

Feature Article

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

Part One: Where Dorothy Came From, What She Did, and How It Can Support Language Development

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Abstract

From the 1960s onwards, Dorothy Heathcote became a highly influential figure in UK drama education. Her practice, based around unscripted, participatory dramas in which students were often guided by a teacher working 'in role', helped to shape the way drama is taught in schools today, particularly within the process drama approach. Influenced by a range of educational theorists and practitioners, Heathcote developed a style of educational drama that she saw as being distinct from 'theatre', and more concerned with experiencing drama than performing it. To this end, she developed a number of dramatic techniques, such as 'Teacher in Role' and 'Mantle of the Expert', to help students inhabit dramatic contexts and learn through the direct imagined experience of a particular place, time or problem to be solved. These techniques have much to offer language teaching, particularly when communication is the main goal. Placing students in dramatic contexts is claimed to enhance motivation and engagement and lead to more truly authentic communication than is often found in language classrooms. Using a framework based on Heathcote's techniques, and those

developed by other process drama educators, language teachers can begin to explore the many benefits drama can offer language learners.

Introduction

Dorothy Heathcote teaches drama, but it's nothing to do with wearing leotards or pretending to be a tree. Mrs Heathcote uses drama as a teaching medium: a way of stimulating a child's mind to richer levels of learning.

(Narration from *Four lessons with Dorothy Heathcote*)

A junior school in the northeast of England in the early 1980s. A class of children work individually and in groups, absorbed in their roles as expert craftspeople in a leather factory. They consult plans for shoes, bags and belts, and mime the delicate, time-consuming construction of these items. Their teacher, in the role of the factory manager, moves around the group, talking to each child about the work they are undertaking. A girl talks with utmost seriousness and authority about the amount, width and length of leather needed for a dog sled harness; a boy discusses the design of a money belt; a small group measures the dimensions of a traveller's satchel. Throughout the room, the children continue with their individual tasks in an atmosphere of quiet, deliberate concentration.

Dorothy Heathcote, the teacher responsible for this activity, was a “high priest” (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 17) of educational drama, who helped create a “cross-curricular pedagogy that for some came close to religious devotion” (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 15). She was a forceful, influential and divisive educator who believed in a form of educational drama that promoted social health in learners, enhanced their appreciation of art and culture, encouraged empathy and understanding, and helped develop language skills and confidence (Davis, 1997, p. 38).

Heathcote, who died in 2011, trained as an actress at the Northern Theatre School in Bradford, England in the 1940s. After being advised she had no future in the theatre, she found work as a drama teacher at the Durham Institute, and began to develop her very personal teaching approach throughout the 1950s. In 1964, she began teaching at Newcastle University, and until her retirement in 1986, she worked with schools, youth centres, hospitals and correctional facilities, creating improvised pieces of drama that sprang directly from the ideas, emotions and life experiences of the participants.

Dorothy's techniques, writing and teacher training helped to shape how drama is taught in British schools, and her student-centred, process-based approach has much to offer language teachers.

Seeing drama primarily as “a means of using our experience to understand the experience of other people” (Wagner, 1979, p. 58), Heathcote developed a form she termed “‘living through’ drama” (Heathcote, 1984, p. 48), in which a group works together to create unscripted drama content (Davis, 1997, p. 37). Her techniques, writing and teacher training helped to shape how drama is taught in British schools, and her student-centred, process-based approach has much to offer language teachers.

The Development of Educational Drama

Though Heathcote's approach can be seen as emerging from a singular vision, she was influenced by a number of earlier theorists and practitioners who believed that drama education could be a participatory medium which involves “a person's whole being in the exercise of all its resources and capabilities - sensory, motor, emotional, imaginative, intellectual, spiritual” (Francis, 1979, p. 11) and so can become an effective way to “practise living” (Way, 1967, p. 6). Alongside the study of plays as literature and the creation of formal theatrical productions, educational drama has long been seen as a form of creative play (Fleming, 2003, p. 29), and as a vehicle for personal development, in the way that it creates “moments of direct experience, transcending mere knowledge, enriching the imagination, possibly touching the heart and soul as well as the

mind" (Way, 1967, p. 1). The original Greek meaning of *drama* can be translated to mean "a thing done" (Francis, 1979, p. 11) or 'action', and it is this quality of direct experience Heathcote sought to capture in her work.

Heathcote worked extensively with adults and young people in a range of contexts, but she is best known for her peripatetic work with children in schools. She saw the skills learned in drama activities as central to child development, a view supported by theorists such as Froebel (Nicholson, 2011, p. 41), whose ideas about the importance of activities and games in child development were echoed and adapted by a number of early twentieth-century educators.

One of the first of these was Harriet Finlay-Johnson, who

in the early twentieth century was the headmistress of a small English primary school where she put drama "at the centre of children's learning" (Nicholson, 2011, p. 44). Starting from the belief that children's instinctive, imaginative play "could be represented as a *real* drama, rich both in creativity and learning" (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 8), Finlay-Johnson developed a curriculum based around improvised drama that was devised and performed by her pupils. She saw education-through-drama as a pedagogical tool for engaging children in the study of history and literature, and as a powerful "vehicle of expression and assimilation" (Finlay-Johnson, 1912, p. 19) that harnessed their natural enthusiasm for play and physical activity. Finlay-Johnson reported that when her young learners were introduced to her dramatic approach, they "developed a keen desire to know many things which hitherto had been matters of pure indifference to them" (Finlay-Johnson, 1912, pp. 36-37).

Also working in the early twentieth century was Henry Caldwell Cook, who "proposed the then-radical notion that students should perform rather than read the plays of the dramatic canon" (Neelands, 2000, p. 73), and believed that this had the potential to lead to "a more profound understanding of dramatic literature than could be achieved by formal teaching" (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 7). Due to this approach, and his support for creative play as an important part of classroom practice, Cook was a major influence on Peter Slade, who became a key voice in the promotion of educational drama in the 1950s and 60s. Slade's work was mainly focused on a form of child drama based around "spontaneous dramatic play" (Fleming, 2003, p. 17), with an emphasis on personal development and creativity over rehearsed performance. Particularly important was the distinction Slade made between theatre, as a form of entertainment for adults (Slade, 1958, p. 2), and child drama, which he conceived as an almost primal form of behaviour that can be harnessed to aid in the emotional and intellectual development of children (Slade, 1958, p. 2). In his theory of child drama, Slade put particular emphasis on the concepts of *sincerity* and *absorption*, both of which he claimed lead to the building of confidence, creativity and social skills in children (Slade, 1958, p. 80). Slade defined *absorption* as the state of "being completely wrapped up in what is being done or what one is doing" (Slade, 1995, p. 12), and *sincerity* as "a complete form of honesty in portraying a part, bringing with it an intense feeling of reality and experience" (Slade, 1995, p. 12). In Slade's view, the development of these qualities in children was highly beneficial to their early development, and lead to a state he termed *language flow*, in which children are able to spontaneously express themselves in a heightened yet truthful manner (Slade, 1995, p. 13).

Slade and his contemporaries, including Brian Way, who worked from "the same theoretical origins but placed more emphasis on individual practical exercises" (Fleming, 2003, p. 17), were instrumental in bringing practical drama education to the attention of teachers, trainers and educational policy-makers. Their approach became what some termed a "new orthodoxy" (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 26) in school drama practice, and also influenced the teaching of other school subjects. However, the prominence of creativity and self-expression that was a legacy of Slade and Way's work, though a welcome alternative to the earlier focus on rote-learning and obedience, came under criticism for its lack of rigour and accountability in a school context. Detractors at the time felt that this emphasis on self-expression and personal development over elements of skill and craft (Fleming, 2003, p. 72) deprived drama teachers of an "alluring body of 'important' knowledge" (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 44).



Photo courtesy of the Heathcote Archive

Heathcote's Approach

I am engaged first of all in helping children to think, talk, relate to one another, to communicate.
(Heathcote, 1984, p. 92)

Building on the work of Slade and Way, Heathcote made a similar distinction between her form of child drama and rehearsed theatre, favouring spontaneity, concentration and intensity of feeling over polished scripted performances. However, she also brought a sense of educational rigour to her practice, believing that drama could lead children towards improved literacy, oracy and self-confidence, bolster their ability to work with others, and build a sense of pride in their work (Wagner, 1979, p. 18). Like Finlay-Johnson, Heathcote was a strong advocate of drama's potential to actively engage children with many different forms of knowledge, and she saw that her work could offer numerous opportunities for contextual learning. Echoing Piaget, who suggested that learning should stem from authentic intellectual content (Furth, 1970, p. 6), Heathcote was in this way seen to return educational drama "to the track of pursuing knowledge" (Johnson & O'Neill, 1984, p. 7).

Heathcote's version of drama education was a primarily student-centred process, in which instead of simply imparting knowledge, a successful teacher should "give students opportunities for struggling with problems and to reach an answer because of the work they do rather than the listening they have done" (Heathcote, 1972 in Wessels, 1987, p. 14). To facilitate this process, she developed a number of techniques designed to empower students and develop their linguistic and dramatic skills. These techniques included Teacher-in-Role (TIR), in which the teacher takes on the role of a character within the drama (Fleming, 2003, p. 91); and Mantle of the Expert (M of E), in which students take on roles of experts, such as scientists, factory workers, or archaeologists (Heathcote, 1984, p. 141), relevant to the context of the drama. Students working within M of E are usually called upon within the dramatic context to help their teacher, who often steps in and out of the role of a character with a problem (Fleming, 2003, p. 92). As a result the students' "prior knowledge and experience is validated and their frame of reference is enlarged" (O'Neill, 1995, p. ix).

Using these and other techniques, Heathcote helped students construct dramatic scenarios based on their own ideas, using a combination of discussion, research and group improvisation. Eschewing scripted drama, Heathcote preferred to challenge participants to spontaneously create improvised scenes which helped develop empathy with characters removed from their everyday experiences (Scherr and Verrall, 1987, p. x). Heathcote rarely planned sessions in detail, and instead worked intuitively from student suggestions (Wagner, 1979, p. 25), believing risk-taking to be an essential element of drama practice (Wagner, 1979, p. 21) and of teaching in general. This approach allowed Heathcote to give students permission "to take responsibility for their own learning" (Wessels, 1987, p. 14), and reverse the traditional classroom dynamic by putting the students in a position of superior knowledge and in some cases, authority (Bowell and Heap, 2001, p. 46).

By the early 1990's Heathcote and her colleague Gavin Bolton had helped to give drama education in the UK a renewed sense of legitimacy, with their focus on creating immersive, challenging experiences for pupils (Fleming, 2003, p. 17). Bolton saw educational drama as "a dynamic means of gaining new understanding" (Bolton, 1979, p. 112), and developed a framework that complemented Heathcote's on-going practice. Based on the theories of play and social learning developed by Piaget and Vygotsky (Bolton, 1979, p. 17-20, Daniels, 2001, p. 30), Bolton defined drama as "thought-in-action", and its purpose as the creation of meaning within particular contexts (Bolton, 1979, p. 21). Heathcote and Bolton's work in UK schools helped propagate the use of drama in a cross-curricular manner, with the aim of creating "learning contexts in which students use their literacy skills in multi-modalities immersed in situations that demand their participation" (Miller & Saxton, 2011, p. 147).

Process Drama

Educational drama today has developed into "an interactive, participatory form of pedagogy that engages learners emotionally and playfully" (Winston, 2012, p. 2), and encompasses a range of approaches. One of the most popular of these, and the approach that best encompasses Heathcote's beliefs, is *process drama*, in which "the participants, together with the teacher, constitute the theatrical ensemble and engage in drama to make the meaning *for themselves*" (Bowell & Heap, 2001, p. 7). Sharing many similarities with *applied drama* (Schonmann, 2011, p. 8), and also known as *creative drama* (Demircioğlu, 2010, p. 439) and the *conventions approach* (Neelands, 2000, p. 79), process drama has become a key part of much of today's

educational drama practice (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 12) due to its adaptability to a variety of educational needs. Although preparation, discussion and rehearsal can be part of process drama work, the approach is mainly concerned with spontaneous dramatic action that is "lived at life-rate and operates from a discovery-at-this-moment basis rather than being memory-based" (Bowell & Heap, 2001, p. 7). In addition, there is a strong focus on creating a consistent narrative framework for dramatic action, through a series of student-centred activities that take place over a significant period of time (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. x). This allows for the creation of what is thought to be more meaningful work than can be achieved in one-off activities, and gives students a sense of ownership in the way that it "provides a significant context in which roles and identifications become detailed and complex" (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 4).



Photo courtesy of the Heathcote Archive

Performance and sharing of work can be part of process drama, but as its name suggests, the approach is less concerned with the production of rehearsed performances, and more focused on the creative, interactional process of learners working together in a dramatic context. The inclusive nature of this process allows for the use of a range of dramatic techniques, many based around improvisation, in which the majority of the dramatic content is created by students.

Process Drama and Language Teaching

Thanks to the legacy of Heathcote and other practitioners who saw the value of skills development as well as self-expression, much modern process drama practice has a strong focus on language development, providing pupils with "opportunities to use language in all its forms to explore and create meaningful experience" (Holroyd & Kempe, 2003, p. 25). It can also be thought of as an excellent tool for transcending the often arbitrary nature of school subject divisions (Gilbert, 2002, p. 113) and promoting cross-curricular learning (Somers, 1994, p. 13). In this way, process drama has much in common with Content and Language integrated Learning (CLIL) and other modern language teaching approaches that prioritise authentic, cross-curricular learning in the target language. Also important is the way process drama allows learners to "engage with, and learn through, drama as participants in the imagined action not as spectators and observers of it" (Neelands, 1992, p. 28), and it is this participatory nature that is of particular interest when looking at using drama in a language learning context. When students are fully engaged with improvised drama activities, it is claimed that "they are active in their learning process, not just cognitively but socially and kinaesthetically" (O'Neill in Bolton & Heathcote, 1995, p. viii), and the language they use emerges "from the whole body" with "passion and power" (Schmidt, 1997, p. 123).

Learning a language is "a deeply social event" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 15), and drama can be seen as a "perfect medium for learning to be 'productively social'" (Davis, 1997, p. 13). When used in the language classroom, drama's social nature (Ntelioglou, 2011, p. 183) has the potential to support teaching in a truly communicative manner, as it presents "a view of language which goes beyond the superficial acquisition of skills and linguistic conventions and terminology to consider the relationships between language and thought, language and social context and language and identity" (Neelands, 1992, p. 9). From this perspective, a form of process drama that "offers a context and a purpose for language use" (Stinson, 2012, p. 71) and in which learners take part in "meaningful, fluent interaction in the target language" (Wessels, 1987, p. 13) is seen by many to be an excellent vehicle for language development.

Language activities that are based around the principles of process drama place learners in imagined "situations where they feel compelled to speak" (Wessels, 1987, p. 27), and encourage "active and discriminating observation and listening, which true communication always demands" (Evans, 1984, p. 11). In preparing learners to interpret meaning in real-life spoken communication, drama can be invaluable in its "capacity for tuning the ear to the nuances of meaning by encouraging pupils to look behind and beyond the face value of words" (Evans, 1984, p. 49). In addition, the direct experiences possible in drama can also be

highly effective in improving reading skills (Bolton, 1979, p. 122), allowing learners “to turn the abstract written words into concrete images and to construct meaning from the text through collective as well as individual experience” (Chang, 2012, p. 10). Similarly, drama-based writing techniques such as writing-in-role (Ntelioglou, 2011, p. 185), in which learners embody the attitudes and feelings of a particular character in their writing, can be highly motivating (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 32), and give students opportunities to “practise writing in various registers and genres” (Chang, 2012, p. 11). Above all, it is drama’s potential to “naturally integrate all language skills” (Ntelioglou, 2011, p. 184) that makes it an excellent fit for modern language teaching approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which aim to teach “communication in its widest and truest sense” (Evans, 1984, p. 12).

Language teachers working within a communicative framework aim to create motivation and language acquisition by “seeking to engage learners in genuine use of the language in authentic situations” (Addelman & Cajkler, 2000, p. 31). The importance of embedding learning in meaningful situations that mirror ‘real life’ is supported by many educational theorists (Neelands, 1992, p. 16), and is seen as extremely valuable in second and additional language learning. To successfully achieve this contextualisation, language learners are often required to make imaginative leaps into spheres of reference which are quite distinct from their own lives (Fleming, 2003, p. 41). The problem of how to enable these leaps in the closed and un-naturalistic setting of a classroom (Addelman & Cajkler, 2000, p. 32) is often overlooked in language teaching theory and practice. However, as Heathcote states, there is a need to “provide meaningful contexts in which to use language for a variety of purposes, and drama facilitates this need in an ideal way” (Heathcote, 1984, p. 147). Drama is unique in the way that it “relies on the human ability to pretend to be someone or something else” (Neelands, 1992, p. 3), placing participants in imaginary situations that are at once unreal and real (Somers, 1994, p. 11), and allowing them to experience *metaxis*, or “seeing two worlds at the same time” (Bolton, 1992, p. 33). In this way, drama-based activities allow for a deeper exploration of context than classroom role-play exercises, which “tend to take account of only one aspect of context - the physical setting” (Duff & Maley, 1982, p. 9). Dramatic situations rely on factors such as the role and status of characters, their mood, attitude and feelings, and their shared knowledge (Duff & Maley, 1982, p. 10-11), all of which can aid in heightening engagement, and create language learning situations that are “clearly embedded in living” (Ushioda, 1996, p. 42).

Many language teaching theorists and practitioners believe that “learners will learn best if they participate in meaningful communication” (Scrivener, 2005, p. 35). However, some have argued that there is a divide between the goal of focusing on meaning and the often un-contextualised nature of language used by learners during standard communicative activities such as “information gap” tasks (Wong, 2011, p. 186) and scripted role-plays with “tidy A/B/A/B sequence that we see in typical coursebook dialogues” (Wessels, 1987, p. 11). For many Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theorists, a truly communicative approach “involves setting the spoken word in the context of other aspects of communication” (Holroyd & Kempe, 2003, p. 26), which are often given little emphasis in modern language coursebooks. Placing learners in imagined contexts that encourage them “to struggle with concepts and emotions that they do not normally have to put into words” (Arnold, 1982, p. 53) allows for an emotional connection missing from activities such as standard “situational” role-plays in language teaching coursebooks (Wessels, 1987, p. 11), and this affective component is seen as another important factor in encouraging truly authentic language usage (Bowell & Heap, 2001, p. 2). When learners are actively and emotionally engaged, language becomes personalised, and this “makes language more meaningful and memorable than drilling or mechanical repetition can” (Desiatova, 2009). Improvisation, in which language is used in a “vivid and immediate manner” (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 75), is seen to be a key dramatic technique for generating this direct emotional connection.

In creating an immersive learning environment, drama is seen as an effective way to encourage active participation, build confidence and help learners to ‘find a voice’ (Winston, 2012, p. 3) in the language classroom. Using a dramatic context allows learners to “escape from their everyday identity and ‘hide behind’ another character” (Desiatova, 2009), which can help reduce the de-motivating anxiety many learners feel when asked to produce language in the classroom (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 40). This freedom from real contexts encourages “students to experiment safely with alternative identities” (Winston, 2012, p. 3) and can create a “wholly uncritical atmosphere” (Way, 1967, p. 121), in which language and creativity is able to ‘flow’ from learners with as few obstacles as possible (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 10). Working within role can allow

learners “to take risks with language that they would otherwise feel too self-conscious to attempt” (Winston, 2012, p. 3), giving them opportunities to ‘rehearse’ language for use outside the classroom.

Another important aim of many language teachers working within a communicative framework is to create student-centred classrooms in which learners play an active part in acquiring language (Wong, 2011, p. 132). Drama provides many opportunities for learners to actively explore the target language, and this can be highly beneficial to language acquisition (Wessels, 1987, p. 8). It has been shown that students are “more likely to remember the meaning of the word as a result of this moment of direct experience” (Wessels, 1987, p. 7), and that active participation can provide learners with a real sense of enjoyment and achievement (Duff & Maley, 1982, p. 13). In this way, process drama techniques can be seen as excellent motivational tools (O’Neill in Bolton & Heathcote, 1995, p. vii), as instead of focusing on extrinsic factors (Furth, 1970, p. 4), learners can become active participants (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 77), immersed in “the experience of language use, and all the positive motivational repercussions, self-perceptions and intrinsic rewards that using the language can bring” (Ushioda, 1996, p. 31). Moreover, it can be said that “drama returns the initiative to pupils” (Evans, 1984, p. 17), with student contributions actively shaping the content of the dramatic narrative. This can lead to a sense of ownership of the learning process, resulting in learners who “have a greater commitment to it and therefore more to gain from it as a result” (Bowell & Heap, 2001, p. 8).

Process drama offers an effective framework for language development, and a set of very useful tools to help engage and motivate students.

To support this participatory, student-centred approach, rather than merely acting as a transmitter of knowledge, a teacher working in a process drama-based approach has the opportunity to become a “collaborator or co-artist” (Webb, 1992, p. 109). Heathcote encouraged teachers to prepare lessons focused on allowing the “learning situation to happen” (Heathcote, 1984, p. 29), rather than on the static imparting of knowledge from teacher to student in the “transmission model of education” (Neelands, 1992, p. 14). In facilitating a shift towards a more symmetrical classroom dynamic (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 42), drama-based lessons have the capacity to represent “a radical change in the relationship between teacher and student” (Duff & Maley, 1982, p. 22). This shift is often aimed for but rarely achieved in language lessons, where there may only be the illusion of student contribution (Wright, 2005, p. 71), and teacher questions can be seen as inauthentic, “in that the teacher already knows the answer, and is merely checking the students’ knowledge” (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 31). In this way, drama-based lessons have the capacity to allow the emergence of authentic language and learning situations that “seldom see the light of day in the classroom where the lesson has been pre-processed and pre-packaged by the teacher” (Evans, 1984, p. 17). This can be an excellent way to attain an atmosphere of genuine cooperation, which allows students “to move beyond just following directions and into open-ended terrain” (Smithner, 2011, p. 223), which can be both rewarding and challenging for language teachers and learners.

Conclusion

So... we’ve got from now until 12 o’clock to do a play. What would you like to do?
(Heathcote in *Three looms waiting*)

Integrating process drama-based activities into language lessons has the potential to 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, p. 79). By preparing learners to use the target language in a spontaneous manner (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 123), drama can give them the confidence and ability to take their skills into real-life contexts. However, drama should not be thought of as “a panacea, as a magic formula, as something readily packaged and easy to deliver with the minimum amount of thought and effort on the part of the teacher” (Winston, 2012, p. 5). Instead, process drama offers an effective framework for language development, and a set of very useful tools to help engage and motivate students. Using these tools, teachers can encourage active participation in activities that demand truly authentic communication, using a range of linguistic and paralinguistic features in a variety of contexts.

For language teachers anxious about using drama, process drama techniques pioneered by Heathcote and developed by other educators can provide a safe and relatively structured way to gradually introduce a

range of dramatic techniques. As the teacher's confidence grows, so should that of the students, and together the class can use authentic language to explore a wealth of dramatic situations from within the comfort of the language classroom, allowing them to "see the real world more clearly when they have experienced the imagined one" (Wagner, 1979, p. 229).

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Approaches to implementing Dorothy Heathcote's drama techniques in a language teaching context will be further explored in the next issue.

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