the end of the module, students wrote an original script that completely transformed the original plot. *I promessi sposi*, set in Lombardy at the beginning of the 17th century, is now located in 2018 Birmingham: *I promessi sposi di Birmingham*, “*un romanzo criminale*” [The Betrothed of Birmingham, “a Criminal Story”]⁶. The main characters Don Rodrigo and Renzo are now two drug dealers who fight to have control of the city. The events and dialogues reveal a world dominated by drug trafficking, kidnappings, betrayals, and murderers.

These teaching methods have been reflected in the assessment. The oral assessment (for process drama) took place at the end of the first semester in the following format: on the day of the exam, students received relevant coordinates (i.e. indications of roles and events that they had to develop through improvisation). In pairs, they had 20 minutes to prepare before the exam. They were assessed on correctness/appropriateness of language used, intonation/

4. Students and tutor shared the same document. Therefore, I could check what they were writing.

5. The module questionnaire given at the end of the first semester included questions such as: ‘Did process drama enhance your speaking skills?’, ‘Were the activities challenging?’, ‘What did you enjoy the most?’, ‘How can the activities be improved?’. Students’ comments were extremely positive, and their appreciation was expressed in both informal comments and in the module questionnaires.

6. See supplementary materials, Part 2; <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/n7d27peyclx74bflhofzfx51lxqllu>

pronunciation, and listening/comprehension. These competences have been introduced on a weekly basis, so the students were able to concentrate not only on the fluency of their communication, but also on language accuracy.

The oral exam (for theatre) took place at the end of the second semester and was divided in two parts. First, the performance (30 minutes, 50% of the mark) with the focus on the following criteria: body language, pronunciation/intonation, and communicative competence. Students worked on these competences during the semester. The second consisted of an interview (about ten minutes for each student, 50% of the mark) with three additional criteria: accuracy, range of structures, and development of ideas. In the interview, the tutor was a journalist/interviewer and the students were the actors who played the roles.

3. Results and discussion

Regarding process drama, students enjoyed the fact that it was presented as a different pedagogical method to those used in other language modules. In particular, students seemed very at ease (regardless of their competence in the language) to step into uncertain situations only knowing the starting point. Indeed, “effective language learning requires opportunities for authentic verbal interactions” (Hulse & Owens, 2017, p. 18; see also Kao & O’Neill, 1998). These interactions let students produce language in a more practical way and consequently pass from familiar to unfamiliar contexts without excessive anxiety (Hulse & Owens, 2017). As process drama is an open-ended activity, students were the protagonists and actively decided how the stories would develop.

Even if theatre does not share many of the aspects related to process drama (i.e. improvisation, no script, open-ended stories), students participated with passion in the creation of an original script and were able to enhance their writing skills by inventing a story and helping each other to give the characters a similar amount of space and dialogue in the plot. During the rehearsals, students improved their speaking skills through practise, with special attention to pronunciation, intonation, and accuracy.

4. Conclusions

Although, as shown, process drama and theatre have different features, students can directly apply the classic concept of ‘learning by doing’ (Dewey, 1938) in both methods. Referring to the above-mentioned experiences, the way of learning through process drama and theatre is highly motivating for students and gives them the opportunity to experience a foreign language in a collaborative and engaging context. This aspect of the learning experience is not to be overlooked: university students are exposed to a lot of pressure and stress since they have to deal with assignments and exams throughout the academic year. Process drama and theatre activities, on the contrary, can change this instrumental attitude and make the learning experience much more pleasant and meaningful⁷.

Although similar initiatives are very popular in other countries (i.e. France, USA, and Italy), in the UK, process drama and theatre are only occasionally present in higher education institution syllabi. I hope to have demonstrated that these methods can strongly enrich the learning experience thanks to the creative and imaginative use of the foreign language.

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7. As previously said, assessments in both activities were planned in form of oral exams, which were however received very positively, putting the students at ease.

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