

# Process Drama and Teacher in Role in ELT

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a discussion of the potential of using specific drama techniques during English lessons at a Japanese private senior high school. The techniques in focus are process drama and specifically teacher in role (TiR). TiR is a specific technique that is often used in the broader area of process drama. Process drama concerns itself more with the experiential rather than the performance aspect of drama. In it, a teacher, or facilitator, goes into role with the participants in the co-construction of extended role-plays and dramas. Such methods have been used in English language teaching by many practitioners. The methods are discussed in this paper, with the focus on their suitability for teaching in a Japanese senior high school.

A recent project of mine investigated the potential for using elements of drama during the English lessons at a Japanese private senior high school. The broader drama element in question was process drama. This approach has a focus on the process of longer interconnected role-plays and simulations. It is an open-ended approach that is co-constructed by all participants. This authorship potential means that the students involved can invent facts to develop the drama. Process drama is closely associated with the use of ‘teacher in role’ (TiR). This refers to the teacher being directly involved in role-plays. Using TiR, the teacher can serve a facilitating function both in and out of role in the drama. I would like to discuss some relevant literature, and also share some observations from my project in this article. Before focusing on the literature, it would be useful to briefly describe the setting where the project took place.

The high school where I work prides itself on guiding students through Japanese university entrance exams. The perception is that these exams are the gateway to future academic and professional opportunity. Therefore, they are of paramount significance. Some educators have noted the difficulty in Japan of reconciling the need to attain examination success within a curriculum that adheres to the principles of communicative language teaching. Seargeant (2009), for example, contends that the drive towards exam success is “incompatible” with communicative approaches (p. 52). In this atmosphere of constant testing and preparation there is often a focus on grammatical structure rather than the context in which the language takes place. The rationale behind my advocacy of TiR and process drama was that such an experiential teaching approach might help to redress the balance in which grammar appeared to be privileged over the situational context of language use.

### **Process Drama and TiR**

It would be worthwhile to frame the use of process drama and TiR within the broader context of drama in ELT. Useful links could be drawn between drama activities and linguistic theory. In particular, such activities have a contextualizing potential. Support for the importance of context can be found within functional grammar theory. This advocates for the embedding of language study within the situation in which that language takes place: “any naturally occurring stretch of language should, to a greater or lesser extent, come trailing clouds of context with it” (Thompson, 2004, p. 10). Drama, also, cannot exist in a vacuum and is usually inseparable from language and communication. Therefore, the utilization of elements of drama could be seen as a more meaningful way into language study than the detached focus on morphological features, as was often found in my teaching environment.

The process drama approach was developed from educational drama, and TiR has been described as one of its hallmarks (Kao & O’Neill, 1998, p. 26). Kao and O’Neill researched the application of drama techniques to L2 teaching. They make a distinction between activities that are more autonomous and learner centered, and others that are teacher led and less satisfactory. They see such activities as the simple memorization of short scripts that do not challenge the learner a great deal as being of the latter variety (1998, p. 6). However, more challenging activities that

require greater involvement and commitment from the learners are what they see as natural and negotiable, and therefore beneficial. Kao and O'Neill firmly place process drama in this category. They claim that process drama is more, "concerned with the development of a wider context for exploration – a dramatic world created by the teacher and students working together within the experience" (1998, p. 12). The tool used to place the teacher in the drama is TiR, which Winston suggests is excellent for, "unsettling the normal power relations in the classroom and allows the teacher and the children to engage in forms of questioning and answering with the kind of emotional edge that ordinary teacher-pupil discussion cannot manage" (2011, p. 152). TiR does not always have to be enacted with younger learners. The dynamic between teachers and adult learners could also be affected.

An example of the extended nature of process drama can be found in Rothwell (2015). She describes a 20-week project. In her study, a group of (mostly) 12-year old learners were investigating the effects of an involuntary migration to another country. In addition to the migration, learners had to deal with using an L2 (German). Various techniques were utilized in this study, contributing to its comprehensiveness (Rothwell, 2015, pp. 342-344). The tasks could be divided into three distinct preparatory, experiential, and reflective phases. Among the preparatory activities included the writing of family biographies for the migrants who would be sailing from Brisbane to Germany. Experiential tasks included the learners having to give details about themselves in the L2 as they boarded the boat, and a whole class role-play in which the students were involved in a protest meeting against the ship's captain (the researcher-TiR), confronting her about the food shortage on the ship. Finally, among the reflective tasks included an activity where learners observed a video of themselves having their immigration assessment interviews. In this activity, the students were focusing on not only their language use but also their emotional state within the experiential activity.

O'Neill argues for the heightened agency of this approach. She claims that optimum educational and aesthetic potential occurs when participants are involved in the co-construction of the event and in the negotiation of meaning (1985, p. 160). O'Neill goes on to give examples of co-construction and negotiation (p. 163). In her examples, details about an imagined resistance fighter against a totalitarian regime were co-constructed by a group of British teenagers. The details were

elicited in a whole class role-play rather than just given to them in the form of instructions beforehand. In addition, the instructor did not impose her interpretation of events on the learners. Rather, learners were invited to give their own reactions, or meanings, to the dramatic world created. Accordingly, teachers would be responsible for the preparation of the original stimulus. Following this, teachers would also be open to possible new learner generated input as the process drama continues. Overall, process drama can be seen as nurturing collaborative skills that may lead to the development of the ability to look for solutions.

Kao and O'Neill also highlight the importance of some "internal tension" that leads to greater participant generated speech and action (1998, p. 71). O'Toole defines this tension as, "the gap between the characters and the fulfillment of their purposes" (1992, p. 27). A good example of tension can be seen above in the protest meeting from Rothwell's study (2015, pp. 347-348). The tension here was created by the students' desire to improve their situation and their recognition that they were involved in a risky confrontation with their teacher in role as the ship's captain. The real (classroom), and the imagined (ship) situation impacted on the dynamic of the exchanges.

### **The ELT Drama Project**

The TiR technique within a process drama approach was used in a group of five 50-minute sessions in which I was the teacher and eight of the Japanese English teachers were group members. The sessions took place over a period of six weeks. The term 'members' will be used as this was neither a formal research project nor a series of in-service training sessions. It is hoped that this term will serve to reflect the democratic nature of the project. The drama was based on a scenario from Harmer (2003, p. 273). In it, members adopted roles as various notable people from world history. The following figure summarizes the different stages.

**Figure 1**

*Hot Air Balloon Process Drama*

<i>Stages</i>
<p><b><u>Choosing / Researching (Preparatory)</u></b></p> <p>Members chose 8 historical figures (notables) they felt had made positive contributions to humanity. Details about them were brainstormed and researched.</p>
<p><b><u>Boarding Hot Air Balloon (Experiential)</u></b></p> <p>Members (in role as notables) justified their positions on the balloon set to travel above a dangerous stretch of sea to an imaginary conference.</p>
<p><b><u>Language Focus (Reflective)</u></b></p> <p>Members discussed strategies speakers had used in justifying their place on the balloon. Focus on linguistic choices.</p>
<p><b><u>Bad News (Experiential)</u></b></p> <p>News came that there was not enough food to reach the destination. The pilot (TiR) delivered this news suggesting they were left with the choice of either throwing one notable overboard, or the likelihood that they would all ‘perish’. The rationale was that the person who had done the least for humanity would be sacrificed.</p>
<p><b><u>Drafting Speeches (Preparatory)</u></b></p> <p>Members worked in pairs, drafting speeches that the notables would make to defend their continued presence on the balloon.</p>
<p><b><u>Speech Competition (Experiential)</u></b></p> <p>Members delivered their speeches in role, and voted for who should be ‘sacrificed’.</p>
<p><b><u>Final Thoughts (Reflective)</u></b></p> <p>Members discussed the speeches and whether there could have been different options to throwing someone overboard. Finally, there was a whole class discussion about the feasibility of using process drama and TiR in their mainstream classes.</p>

### **The Impact of the Project**

Within the experiential phases, members were hesitant at first about how much agency to exert regarding the co-constructed nature of process drama. However, some of them became enthusiastic in this regard, finding that their contributions were usually accepted and developed. An example of this came in the ‘boarding’ stage when members were asked to suggest features of the stretch of sea that they were to travel above. At first they were hesitant about making suggestions. After gentle prompting, members came up with details such as the stretch being “shark infested” and “icy cold”. In addition, members seemed prepared not to follow conventional social niceties. For example, there was a brief impasse between the pilot and some members in the ‘bad news’ stage as to whether it was really necessary to throw someone overboard. This mirrored Rothwell’s protest meeting (2015) that was mentioned earlier (pp. 347-348). Namely, members appeared to be prepared to take part in risky exchanges with the project leader, which could have been interpreted as challenging his authority.

Kao and O’Neill suggest that teachers can offer linguistic support within process drama, and that the roles they take can, “enable them to diagnose the students’ language skill and understanding” (1998, p. 71). An example of this type of support occurred when the pilot (TiR) was able to naturally suggest the word ‘bribery’, which members seemed to be searching for. This happened as the achievements of John F. Kennedy were being discussed during ‘boarding’, in which members were obliged to justify their place on board to begin with. The vocabulary item was added without disrupting the role-play. Moreover, Kao and O’Neill also suggest that greater focus could be on the preparatory and reflective stages of ELT process dramas in more exam-oriented classes (1998, p. 122). Hence, teachers would be free to use their judgement regarding how much time to allow for preparatory, experiential, and reflective activities respectively. In addition, teachers can judge the appropriate amount of language focus that should be in preparatory and reflective phases.

Despite the benefits described in this article, it must be noted that there are some problematic issues linked to the usage of process drama and TiR in ELT. Concern was often expressed that a focus on grammatical accuracy was being neglected in these activities. In addition, many members felt that they would not be able to lead lessons in a style where they would be

required to manage classes in such a multi-layered fashion. As well as focusing on L2 teaching, there is a heavy burden on the skill or the “artistry” of the teacher and this could be problematic (Dunn & Stinson, 2011, p. 617). Framed such as this, teachers would need to develop an ability to manage and plan interesting and engaging contexts for language learning through drama, while also being able to maintain the flexibility to react appropriately and skillfully when unpredictable things happen within role-plays that could open the door for rich new directions. Dunn and Stinson (2011) suggest that applying drama in L2 instruction requires multi-tasking ability from the teacher in at least four fields, “actor, director, playwright and teacher” (p. 630). Additionally, the need to attend to linguistic matters in exam-orientated classes is obvious. This does seem to require a lot of skill from the teacher and may not be possible in many situations. Furthermore, there can be issues where some researchers have felt that focusing too much on the language points has a negative effect on engagement (Dunn & Stinson, 2011, p. 628). This could counter-balance the claim that accurate language use was being neglected.

## **Conclusion**

I feel that I am by no means an expert practitioner of process drama within ELT. I could, for example, have exploited the situation more when there was an impasse between the pilot and some members as to whether it was really necessary to throw someone overboard during the ‘bad news’ stage. Perhaps the confrontation could have been mined more in an exploration of citizenship issues. Ultimately, individual teachers have to assess how realistic it would be to use process drama and TiR in their lessons. Moreover, teachers have to take into account the culture of their particular institution, and whether such techniques would be viewed as appropriate. However, I feel that the process drama approach is flexible enough to be used in exam-oriented classes providing there is a suitable balance in terms of preparatory, experiential and reflective tasks. The key factor is the necessity for linguistic focus in addition to the management of the drama itself. Furthermore, TiR is an excellent tool for exercising some control over inter-connected role-playing within ELT. In addition, the approach as a whole opens up exciting paths to continual development as a language-teaching practitioner.

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