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# TEACHING ENGLISH WITH DRAMA FOR YOUNG LEARNERS: SKILL OR CONFIDENCE?

G.M. Adhyanggono<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract: There are various ways in teaching English to children. One of them is by using drama. Drama is basically an expressive activity that is, generally speaking, suitable for children's condition. The children's condition mentioned in this article deals a lot with their being dynamic, enthusiastic and full of imagination. The idea of using drama to support the learning process of children is increasingly recognised in a wide range of school settings. The children here are specifically aimed at students who are in pre and primary schools – young learners. Focusing on literacy and oracy processes, this article attempts to give an overview on how to use drama in teaching English for young learners.*

*Key words: drama, literacy and oracy processes, young learners*

## INTRODUCTION

In general, teaching language, especially foreign language, to students is a matter of being aware on student's literacy and oracy

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processes. Those literacy and oracy processes are basically about “acquiring the skills, knowledge and attitudes to become an empowered reader, writer, speaker and listener” (Medwell 2009:2). Thus, it deals very much with skills, knowledge, and attitude. Therefore, in order to improve students’ skills, knowledge, and attitude, drama, as a part of literary texts, can be very helpful along with those of non-literature ones. Such a notion is explained as follows.

The most important and complex knowledge children must gain is knowledge about how to orchestrate their skills and understandings about reading, writing, speaking and listening effectively. To do this, children need to know about successful texts – these can be written examples of literature or non-fiction, spoken discussions or reports. If children have clear, effective models they can analyse why these are effective and begin to make their own texts effective. All this knowledge is part of primary Englis (Medwell 2009: 2).

In addition, Debbie Chalmers (2007) underlines the importance of using well-taught and planned drama as one of teaching activities that may develop student’s social skills, self-confidence and a deep understanding of co-operation as well as team-work.

With the use of drama, the process of teaching and learning English for both teachers and students will be more creative and engaging. Why? Because Marcia S. Pop in her book *Teaching language and literature in elementary classroom: A Resource book for Professional development* has already pointed out that in dramatic activities, students explore movement, sound, speech, character, sequence, story, and their environment. Through the

power of imagination, students enter the settings of stories and become its characters. Moreover, she also mentions as follows.

Exercises in creative drama are designed to stimulate imagination and enhance appreciation of sensory experience. When used in conjunction with literature study, students re-create a story by examining the context and exploring the feelings and motivations of characters. These exercises benefit skill development in speaking and listening, but they also enrich the reading and writing experience with their emphasis on imagery (Debbie Chalmers 2007:250).

All of these are what I call the power of drama. Drama can be a very powerful medium when its text is well selected or made, and when its activities are well prepared and executed to engage both teachers and students.

However, as a matter of fact, there are many teachers (inexperienced and experienced) who tend to avoid using drama as a teaching medium. Of course, they have reasons. The most apparent one is that they do not want to be in “hot seat”, a term introduced by John Goodwin (2006) in his book *Using Drama to Support Literacy: Activities for Children Aged 7 – 14 1<sup>st</sup> ed.* He uses the term in a situation described below.

Drama is active. Try not to talk for too long in your introduction. Work at creating an immediate tension in the drama. One basic definition of drama is: *A person in a crisis.* Allowing the class to hot seat you as a fictional character in role is an excellent way to create tension. The class will love it but you [teacher] may be daunted. (Goodwin 2006:2)

Being in a hot seat means that teachers may be in embarrassment, fear or even terror dealing with the situation that entails them to be as expressive as their students. This is also what

Joe Winston and Miles Tandy (2009) point out as teacher's "anxiety". It is an anxiety that centres around issues of control and around their lack of "extrovert qualities" (skills) and "personal dynamism" (confidence) they feel that drama demands. They can also reflect a deeper misgiving, an uncertainty as to what drama for their students is actually supposed to be about.

Having considered all aspects above, I expect to have some outputs for the teachers to have. First, they will be more confirmed that drama can be one of the alternatives, which is very inspiring, fun and not as fearful as what they might have thought before, for their teaching media. Second, teachers can prepare well-planned dramas for their English classes.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **A. Some Facts about Drama**

To begin with, it is necessary to highlight some facts about drama to avoid misconceptions:

#### 1. Drama is playful.

That's why we have characters (human and non-human) playing roles as someone or something else. They do not become themselves as in their "real life" but they play on roles they cast. Their interaction to one another is like *a game*. What they do may not happen to them in real life. Therefore, they uniquely represent actions, events, problems, and experiences as if they all truly happen (Winston and Tandy 2009:3)

#### 2. Dramas use stories to explore issues of human significance.

Basically, humans communicate their experiences in story form, whether to themselves or to others. Therefore, dramas through their characters/actors/actresses eventually tell us a story to

communicate. They function as storytellers. And what they tell focus mostly on the significance of human being in relation to his/her surroundings such as man versus man, man versus nature, man versus divine beings etc. (Winston and Tandy 2009:3.)

3. In drama, the normal rules of time, place and identity are suspended.

It means that dramatic time and place are elastic. When our time in “real” life is locked in present, dramatic times can leap back into the past, or forward into the future. Various places are also introduced. Some of them are even imaginary ones. Actors in this case, play different characters than they really do. They pretend to be others. In drama, time, place and identity are also temporary. It means that they are not presented or described fully and permanently. They are easily changeable. (Winston and Tandy 2009:3-4)

4. Drama is a social activity and communal art form.

Drama becomes a drama when it is performed. Although a playwright is important, drama can only be meaningful when it involves other people to perform it. Therefore, drama is a communal experience, shaped and shared by individuals (actors/actresses, crew, and audience) working and watching in groups. (Winston and Tandy 2009:4)

5. Drama is driven by rules and convention.

All social events need rules and conventions to guide them. And drama is one of the social events, even when it is conducted in class. Individuals watching drama have to agree with those rules and conventions. In conventional performance, audience needs to remain seated and silent. The purpose is to respect the performers and the audience. Moreover, it is the most suitable situation in which audience open their mind for concentration. They need to

think and feel the senses of the performance. For a classroom drama, teachers and students need to be clear about the rules they must agree. The rules are not supposed to be restrictive or even punitive, but they have to make the students clear and aware that to achieve the goal in drama, they need to obey them (Winston and Tandy 2009:5).

#### 6. Dramas should not be boring.

In drama, what become the engaging elements to keep the audience interested are its subject matter and structure. The subject matter needs to be alluring to follow, which can arouse emotional pitch and tension. Problem and conflicts need to be elaborated, and the actors should wittily perform them. The performance from one scene to another should also be artistically and cleverly arranged, so that the audience will not get bored easily. Similarly, in classroom drama, if the subject matter is inappropriate, if the children are kept seated on the floor for too long, if talk is emphasised at the expense of other activities, or the sequence of tasks is disconnected and unfocused, then interest will quickly wane and the experience will fail to engage the children dramatically (Debbie Chalmers 2007:6).

### **B. Having known the facts, then what to do?**

#### 1. The first step to do is to prepare the teacher.

As mentioned in the introduction, teacher plays an important role in teaching that uses drama as its medium. Therefore, skills and confidence about using drama are qualities that every teacher needs to have. Skills can be learnt through modules, textbooks, and other sources, but confidence entails two important requirements. First are mental attitudes such as willingness, open-mindedness, perseverance and patience which are more difficult to do. Second is

continuous practice. Drama can help enormously in the building of confidence in people of any age. Learning to express oneself more clearly and practising speech and movement skills are valuable aids to developing good self-esteem. Role play situations can help with preparing for or recovering from difficult or worrying experiences, giving you the ability to 'move on' and use new skills to cope more easily in the future. Developing the imagination and flexibility to adapt to any situation quickly and do our best to join in or make things work out is an empowering life skill best learned as early as possible (Chalmer, 2007:13).

## 2. Second is to prepare the materials

When we want to make use of drama materials for our students, there are two basic tenets worth-remembering in teaching drama, especially for students of EFL:

- a. The level of language that a drama has should go hand in hand with the language proficiency that our students have.
- b. We should not expect their highly dramatic skills, instead we let them do it with fun and naturally (enjoyably).

Having considered the basic principles above, we can now move on thinking about technical issues arranged below:

### 1) Who will play and what kind of drama?

At this point, students' age and condition can be very helpful for teachers to choose appropriate drama. Generally speaking students or children age 3 to 6 are more suitable for a type of drama called "living through drama". It is a type of drama developed for classroom use featured by games and rhymes. In this kind of drama, students understand the story as a game, and the contexts of

time and place are only present and here. Meanwhile, students age 7 to 14 can be introduced with “episodic drama”, a kind of more abstract drama wherein the students are led by the teacher in creating situations and events through specific techniques or strategies and where chronology is more broken. Of course, most dramas have a mixture of both styles, but the younger or more inexperienced a class, the more ‘living through’ will dominate to create the tensions and challenges more directly. The more sophisticated the group, the more they will look in a more abstract, artistic and less realistic way (Franciss Prendiville and Nigel Toye, 2007:36).

## 2) Decide whether to use already made dramas or create ones

When using already made one, we need to think of some considerations such as:

- a) Choosing drama that offers an interesting theme with clear and simple plot*
- b) Avoiding complex theme and intricate plot*
- c) Paying attention on number of characters involved*

As for writing a drama text, things to consider:

- a) Creating an interesting theme. Teacher can set a theme in the most atmospheric situation for students to be familiar with.*
- b) Composing a simple and engaging plot as complex and intricate plot may confuse students.*
- c) Provide elements of fantasy or imagination.*
- d) Paying attention on number of characters involved*

### 3. Third step is to practice the drama

#### a. Pre-Conditioning

Practicing drama does not always need a school hall to do. A sufficient space in a classroom can work out more effectively. The first thing a teacher needs to do in this level is what I call “pre-conditioning”. This pre-conditioning, based on experiences, can eventually be done through various ways. For children, the most common technique is by engaging them through a particular object or artifact (still image, picture, photograph, sculpture, or anything) that has connection with the story in the drama. The teacher in a positive mood then asks the class while holding up the object:

*Kids, what is it?...*

*Do you know it?...*

*Okay, this is ... and I have a story about it ...*

*Do you want to know the story?...*

The teacher needs to observe the response and immediately ask them all together with him/her clear up some space in the center of the classroom. Then, the teacher gathers and asks them to make a circle at the centre of the class. While still holding the object, he/she introduces and tells the story of the drama briefly but convincingly to the students, as if it really happens. Why? It is because the story is the very heart in this activity as explained below.

Stories are what provide dramas with their substance. The story a drama tells is the key to what the drama is about. Primary teachers do not need reminding of the power and significance of stories in children’s learning. Apart from their potential for language enrichment, it is through the particularity of stories that children apprehend and think through ideas and issues of human

significance. Stories can thus provide a teacher with ways of accessing important areas of the spiritual, social and moral curriculum; and drama can help children linger among the ideas contained within a story's imagery, to engage more fully with the world the story creates. (Winston and Tandy 2009:25)

At this very moment, it would be better for the teacher not to show or give the text/script of the drama to the students. What is the purpose? The purpose is to get their attention first, and see their further responses.

#### b. Confidence Building Activity

The next step is aimed at two target students, those age 3 to 6 (first group), and 7 to 14 (second group) with different techniques. For the first group, the teacher needs to do confidence building activity. This activity is closely related to the telling story activity in the previous session. The teacher asks the students to choose one character they like from the story and demonstrate an imaginative action of the character they choose. This is a game. For example if the story is about *Sleeping Beauty*, then a student can do:

*My name is Sleeping Beauty and my favourite character in the story is the prince who cuts down the trees to come and give me a kiss and wake me up!*

*(accompanied by a demonstration of a princess sleeping and/or a prince on his horse cutting through a forest)*

When students have hesitation to do it, the teacher can initially give a similar example as shown above. Besides building confidence,

this session also encourages students to more detail in speech and acting skills (Chalmer 2007:19).

As for the second group, age 7 to 14, the teacher can do a more complex game as exemplified overleaf.

### **DRAMA GAME: KEEPER OF THE KEYS**

First of all, sit the children in a circle and ask for a volunteer to sit blindfolded on a chair in the centre. Now place a large key under the chair. Ask if any child in the circle would silently volunteer to attempt to retrieve the key. If the Keeper in the centre at any point hears a noise and points successfully in the direction of the child approaching, she must return to the circle to be replaced by another silent volunteer.

Second, in playing the game, the Keeper can hold a rolled-up piece of sugar paper. The child is out only if the keeper manages to hit him with it. This last game is very adaptable for suggesting different stories. The teacher might introduce the Keeper as a monster, guarding the door to a secret cave whose treasures the children can only uncover by capturing the keys. When using a drama to suggest a story in this way, it is far better to introduce the game *as a story* rather than by explaining its rules. The drama activities in this session can be introduced in the following manner:

*We are the animals of the forest, gathered around a clearing, watching. We have many skills, which human beings do not have; we can see in the dark and can move silently over the forest floor. And tonight we need those skills for one of our friends is being held prisoner by a vicious and cruel Hunter. There he sits, on a tree stump, in the centre of the clearing, with his club in his hand, guarding the keys of the hut in which he has locked our friend. He senses we are near and is*

*waiting for one of us to approach so he can swing the club and kill us. But, unlike us, he is afraid of the dark. He cannot see and dare not move from where he sits. Which of us has enough courage to enter the clearing and try to steal the keys, I wonder? Whoever would like to volunteer, raise your paw in the air.*

Third, the teacher then chooses one of the volunteers and the game begins. This use of story effectively changes what was a game into a piece of theatre. *Through the story* the space is transformed within the imaginations of the participants into a forest clearing; the chair into a tree stump; the player into a Hunter; the roll of paper into a club; the children into forest animals; the time into the dead of night. The story implies very strongly what the rules of the drama are, and the behaviour of the Keeper and those trying to steal the keys are explained and given emotional significance. These dramatic transformations engage the participants much more deeply in the game than if they were absent, with the result that the tension becomes higher, the suspense greater. Furthermore, the children in the circle are given a possible right of entry into the action; as audience, they are also potential actors. In other words, they are invited not only to witness the action but also to take responsibility for it. But the game (or scene) also leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Who is the prisoner? Why has the Hunter captured her? Why do the animals want to rescue her? What will happen if the animals manage to release their friend? It therefore, implies a history and a possible future, both of which can be speculated upon and explored. All the elements of classroom drama are, in fact, introduced here (Winston and Tandy 2009:23)

Fourth, coming up this step, the teacher then needs to choose the characters or actors/actress among students. An explanation from the teacher that everyone has significant role in making the

story comes to alive is really important. Therefore, it is necessary to never state that one role is more important than the others.

Fifth, in rehearsal session, the teacher can focus on reading, speaking, listening and movement practices with some tips to remember:

- a. Make them aware of the fascinating language being used
- b. Show them that they can get fun through mimic expressions and intonations from such a language
- c. Let them read and speak confidently though some minor mistakes may occur
- d. Don't be too judging about their pronunciation; they are learning step by step, therefore never push them to pronounce perfectly.
- e. The teacher has to listen to their reading and speaking attentively to show them that the teacher is with them actively, and to give an example how other children should behave when one is reading/speaking.
- f. Show the children how, where and when to move, but later on it is necessary to limit the instructions as they will be very boring and confusing for the students.
- g. Never explain any logical reasons why they have to move as such for it will ruin the mood of their excitement. Let them express their movement naturally (enjoyably)
- h. It is okay when they cannot remember the dialogue at first, reading along with movement is acceptable; however, later on the teacher needs to show them that the excitement will be more and more gained when they don't have to bring the text
- i. Never focus on some minor mistakes they may make as it will demotivate them drastically.
- j. Give credit to them every time the practice is over.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching English with Drama is an art. It is an art worth-trying and doing for it gives chances for both teachers and students develop themselves more creatively and enjoyably. Dramatic skills and confidence are the most basic requirements for the teacher to master. Teachers need to prepare themselves better so that any dramatic lesson plan they scheme might effectively work. The use of drama is basically aimed at enhancing literacy and oracy processes of the students. Basic skills in English Language proficiency such as speaking, listening, reading, and to a certain extent writing, can then be main objectives that frame the dramatic activities. Nevertheless, it does not mean that both teacher and students put aside the natural excitement they have for learning with excitement is the key to obtaining the objectives.

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<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/using-drama-texts-classroom>

<http://www.teachkidsdramastuff.com>

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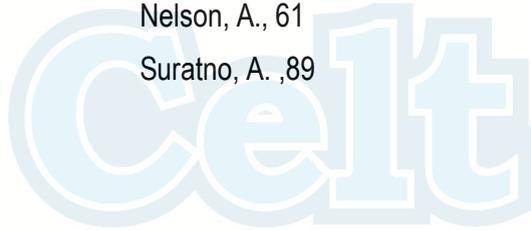
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