

*FROM TEXT TO STAGE: IMPROVING STUDENTS' ENGLISH THROUGH
DRAMA EDUCATION*

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About the study

Drama is offered as a compulsory subject for English students in their eighth semester. They could have discussions, give responses, or act out the fragments of the script of certain plays. However, last semester, they did something different. The students were given opportunity to experience the making of drama production for the semester. Having real first hand experience in producing the drama would give deeper and greater appreciation towards literary work in general and the drama in particular. The students were then given some options of which plays to be performed. The two classes could have chosen the same play, but it turned out that the A class chose "*Antigone*" by Sophocles while the B class preferred "*Bottomless Well*" by Arifin C. Noer. The lecturer team did not direct the students in certain ways, because we wished them to explore the play themselves. Exploration, is indeed the key to drama education. Most importantly, as student players, exploration would enrich they appreciation towards the plays. They needed to completely understand the characters, plots, dramatic structures, and dialogues.

The first weeks were allocated for casting for the characters as well as building the team in charge with on-stage and off-stage responsibilities. On-stage preparation covered casting for the characters, rehearsing the dialogues, and acting. One of the students from each class was appointed co-director who evaluated his peers' performance during the rehearsals. The team in charge with off-stage preparation took care of the setting, music, costumes, and publication. The first four months were spent mostly to digest and conquer the texts. The students rehearsed the dialogues and tried to perform the dialogues in separate scenes. Only after the students had conquered the texts, the scenes were put together as one whole performance. The students now needed to work on complete dramatic structures: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

After spent more than six months for preparation, the class A students performed "*Antigone*" by Sophocles in Rumentang Siang, while class B had their performance of "*Bottomless Well*" in JICA building. Close and intense observations and interviews showed that most of the students benefited from the process of the drama production. The process demanded not only their English proficiencies but also their strong commitment to make the plays possible to be performed in front of the audience. Overall measures indicated that the students showed greater appreciation towards literary texts and stronger self-confidence. Most of them admitted that it was the first time for them to be involved in such production and it taught them many things about literary work as well as about

commitment, hard work, responsibility, and about life. It was not uncommon that during the rehearsal, conflicts and other obstacles arose among the students and they had to learn to deal and solve the problems. In the language area, many of the them who initially appeared to have problems with pronunciations and vocabulary as well as sentence structures had improved a great deal during the process of making of the production.

Drama education defined

A play or drama is one of the genres of literary work. Besides its uniqueness, a play shares some similarities with other genres: poem and epic. To consider how literary work means is to go beyond what the words say. They mean by the feeling they convey; they mean by the attitude they create; they mean by the style they assume; they mean by the author's intentions and the time and occasion of the creation of the literary texts. Thus, new meanings emerge constantly with the passage of time and with the investigations of new readers. A new reader is capable of seeing new meanings.

Drama education is not theatrical drama where all the players are professional actors and actresses. It is used as methods and strategies in education settings in order for the students to have benefits of exploring literary work. Drama education provides students with opportunities to examine human experiences through imagined roles and situations. Drama education offers students a powerful mode of expression. It is an interactive, creative process

involving the individual in relationship to others and the environment. It helps students develop the ability to move from their actual situations and roles into imaginary or assumed situations and roles. This ability gives them unique insights and provides them with a window through which the beliefs and values of cultures may be viewed, explored, and challenged. Learning experiences in drama provide unique avenues for thinking and knowing that help prepare learners for present and future challenges. Drama education contributes to the students' development by providing opportunities to experience situations like those they might encounter in real life, to make choices, and to take responsibility for their actions in a safe and nurturing environment.

There are some myths about drama in education setting:

✚ The purpose of drama is to entertain the audience

Fact: The purpose of drama is for the participants to develop speaking skills, acting skills, creative thinking, confident and self-esteem

✚ Drama requires repetitive memorization of lines

Fact: Creative, developmental drama uses new short plays and other drama activities. The focus is on the skill development, not line memorization

✚ Drama are only for the students who are not interested in sports or other extracurricular activities

Fact: Drama education is for all children despite their sport preferences. It offers advantages to develop speaking and presentation skills. In addition,

team building skills exercised through drama activities benefit the children in dealing with other projects

✚ Drama is only extrovert children

Fact: Drama is great for both shy and outgoing children. Drama can help introvert children to develop speaking skills and public confidence, provided that they are given a pace that is comfortable and enjoyable for them. Often, parents find that after participating in drama classes, their shy children is not introvert after all; they just need proper guidance. Also drama helps extrovert children to focus and to work on their retention, projection, and articulation skills.

Drama education helps students develop intellectually by expanding their capacity for creative thought, expression, and critical thinking. Drama arises from "an insatiable curiosity about the human condition." Curiosity and inventiveness are keystones of critical thinking. At the same time, drama offers all learners the opportunity to think metaphorically and to develop intellectual flexibility. It seeks to bridge the real and the imagined, the concrete and the symbolic, the practical and the inspired. It thus supports the process of intellectual growth that all learners engage in as they make sense of their world by integrating knowledge and experience. With these multi-layered effects, it is almost impossible that the students have nothing to say in responding to the play.

There are enormous activities available for the classroom use. And obviously, language aspects are not the only ones exploited during these activities. However, as language means to communicate, it can be the vehicle through which the students state their responses. The students are also encouraged to increase voluntary reading that would help them to enhance vocabulary development. Further, during dialogue activities, the teacher can help the students to develop their fluency. In the scripts, there will be various models of many organizational structures and language styles used to various language functions such as describing, instructing, persuading, generalizing, and demonstrating.

Productive language environment must be prepared in order to create non-threatening situations. One means of helping the students feel comfortable is to focus the language use by learning about something else. For many students, getting up in front of the rest of the class is a frightening and stressful situation. Group exercises are good ways of introducing dramatic activities in relatively risk-free environment. Students will feel a certain safety in numbers so that they can be relaxed and feel confident about what they are doing. Things will get slowly at first; be patient, the teacher and students who are accustomed to dramatic activities can learn together.

Drama education provides excellent oral communication formats. Pantomime, puppetry, and improvisation supply opportunities for students to plan, discuss, participate, and reflect. No matter what the age, puppetry is

valuable option. Given their varying proficiency levels, the ability to hide behind the “stage”, a sock, or a paper bag can increase students’ confident levels without risking their language. The puppet performance can be videotaped and then discussed afterwards.

Other beginning group exercises are dialogue activities that can be used to help students to infer meaning of characters dialogues. The dialogues can be taken from real plays, or simply created by the teacher considering the proficiency level of the students. Some options are as follows:

- Invisible objects Exercise
 1. Sit on the floor in a good round circle that exposes everybody
 2. Create an object through mime. Let it very simple; for example: look through a telescope, put on invisible clothes, go fishing with an invisible pole, and so on.
 3. Once you have created an object, demonstrate how to use it and pass it to the left. Have the person on the left use the object. Then mould the object into something new, demonstrate how to use it, pass it to the next person on the left. Continue until everybody has the opportunity to create an object.

4. After the first circuit, repeat the exercise. Often it is in the second circuit that the challenges come to the exercise.

- The Mirror Game

1. Find a partner and stand face to face. One person is the leader and another is the 'mirror'.

2. When the leader lifts his right arm, the 'mirror' lifts his left arm. If the leader bends to the left, the 'mirror' bends to the right. The idea is to have the leader and the 'mirror' cooperate together so well that we cannot tell who is leading and who is following.

3. After one or two minutes, switch roles so the leader becomes the mirror and the mirror becomes the leader.

4. Switch several times. Then without talking to each other, switch on your own. One person takes the lead for a while, then the other person takes the lead and so on.

- Living Statue

1. Select a partner you have not been worked with during other exercise.

2. One person is the “sculptor” and the other is the “statue”. The statue closes his or her eyes. The sculptor then shape the statue into any shape he or she wishes as long as they do not place the statue into any position break bones or be embarrassing.
 3. The sculptor may not keep the statue in a single pose, but must continue to change and mold. Then switch roles.
 4. Talk about the meaning of different poses.
- Saying “Hello”
 1. Pair up with another student.
 2. Share only one word with each other: “Hello.” Communicate how you feel, what you want, or what just happened to you and so on, only by saying “hello” in different ways, using different tone of voice.
 3. Talk about the differences in the meaning of one word.
 - Chain Improvisation
 1. Get into groups of four and number off so everybody knows who is first, second, third, and so on.
 2. The first two people begin by having conversation. The greater the crisis the better. Location, time, and relationship should be determined beforehand based on the suggestion from the class.

“You are two goldfish in a bowl and you haven’t been fed for a week,” or “You are a teacher and the student at a ten year class reunion” and so on.

3. Begin the improvisation. After 30 seconds or so, whoever the student number three enters the scene and introduces a new situation. “My boyfriend ran away from home!”
4. Students one and two must stop what they are doing and immediately adapt to this new set of circumstances. If you are presumed to be another character, you must become that individual. Upon entering, you should present a problem to the others in the group, saying something like, “Mom, where’s my shoes?” or “Mr. Smith, I’m sorry I don’t have the report you wanted.”
5. Student number one find a way to exit within the context of the scene.
6. Student two and three continue the improvisation until student number four enters with a whole new problem. “I’ve just been in a car accident!”

Drama Education in Indonesia?

To date, most of English teachers in Indonesia still depend heavily on textbooks to provide them with classroom activities. Rarely do we find teachers who initiatively take other communicative techniques. That's why some educators are concerned that the English teaching tends to be grammatical and the levels of difficulty seem to be increasing from time to time. It appears that what is considered "challenging" for many teachers is "more difficult". This vision has to altered.

I believe that we should ask ourselves how much weigh we put on literature and literary work. At this present moment, it is plain to see that stakeholders English education - teachers, writers, publishers, parents, community, and government - are not aware how literature benefits the students. In any textbook, we find that most of the materials are informational texts, and literary work as given very small portion. With all the advantages that literary work can offer, we should have given it much greater portion.

Especially on drama education, teachers, school, and community can contribute to the development of drama education. Drama education is very feasible because we teach English to younger children, and they love to play. Together, they can create alternatives for having interesting and engaging classrooms.

Further more, we can use any school event to perform drama. In many school events, we usually have performances, either musical or theatrical.

Performing English drama in school events can be a very good start to nurture the use literary work in our classrooms.

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