

# Views From the Classroom

## Drama on the Global Stage: Cultural Competence and the Role of Drama Techniques in the EFL Classroom

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### Introduction

Cultural competence has increasingly become a topic of interest in EFL and while its role in the EFL classroom has been a topic of some debate, it is hard to deny the importance of aiding students in the acquisition of such skills (Norton, 1997). With the globalization of businesses and the establishment of English as the lingua franca for the world, is it enough to merely teach students reading, writing, listening, and speaking in a sterilized, neutral fashion? Does this equip the students with enough linguistic skill and practice to deal with the multiple Englishes and backgrounds of the people they will encounter? The answer is no. Having a vast knowledge of an L2 does not automatically mean that a speaker can use such knowledge to effectively communicate. This paper will discuss the concept of culture and *intercultural* competence and will demonstrate how drama techniques in the EFL classroom can help students hone skills that will aid them in communicating with the myriad of cultures and people they must interact with to function in a global society. It is hoped that through being introduced to some basic activities and their connection to intercultural competence, educators will feel the desire to explore further this much untapped, yet extremely valuable, resource and add it to their teaching repertoire.

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### Culture - What does it mean?

When discussing cultural competence, one cannot assume understanding of the concept of culture. With its obvious ties to student and teacher identity, a clear definition is essential. What is culture in terms of TESOL? Dwight Atkinson (1999) describes the received view of culture that is often the norm in TESOL, stating that many see cultures “in their most typical form as geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behavior” (p. 626). In this view, culture is considered to be an unchanging and uniform thing, that the members of a nation or an ethnic group all share the same traits and views (Atkinson, 1999). This is often reflected in many EFL textbooks that include cultural short stories or notes, often speaking in broad truths that are shown to apply to all in that cultural group (Cunico, 2005). The facts are rarely given in a perceivably logical way and instead are often just tagged on to whatever linguistic lesson the unit is discussing (Cunico, 2005). Cultural competence is far more than knowing a great deal of random facts about different

cultures, facts that are highly generalized, or learning about one or two famous artists or literary figures to “cover” high culture. This type of approach to cultural competence inevitably perpetuates cultural stereotypes and skewed knowledge, certainly not what educators strive to achieve in the EFL classroom.

What is needed is a hybrid/middle-ground definition of culture that acknowledges the uniqueness of the individual with the understanding that this individuality is influenced and molded by a set of shared views and practices (Atkinson, 1999). Although Atkinson (1999) essentially describes culture as being schemas, social practices, tools, and products that are shared across a group of individuals, it must also be pointed out that improvisation, indeterminacy, and change are inevitably based on each person’s unique experiences and so no two people can ever have the exact same culture. If educators take on this view of culture, how does this apply to the daily EFL classroom? The idea of aiding EFL students to gain this type of “fuzzy” cultural competence may be daunting for many educators. This is even before discussion of precisely which cultures should be taught. No matter how much variety textbooks and courses hope to achieve in the presentation of information given on different cultures, it is extremely difficult to incorporate enough of a range for the students to truly get an accurate view of the complicated myriad of people that reside in any given culture. What educators should focus on, therefore, is a development of the students' intercultural competence to aid students to become “ethnographers” and “cultural mediators” (Cunico, 2005).

### **Intercultural Competence and the Role of Drama**

While there is some debate about the role of culture in EFL, for the most part it is agreed upon that language cannot be truly understood without understanding the motivations, schema and reasoning behind it, and the culture of the language (Norton, 1997). The teaching of culture does have many benefits and can often spark the interest of students. It is merely the fact that the teaching of culture is often accompanied by gross generalization that can cause problems and help to increase stereotypes. It would be better to focus on the skills needed in the study of ethnography. Cunico (2005) describes ethnography as:

...the study of a group's social and cultural practices from an insider's perspective. It is both a method involving the detailed observation and description of particular forms of behaviour and a written (and sometimes audio-visual) account based on social and cultural theories. So it combines both an experiential element in which theoretical concepts are used and then developed, in order to write 'culture'. (p. 23)

Essentially, what can be taken from this is that culture is locally unique and extremely heterogeneous and the students must acquire skills, much like an ethnographer, to analyze the localized culture swiftly in order to adapt to it. By learning to analyze culture effectively, learners can avoid national stereotyping while still learning cultural practices and learn, with sensitivity, the similarities between their own and the culture they are interacting in (Cunico, 2005). This type of adaptability and observation skill, however, is often seen as only being able to be acquired if a student travels abroad to their target language country (Cunico, 2005). As educators well know, most students will not have such opportunities and for the most part, will use English as a lingua franca with other non-native speakers. Thus, despite the lack of opportunity for studying abroad, students still need the ability to adjust to many different types of speakers and their cultures. Cunico (2005) summarizes it best: “intercultural competence is more properly an attitude towards 'the other' which should be fostered in all FL students and has universal educational validity” (p23). How can teachers create opportunities for students without requiring them to travel abroad?

First, an examination of the skills necessary for the development of intercultural competence is needed. Essentially, intercultural competence is the ability to observe, incorporate, and adapt to different people and situations, to learn to communicate effectively with those who are different from the learner. Skills such as critical thinking, analysis, exploration, creativity, team work, interpersonal skills (negotiating, mediating, empathy) are vital. In addition, spontaneous thinking and the ability to try new things will also be essential skills for adapting to new situations. All of these skills are ones drama teachers aim to develop in their students. Drama techniques are perfect tools for the development of intercultural competence.

It is important here to define exactly what is meant by “drama techniques”, as educators often assume that using drama techniques implies some type of performance (Gaudart, 1990; Royka, 2002). Drama techniques

in education do not require performance, though it can be an aspect of the class should the teacher want to include it—the focus, instead, is on the activities that traditionally are used in the development of skills needed for actors which match, as mentioned above, the skills needed by EFL learners. Essentially, a drama technique is any activity that “asks the student to portray himself in an imaginary situation; or to portray another person in an imaginary situation” (Gaudart, 1990, p. 230). Therefore, “the developmental aspect of drama [is] stressed and emphasis [is] given as to how drama [can] be used to increase awareness, self-expression and creativity” (Gaudart, 1990, p. 230). Also, drama techniques are usually heavily based on group work and group interaction which brings with it teamwork, negotiation, taking on of different roles, and learning to communicate with different types of people--skills required for intercultural competence. Exactly how does drama help in the development of these skills? What are some examples of drama techniques that can be utilized to develop such skills? This will be discussed in the following sections.

## **Drama as Simulated Experiential Learning**

The popularity of studying abroad and the reason why so many institutions insist that it is a vital tool in gaining cultural or intercultural competence is the “hands on” experiences that students have as a result of being thrust into an L2 environment (Cunico, 2005). Students will encounter language they are not familiar with, sudden problems that must be resolved, as well as the need to communicate spontaneously using the limited language they have and adapt in real time. There is a real need to communicate in the L2 and so students will be extremely motivated and will often gain skills that are noticeable upon their return to their L2 classroom after such experiences. As mentioned previously, however, for many students, this type of study abroad experience is neither possible nor desired (Cunico, 2005). While textbooks provide important sample dialogues and grammar points, it is often difficult for students to see the goal for many activities-- there is often little to no emotional investment, essential for motivation. Dialogues are sterile in terms of emotion and there is little spontaneity, even in more advanced textbooks. What is missing is the drama.

Drama techniques are problem solving in nature, often about conflict resolution-- they require students to work together towards a concrete goal that they can perceive easily, and students must use the L2 in authentic types of communication that they are often emotionally invested in, thus increasing motivation (Gaudart, 1990; Sam, 1990; Connors, 1986). A wonderful tool for spontaneous communication, so often encountered in the real world, is improvisation. One such improv activity is “Who, What, Where?” In this activity, the teacher sets up a scene by answering the three questions:

Who? - two people who are organizing a rock concert.

Where? - at a printing company

What? - They have come to pick up their fliers for their big event.

In small groups, of which some members would be participants in the scene and others the “directors”, students would briefly discuss some of the background to the scene and decide what roles were needed and what roles members would play, a wonderful opportunity for authentic, problem solving dialogue in itself. Then, after this brief preparation, the scene would unfold in a spontaneous fashion. Further, it is possible to implant an unexpected issue that must be resolved, a “rupture” that the students must react to in a spontaneous fashion (Dickson, 1989). The “directors”, the observers of the scene, can call out problems or sudden changes in the story for the participants to work out, such as the printer breaking down limiting the amount of fliers that could be printed. The observers can also jump into the scene when additional characters are required. For teachers who feel that this is too difficult for their students, the activity could begin with some brainstorming of language that would possibly be needed or could start with a scripted version of the situation as a starting point.

Another activity, which is more challenging but wonderful for creativity and spontaneous problem solving, as well as cooperation, is an activity called Freeze Tag. It is similar to “Who? Where?What?”, as the teacher will give an initial place for two students to use as the basis for their scene, such as a broken down elevator. The two students will discuss the scene briefly and then act it out. After two or three minutes, another member of the class will call out “Freeze!”, and the students will stop in whatever position they are

in. The student who called out will then replace one of the students, in the exact same position and lead the other person in a different scene, using the last frozen position as inspiration. The audience can help by calling out ideas if the students are struggling. This activity can be quite challenging but extremely successful in getting students to explore many different scenarios and emotions in a short amount of time.

As can be seen, by utilizing these types of improv based drama activities, the activity of role plays and dialogues become more authentic communication acts (Connors, 1986). Students must be in the moment-- they must listen actively and think about how next to communicate as they listen, exactly as they would in an 'authentic' L2 situation. With the addition of problems or ruptures, students can explore genuine emotions such as anger, frustration, surprise, disappointment, and joy. As Chauhan (2004) states, "an attractive alternative is teaching language through drama because it gives a context for listening and meaningful language production, forcing the learners to use their language resources and, thus, enhancing their linguistic abilities". It can help to provide opportunities to focus on meaning and on life experiences rather than on the mechanics of language itself (Dickson, 1989).

There is an additional benefit and key difference between study abroad experiential learning and incorporating drama techniques in the classroom-- these types of activities, unlike real situations outside of the classroom, can always be modified, allowing the teacher to provide slightly slowed down or phased versions of real experiences, catering to the level of the student, aiding in easing them into the L2 world (Royka, 2002). The students are not suddenly forced to fend for themselves, a situation that can leave some students with a negative view of the L2 environment, the process is not immediate or jarring, but a steady one. The activities are thus beneficial as they allow for spontaneity and exploration, they challenge the student, but there is always a support group and system there to encourage, assist and advise them.

## Drama as an Analytical Tool

One of the primary tools developed through drama techniques is analysis: analysis of one's own body language and facial expressions, analysis of characters, points of view, and situations, analysis of motivation, and analysis of the voice and how it is used, to name some examples. As educators, it is easy to make the connection of these types of analytical tools to L2 linguistic competence and even to intercultural competence. Much of how people convey themselves is through body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. The language people use (word choice, level of formality, the use of slang) also shows feelings, attitudes, and relationships to others they are communicating with. The use of drama, in this case, the examination and analysis of drama texts, much like in the initial reading sessions of a play, can be extremely beneficial (Cunico, 2005). As Cunico (2005) states, while textbook dialogues are written to focus primarily on teaching grammar points or key phrases and tend to be lacking in emotion or conflict, drama is character and emotion driven-- writers aim to show the motivation/psyche/emotion of the characters as accurately as possible. Essentially, they try to make their interactions as "real" as possible. Cunico (2005) advocates the use of scenes from plays, stating that while the content is very real, filled with emotion driven interaction, it contains "condensed meaningful interactions ... which normally occurring exchanges (do) not" (p 24). Authentic conversations often omit a great deal of assumed and shared knowledge and history, something which drama scenes do not, as they try to provide as much background information as possible to the audience (Cunico, 2005). What Cunico (2005) suggests is that classes re-enact scenes, analyze them in terms of character motivation, underlying feelings, and conflicts and then examine closely how these are demonstrated through language. Further, it is important to allow students the opportunity to observe how "our perception of people/characters is built upon their linguistic choices and styles and how language is used to express social identity" (Cunico, 2005, p 24). This awareness in the L2, and even in the L1, helps students to truly master how they are received by others and the cues that others speaking the L2 are giving them. There are many text sources that teachers may use and it may be daunting to use a play, as Cunico (2005) suggests. It is important to note that, much like any other drama activity,

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teachers can modify the text or slow down the process to match the level of the student. Perhaps what would be most easily accessible to students would be to use scenes from a popular film or a television show. Teachers would begin by showing the scene, allowing students to listen to the model conversation, with the visual and audio cues. Teachers could then show the dialogue, in the form of handouts, to the students and discuss the content and how linguistically it reflects the different characters' attitudes, moods, and/or goals of the participants, whether, for example it is to deter, persuade, or resolve an issue. A good developmental activity that could be done here is what is called "hot seating". The class is divided into small groups, arranged in a circle or semi circle, facing a seat in the middle and the teacher elicits student volunteers to be different characters from the scene. The volunteer students would then take turns sitting in the middle of the group and the rest of the members would ask them questions about their character and the situation. This helps the group to gain a deeper understanding of the scene and the person portraying the character is given stimulus to think more deeply about the motivations of their character. In groups, students would then re-enact the scene, reflecting the characters' personality and goals. Students can discuss and advise the students re-enacting on their physicality and tone and how it reflects the character's personality and intent. The scene could then be played out again, based on the group's suggestions. Post performance feedback is a wonderful opportunity for both participants and observers to hone their analytical skills and learn how best to convey the message of the character. An additional activity that can be then done is where students are asked to create an original scene such as: a) a prequel or sequel to the scene, b) a new scene with new characters in a similar situation, c) the same scene but with an alternate ending (different conflict resolution or lack of resolution). The students now must apply what they have learned in terms of the personalities, relationships, linguistic patterns, and emotional content of the characters and use what they have learned in a new and original situation. Again, this can be modified to suit the level of the student.

An additional advantage to using drama as a text source is that many plays or scripts take up important social issues or deal with difficult situations (Cunico, 2005). Students can explore these issues and discuss them. The fact that the discussion is not about the students themselves, but a third party, fictional character allows students to feel freer and safer to explore topics that normally they may be reticent to discuss (Cunico, 2005, Dickson, 1989). Teachers often struggle with students not wanting to give their opinions in class. A possible solution could be to use a drama that has a scene dealing with an issue, such as bullying. The students could then take on different roles from the scene, for example, a new student, a bully, the bully's friends, classmates etc., and have them discuss, after some research, their points of view as the characters. This can help the students, particularly when they take on an opinion or role very different from their own, to see other people's perspectives, to literally be in another person's shoes. The act of doing so can help to develop empathy and seeing problems from multiple perspectives, skills vital for intercultural competence. It is important, however, that teachers actively monitor and aid students in their exploration to ensure that gross generalizations or stereotypes are not created.

## Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to say that the possibilities for utilizing drama in the classroom are endless. This paper has discussed two broad benefits to utilizing drama techniques in terms of intercultural competence. However, there are still many more drama techniques that can be explored. For example, drama exercises for physicality, tone or facial expression are also extremely beneficial in aiding students to become aware of how their message is being communicated to others. The primary hindrance to the use of drama techniques is not the students, but the teacher's own fear of trying something new (Royka, 2002). Teachers, primarily those teaching Asian students, often have preconceived notions that their students are shy and unwilling to try activities that put them in the limelight because of their L1 culture (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Many actors, in daily life, are shy and use theater as a way to break out of that shyness. If the teacher participates actively in the activities and creates a safe environment, students will respond (Dickinson, 1989, Royka, 2002). The safe environment that is created will then be the vital buffer that allows the students to explore new situations and new ways of communicating, helping them by being the intermediate step before stepping onto the global stage. The skills of analysis and adaptability, combined with the courage to try new methods of communicating

are essential for the intercultural communicator. These skills, in addition to the fundamental linguistic skills studied in the EFL classroom, are what educators should strive to empower their students with.

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