

Feature Article

Standing in Dorothy's Shoes: What Can Language Teachers Learn from Dorothy Heathcote?

Part Three: Process Drama in a Real-World Context

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Abstract

Based on research into the benefits of using process drama techniques in language teaching, guidelines for planning process drama-based language lessons were created. Using these guidelines as a starting point, two workshops were planned and carried out, with the main aim of introducing Korean elementary school teachers to process drama. The workshops featured activities based on techniques pioneered by Dorothy Heathcote and other practitioners. These activities were linked by a narrative inspired by the university the workshops took place in, introduced by the workshop leader working in-role. The feedback from the workshops showed high level of engagement, and support for the use of process drama in the teachers' future lessons.

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[Editor's note: For those who have not yet read the previous articles in the series, process drama is defined as follows:

Process drama is a dynamic teaching methodology in which the teacher and the students work together to create an imaginary dramatic world and work within that world to explore a particular problem, situation, theme, or series of related themes, not for a separate audience, but for the benefit of the participants themselves.

(https://tesoldrama.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/definition_prdr.doc)]

The tension of the drama, and the need to overcome obstacles and to accomplish their mission produced commitment to the activity and a degree of fluency which surprised the students themselves.

(Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 20)

The first two parts of this series [volume 2, issue 1, 2013, and volume 2, issue 2, 2013] explored the work Dorothy Heathcote and the process drama movement she helped to inspire. In these articles, I looked at how process drama techniques, which encourage active participation in learner-shaped narratives in imaginary contexts, can be beneficial in language classrooms. I discovered that process drama, which focuses on the process of making drama rather than producing polished theatrical performances, can allow language learners to use their target language with a high level of emotional engagement, spontaneity, confidence and intrinsic motivation. Putting students into problem-solving situations within a dramatic narrative gives them the freedom to take risks with language, and can break down barriers between students and teachers (Cowburn, 2013a).

These benefits are well-documented, and the survey and workshop I carried out as part of my research (Cowburn, 2013b) suggested that many language teachers see how useful process drama techniques can be in helping language learners develop in ways that go beyond traditional Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods. To further investigate this positive reaction, I wanted to trial a process drama-based approach with second language English speakers, and was given an excellent opportunity to do this in January 2014, when I ran a series of drama workshops at Chinju National University of Education in South Korea.

Planning the Workshops

The two two-hour workshops were held on concurrent days, with a group of 15 Korean elementary school teachers who were engaged in a short course of instruction in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the university. These participants were aged between 25 and 55, with mixed English levels and a range of language teaching experience. I decided to base the workshops on three main aims: to introduce the teachers to process drama techniques, to motivate them to use similar techniques in their elementary school lessons, and to show how drama can be a useful tool for building skills and confidence in a second language. The workshops were planned to include a linked series of activities that would serve as a general introduction to process drama, and involve the teachers in using English to actively work through a variety of techniques that could be transferred to their teaching contexts.

Based on my research (Cowburn, 2013a/b), I concluded that for process drama techniques to be used to their full potential in CLT, whole lessons based on drama should be used, rather than one-off activities within traditional communicative lessons (Demircioğlu, 2010, p. 442). This is not to say that individual activities cannot be beneficial, but I believe that lessons in which an imaginary context is developed over a series of activities deliver the benefits of drama in a more sustained, effective manner. To this end, careful groundwork should be carried out in order to ensure that the lesson creates “the prerequisites for any constructive drama work” (Evans, 1984, p. 24), which can be summarised as “security and trust, interest and relevance, confidence and control” (Evans, 1984, p. 24). To meet these prerequisites, my research suggested that a successful process drama-based language lesson should contain:

- An imaginary context that is relevant and meaningful to learners;
- a narrative framework based around the context that includes elements of tension and problem-solving, to aid motivation, engagement and emotional involvement;
- specific communicative language aims with clear real-world applications;
- a sequence of warm-up activities to prepare students for drama work;
- a series of sufficiently challenging small-group and whole-group activities that develop the narrative, result in spontaneous, meaningful language use, and develop language and drama skills;
- opportunities for students to exert direct control over developing the context, extending the narrative and solving problems;
- a reflective period in which the language aims are made explicit.

This list should not be considered all-encompassing, but can act as a set of recommendations for teachers interested in integrating drama with their CLT practice. I chose to focus on all but one of the guidelines (specific language aims, which seemed unnecessary for this particular context) to inform the planning of my workshops.

The Dramatic Context

A useful starting point for planning drama-based lessons is choosing a context that supports the teacher's learning aims (Wright, 2005a, p. 36), and makes “the dramatic situation *matter* to their students” (Chang, 2012, p. 7). Taking this context-first approach to planning should result in drama-based lessons that not only promote language development, but also have a built-in narrative framework based on “a sense of progress and achievement” (Wright, 2005b, p. 149). This should encourage students to use the target language in a truly communicative way, as “in a well-designed dramatic situation, the learners’ need for communication tends to overcome their fear of linguistic inadequacy so that they are able to make the best use of the language skills they already possess” (Somers, 1994, p. 139).

The nature of the narrative that develops will often depend on the demographic make-up and cultural background of the group, and should be chosen to appeal to learners’ interests and learning styles. Narratives based on existing stories, such as folk tales, legends and historical events can be excellent catalysts for dramatic action, but the most rewarding drama often takes place when learners are given the freedom to shape their own stories (Linnell, 1982, p. 9). This freedom should also give learners a strong feeling of ownership of their work, and accomplishment in the creation and sharing of it. Though the main focus of drama-based lessons should be on language practice rather than the production of effective drama, with the provision of appropriate context and scaffolding, process drama techniques “can stimulate high levels of expressive coherence” (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 81) in language learners. Having an outlet for effective expression in the target language should create a meaningful sense of achievement in learners, which can be highly motivating and have many positive outcomes, including improved group cohesion, greater fluency, and increased confidence.

The context I chose for the workshops was Chinju National University of Education (CNUE) itself. The participating teachers were visiting the university from towns and cities throughout Gyeongsangnam-do (a province in the south-east of South Korea), and so the campus was a novel environment for them. In addition, the teaching room I had been assigned for the workshops was in a newly-opened building which housed a small museum detailing the history of CNUE, with some of the information displayed in English. This museum seemed to offer a useful resource to base a narrative around, and led me to create a starting point for a story that

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could be developed over the course of the workshops: that the university campus was threatened with being acquired by Homeplus, one of the largest retail companies in the country, who wanted the land to build a new supermarket.

This was a completely imaginary situation, but based on details that would be tangible and immediately understandable to the workshop participants. Homeplus is a very prominent company, jointly owned by Samsung and Tesco, with supermarkets and smaller stores in almost every urban area of South Korea. Along with its competitors E-Mart and Lotte, Homeplus dominates the retail landscape to such an extent that laws were introduced in 2013 to limit the areas supermarkets can be built in, and to force large branches to close on certain days of every month, to help protect the livelihood of smaller “mom-and-pop vendors” (Lee, 2013). This starting point seemed to offer a rich seam of tension and dramatic potential, and to be an issue on which the participants would likely have strong opinions. It also gave me the opportunity to give the participants a set of roles: members of a film production company employed to help save the campus from the clutches of Homeplus, by making a documentary that would support the university's case against supermarket chain acquiring the land.

Giving participants a group identity, or 'mantle', in this way is an important part of Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert (M of E) technique, and something I was very keen to include in the workshops. Not only does M of E provide participants with a clear sense of their role within the imaginary dramatic context, it also empowers them to act as experts in solving the problems that arise from the narrative, regardless of their skills and specialisms outside of the drama. As far as I knew, none of the teachers in the group were experts in film production, but I assumed that they would all be familiar enough with the conventions of documentaries to be able to take part in theatrical activities based on the process of film production.

This context also seemed to present many opportunities for authentic language practise, and allowed me to work within another of Dorothy Heathcote's most important techniques: Teacher-in-Role (TIR), which requires the teacher to take on a role within the dramatic context. The role I chose for myself was Simon, the head of the production company, who could act both as an authority figure and as someone who needed help from the experts who worked for him. I decided that I would not work in role throughout the workshops, but use Simon to punctuate the

narrative and add urgency to the drama at key moments. A conscious decision was made not to 'act' in the role (by using a different accent, for example), but to simply heighten my energy level and use a costume change to signify the change from teacher to character. I began the session out of role, briefly explaining the structure and aims of the workshops, then left the room and re-entered wearing a hat that signified that I was now in role as Simon.

Warming up

When 'Simon' entered the workshop space, he congratulated the group, who he made clear worked for his company, Jinju International Films (JIF), which had just won an award at a major film festival. Simon presented each of the participants with an individualised certificate from the festival, to immediately give them a sense of group identity and reinforce the idea that they were now in role as experts in the field of film production. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Certificate presented to workshop participants before warm-up activities

Simon then explained that the group was about to attend the awards ceremony, and that they would need to warm up to prepare for the event. We then worked through a series of drama warm-up activities, starting with a variation on Greyhound Race (Swale, 2009), which introduced the group to James, the JIF company dog. This is a particularly effective way to begin process drama sessions as it immediately involves the group in a shared fiction (that there is a dog running around the room), and allows the participants and workshop leader to actively engage in a simple physical activity. (Thanks to Dawn Kobayashi for the suggestion). Other simple warm-up activities, including variations on MTV Cameraman (Swale, 2009), Rubber Chicken! (Swale, 2009) and Bippity Bippity Bop (Farmer, 2012, p. 10) were chosen to fit in with the context of the workshops, to prepare the group to work physically, and to build energy, focus, trust, and group cohesion.

Setting up the narrative

The warm-ups were interrupted when Simon received a phone call, apologised to the group and left the room. Returning to the room, He explained that the call was from the dean of the university, telling him about the proposed Homeplus buyout, and asking for JIF's help in persuading the city council not to sell the campus land. To reinforce the problem, I distributed handouts featuring a mock-up of a newspaper front page featuring the story. (Figure 2)

After reading the short paragraph on the buyout plan, the group discussed the issue, and agreed that JIF should help oppose Homeplus' plans by making a documentary on the merits of the university. Simon then called the dean back, announced JIF's decision, and received a 'briefing' about the proposed film, which he passed on to the group. The film would be shown at a city council meeting the next day, and should include the following elements:

- images of student life;
- facts about the history of the university;
- interviews with important people.

This information added an element of urgency to the narrative, and provided a framework for the activities that would make up the remainder of the workshops.

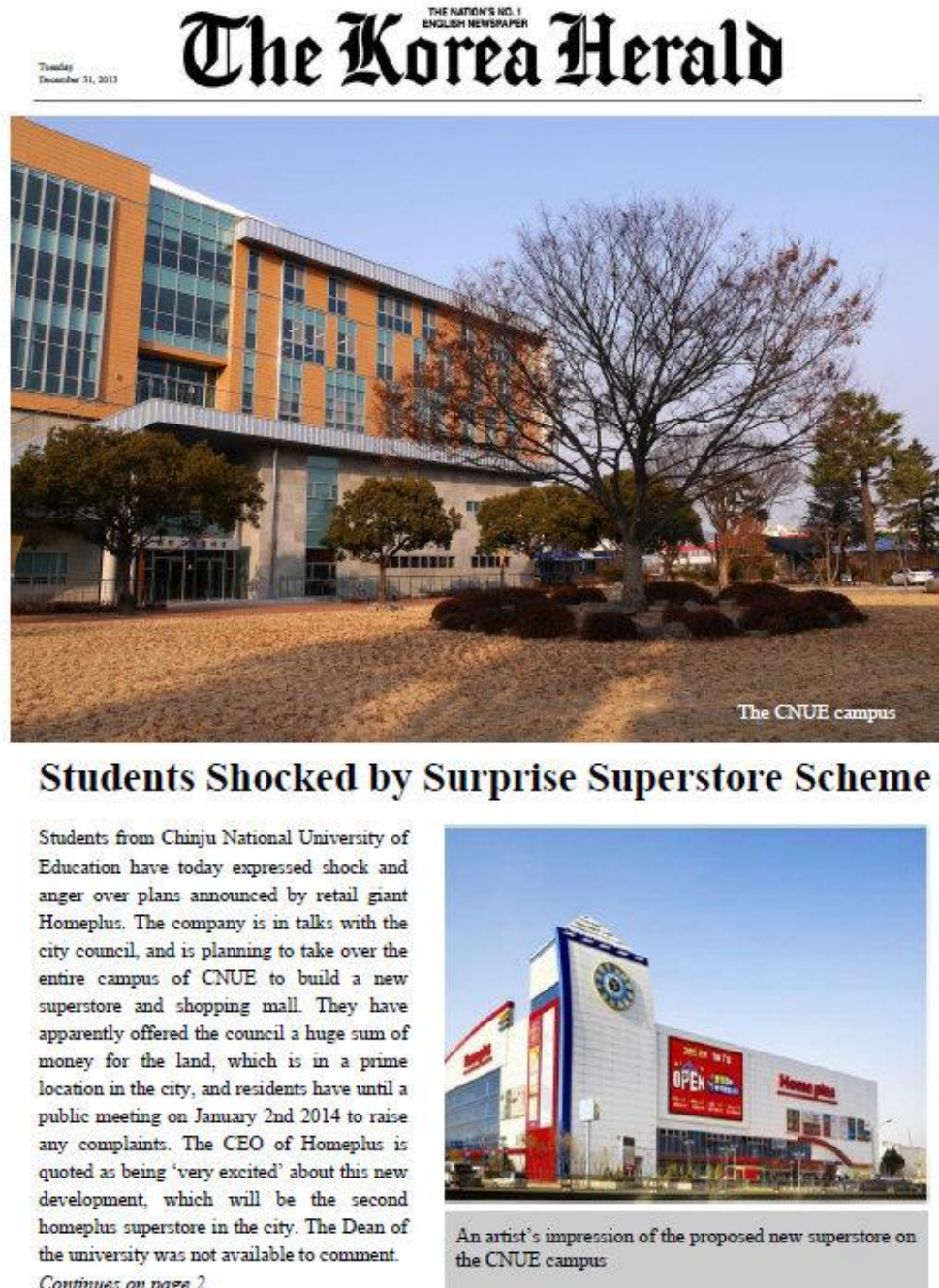


Figure 2. Newspaper front page given to participants at the beginning of the first workshop.

Tableau and Hot-Seating

To create images of student life for the first part of the film, Simon asked the group to work in small teams to use their bodies to create sets of tableaux, or still pictures (Fleming, 2003, p. 85), which illustrated some of the challenges, joys, and life-changing moments students might experience at CNUE (Figure 3). These images were then shown to the other teams to interpret and comment on, and in some cases make more powerful by suggesting changes to aspects such as positioning, facial expressions and body language. The teams worked energetically to create a number of striking and expressive tableaux, which in turn resulted in some in-depth discussions of the aesthetics of the tableaux, the activities being portrayed, and the value of the university experience for students and teachers.



Figure 3. Examples of tableaux

To create the second part of the film, a brainstorming session on people to interview was followed by the small teams each choosing a different character to focus on. These characters included the CEO of HomePlus, a parent of a CNUE student, and a former university professor who is now a TV celebrity. The teams were given time to prepare questions for their character, who would be played by one of the participants. The interviews were then carried out in a whole group hot-seating exercise (Wright, 2005b, p. 153) in which each character was individually put on the 'hot seat' and asked to spontaneously answer questions from the whole group. This acted as a lively and effective way to discuss the issues raised by the imaginary narrative, and helped to create some very memorable characters, especially the CEO, who was portrayed as arrogant and unfeeling, but raised some convincing points about the value of large supermarkets.

These two activities were followed by a short reflective session, for which I stepped out of the character of Simon, to allow discussion about the structure and content of the workshop. At this point the responses were mostly very positive, although there was some confusion about the film production context. I explained that although there was not time to actually make a documentary-style film in the workshops, the focus would be on imagining the film production process through drama, and the final activity in the second workshop would be filmed.

Most participants reported that they had enjoyed the activities, especially those in which they were encouraged to be active: “we had to move our bodies ... that was very active than ... just sitting at the table.” The warm-up activities were judged to be a valuable way to begin the session, with one participant reporting that “at first I felt a little bit shy but it helps me to relax before doing activities” and another saying that “I didn’t think I could cry or act something but very relaxed and I saw other people’s acting and I could.”

The hot-seating activity was also popular, and was seen as an effective way to practise sharing opinions in a second language: “it was great ... we can share many ideas and we can add the opinion and sometimes we ... object their opinion.” This was thought to be a very worthwhile part of the workshop, as encouraging language learners to share opinions can be difficult without the safety net of an imaginary context. The activity was particularly enjoyed by the participant who played the CEO, who said “I was very happy ... I feel like I was the real Homeplus owner.” The overall context of the workshop was also given positive feedback: “most

of all I think the topic is very interesting ... maybe I think the topic will not happen ... but that is very unique and interesting ... and I think I will keep going to think about that kind of interesting topics for our students.”

Researching in Role

After another brief set of warm-up activities, the second workshop session began with Simon asking the group to research the history of the university for the film. The participants were then led to the museum to find out key facts that could be useful in making the case for CNUE against Homeplus. The group then discussed their findings, and decided which of the facts they had discovered would be useful in the final film.

This was the least obviously dramatic section of the workshops, and could conceivably have been carried out without the narrative context. It was included to show that process drama can incorporate a wide range of activities, and that an imaginary context can be used to add engagement and motivation to many traditional classroom activities, such as research, reading and writing. In this case the activity was also a useful way of exploiting the resources of the building, and perhaps reinforcing an emotional connection with the university as a place of value to the community.

Putting it all together

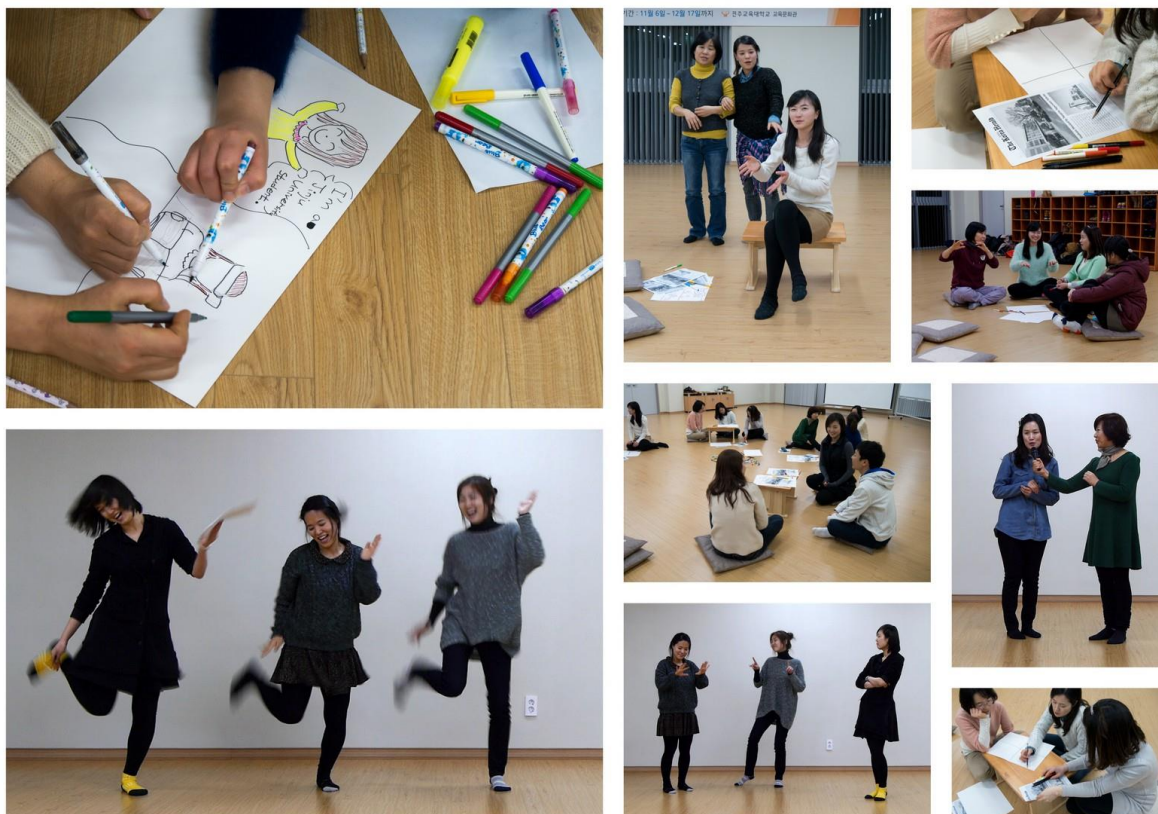


Figure 4. Preparing and performing film segments

The final workshop activity was for the small teams to create individual sections of the film. Following a brainstorming session, the teams chose to focus on a range of topics, including student activities, learning, sports, teachers, management, and support staff. Simon explained that the segments could include movement, dialogue, costumes, and props, but urged the teams not to write scripts, as JIF had less than an hour to finish the film. Instead, teams began by making simple storyboards of their segments, and were then given a short amount of time to prepare improvised scenes. These were then performed for the other participants, who gave feedback as in the tableau activity, and were finally replayed and recorded (Figure 4). The scenes were again expressive and creative, and included many of the elements practiced throughout the workshops, including tableaux, interviews, and information from the museum research activity presented in novel, dramatic ways.

Preparing and performing film segments

The film segment activity was designed to create a satisfying end to the narrative, which was concluded with Simon receiving a call from the dean, telling him that the film had been successful, with the city council refusing Homeplus' bid to takeover the campus. It also acted as a way of combining all the techniques used in the workshops, and building on them to create scenes which were prepared, but still had the spontaneity and energy of improvisation. This was also to show that though performance is not essential in process drama, it can be successfully included without dedicating excessive time to preparation, and that improvised performances can, in the right context, be just as satisfying and worthwhile as scripted, rehearsed pieces.

The final activity was followed by a second reflective session, in which the participants gave feedback about the workshops. I asked the participants what they enjoyed about the process, what they found difficult, and how they could use similar activities in their schools. Again, the responses were largely positive, with one participant summing up the mood of the group by saying "I liked that it was full of energy, so I was very impressed. I didn't imagine that these people could have lots of energy, and they really did a good job." Another participant explained that the activities were not what she expected from a drama class: "I just think we read the script and then do the role-play, but it's very different. I was emerged in the mood. On Tuesday I was very angry about Homeplus ... you make us to emerged in the environment." Another participant agreed, stating that she would like to use process drama techniques with her elementary school pupils, rather than pre-scripted role-plays: "instead of that I would make the students to create a new script ... and I want the students enjoy process drama."

When asked if they would feel comfortable working in role in their lessons, some participants expressed reticence: "to move this kind of mood, we have to act like you, but it's very hard to act like that in front of the students, so I wonder I can do that. Because the students may think teacher is crazy today, what did she eat for breakfast?" However, others were attracted to the idea of using TIR: "some students are very shy so I need to be ... crazy so I feel that teacher is not authority, teacher is like us, so they feel very friendly so they can make action ... and I didn't feel you are strange at all ... you make me make action very bigger." This sentiment was echoed by other participants, who reported feeling much more comfortable than they

expected to in the workshops: “whenever I speak English I’m a little bit less confident, but in this class I can move with a big action and with a big voice so now I feel a little bit more confident.”

Conclusion

Fluency springs from the motivation to communicate within the dramatic situation and from the emphasis on meaning. Students involved in the rich variety of speech events that drama promotes draw on all their linguistic and paralinguistic resources as they struggle to communicate. Because the talk that arises in drama is embodied in context, it is purposeful and essentially generative.

(Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 20)

The results that had the biggest impact on me from these workshops were how comfortable and confident the participants became when engaged in the activities, and their sense of achievement in what they had created together. In just a few hours they had engaged with a new story presented to them in an unfamiliar way, and had contributed to shaping the details and outcome of the story. They had taken on a variety of roles, both as a group and individually, and worked together to save the university in which they were studying, if only in their imaginations.

At the end of the workshops, I distributed handouts featuring a mock-up of a newspaper front page featuring the end of the story (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Newspaper front page given to participants after workshops

Although only a very brief introduction to process drama techniques, these workshops felt like a successful demonstration of how process drama techniques can help second language learners practise language skills, grow in confidence and express themselves in creative and surprising ways. They also suggested that process drama could be effective in a variety of learning contexts, including Korean elementary schools, and this is something I would be interested in researching in the future.

Given more time in the workshops, I would have liked to extend the narrative further, as “the most effective drama is slow enough for deep inquiry and intriguing enough to sustain

interest over time” (Stinson, 2012, p. 79). I would also like to have had time to focus on specific language areas based on the needs of the participants, and to have helped them practise teaching in-role and implementing process drama in their schools. Unfortunately I was not able to follow up with any of the participants, but I hope that at least some of them tried out TIR and M of E with their pupils, and inspired them to create new stories and practise their language skills in unusual contexts.

As shown by my previously reported research, and supported by the feedback from these workshops, successful process drama-based lessons can create many opportunities to “activate learners’ ‘static’ knowledge of the target language by pushing them to apply what they have previously learned for meaningful communication” (Kao & O’Neill, 1998:79). At the same time, they will support learners in developing language and drama skills by progressing from warm-up exercises to more demanding dramatic tasks such as planned and spontaneous improvisation. For teachers, process drama can provide a safe and relatively structured way to implement drama, and to gradually introduce a range of drama techniques. As the teacher’s confidence grows, so should that of the students, and together the group can use authentic language to explore a wealth of dramatic contexts from within the comfort of the language classroom.

Workshops carried out by the author in January 2014 at Chinju National University of Education, South Korea. Audio interviews and still images reproduced with full permission of workshop participants.

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