

Dramatically speaking: The benefits of drama for adult EAL learners

by Jodie Whitehurst

Teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL) to adults in the community sector is undoubtedly one of the most rewarding jobs I have ever had. What a great privilege to work with learners from so many cultures and language backgrounds, who bring such a wealth of experiences and skills into the classroom! At the end of most days, I leave the classroom feeling energised and grateful. Naturally, however, there are also days when I scratch my head wondering, 'How can I do more to ensure that I am facilitating learning that is meaningful and long lasting?' One of the key ways I have aimed to achieve this recently is by incorporating a range of drama techniques into my EAL classes.

Prior to entering the world of adult language education, I worked as a secondary school English and drama teacher for ten years, a job which I also loved. As the sole drama teacher at several schools, I became accustomed to spending countless hours with the students, rehearsing for school productions, painting sets and helping VCE students to refine their monologues. I was constantly in awe of the drama students' dedication, initiative and creativity and found great joy in seeing their acting skills and confidence grow over time. It was clear that this confidence was not limited to the drama classroom or stage, but applied to many facets of their lives. As school leavers, it was common for students to articulate how instrumental their involvement in drama had been in allowing them to grow, learn and to feel part of a supportive community.

In light of this experience, when I entered the world of adult community language education, I naturally wanted my new learners to be afforded these benefits. I could immediately see the potential of such methodology to provide them with much needed opportunities to develop their expressive skills and confidence. However, I also realised I couldn't just expect drama to immediately make sense or appear relevant to these mature-aged, multicultural students. To most of them, drama was a foreign concept and certainly wasn't on their radar as an expected educational activity. I also suspected that many

of the more physical techniques I had used in secondary drama classrooms would potentially be inappropriate and confronting. Essentially, I felt that I needed to be clearer in my own mind (and body) about exactly how drama could be used to achieve the communicative outcomes that were essential to my adult learners.

The search for inspiration

In order to do this, I decided I needed two things: resources that specifically connected the disciplines of drama and EAL, and a chance to participate in professional development (PD) in this field. While I certainly managed to find some useful books and websites, I struggled to uncover any relevant PD opportunities in Australia. I did, however, locate a vibrant, passionate community of drama in language education practitioners in Europe, which I longed to be part of. While disappointed that I could not find any workshops locally, I simply became more experimental with drama techniques that I found in books and online resources, adapting them to the adult context where necessary. Through this process, I built up a repertoire of methods that were positively received by my students. I observed quieter students contributing more frequently and taking risks, stronger collaboration and higher overall learner motivation. Encouraged by these results, I felt compelled to delve deeper.

Thus, at the beginning of 2018, I returned to study, undertaking a Master of TESOL at the University of Melbourne. One of my key motivations for doing this was to research the effects of drama on the language and communication skills of adult EAL learners. For my final project, I conducted a systematic literature review of recently conducted studies in the area of performative language teaching. The term 'performative' acts as an umbrella term (Crutchfield & Schewe, 2017), encompassing techniques which are commonly distinguished as either process-oriented (drama activities practised in the classroom with no external audience) or product-oriented (scenes or plays that are rehearsed to be performed to an audience).

Throughout my studies I discovered a whole world of research which not only supported my convictions about the advantages of using such pedagogy, but revealed other benefits I had not consciously considered. One of the most significant of these was drama's potential to have a positive effect on the emotional state of adults learning a language by reducing the anxiety that can commonly inhibit learner engagement and progress (Piazzoli, 2011; Atas, 2014). I recognised this anxiety in some of my own students, which often seemed to stem from a fear of making errors and consequently being judged negatively. As the list of reasons to use drama methodology grew, so did my desire to gain more skills in this field.

ISS Institute Fellowship

My opportunity to experience some hands-on PD on using drama in language teaching finally came when, in September 2018, I was awarded a Fellowship by the International Specialised Skills Institute (ISS Institute) in collaboration with the Department of Education and Training (Higher Education and Skills Group). This was nothing short of a dream come true as it allowed me to enter the international community of practitioners working in this field. I was also privileged to meet and learn from many of the experts in whose research I had immersed myself while studying. Throughout my fellowship journey, I visited five cities across Europe and Canada to attend a week-long TESOL Drama course (Florence, Italy) a five day summer school on 'The role of drama in adult and higher language education' (Grenoble, France), the Drama in Education (DiE) Days conference (Zug, Switzerland) and to meet up with experts, Dr Angelica Galante (Montreal) and Dr Art Babyants (Toronto). Through each workshop, meeting and observation, I gained a deeper insight into why and how EAL educators should consider using drama strategies in their teaching, regardless of whether they have a drama teaching background. As Angelica Galante highlighted in our meeting, we don't have to be actors or drama-trained teachers to teach performatively in this context, because we are not teaching our students to be actors. Rather, we are using drama strategies to teach language skills.

Why use drama?

To paraphrase Art Babayants, creator of a drama-based EAL program in Toronto called Embodied English, there is, in a sense, no option but to use drama if we are teaching oral communication to our EAL students.



With Dr Art Babyants, University of Toronto, Canada.

This is because, as research has shown us, an enormous portion of our communication is non-verbal. In line with this, one need only glance at a few pages of the EAL Frameworks curriculum to see that paralinguistic cues (i.e. posture, gestures, facial expressions and intonation) are repeatedly listed among the criteria against which we need to be assessing our students. Notably, these cues vary from culture to culture and learners need the opportunity to comfortably experiment with them in a safe environment. Drama adds to this sense of safety because when students are working in role, mistakes can be attributed to the character, rather than the learner. Additionally, drama is an ideal vehicle for helping our learners build the employability skills embedded in the curriculum such as team-work, initiative and enterprise, and problem-solving.

Whether or not they are consciously utilising drama, a lot of EAL teachers are naturally creative and tend to use performative language techniques, perhaps without even realising they are doing it. With the shift in recent years towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), many EAL classes have become more learner-centred, enabling students to engage in collaboration, negotiation and meaningful social interaction. However, as Professor Manfred Schewe explained in his keynote address at the summer school in Grenoble, drama "goes a step further than CLT because it brings in the body". Such whole-body learning not only gives learners the opportunity to develop their non-verbal communication, but can also help them retain and recall new language learnt. Additionally, by bringing the body into the equation,



With the participants, organisers and volunteers of the DiE Days conference in Zug, Switzerland

we are welcoming more of our learners' communicative resources, fostering a sense of inclusion for those who may have limited capacity to communicate verbally in the target language.

At the DiE days conference in Zug, Keynote Speaker, Patrice Baldwin, stated "The amount of vocabulary you have is irrelevant. If you're not using it in a meaningful context, it's not useful." No doubt, many of us have witnessed our students measuring their progress according to the number of grammar sheets completed or new words learnt. However, if, through drama, we can help to scaffold authentic contexts in which this new language can be used, the students become engaged in constructing more meaningful interactions.

Such authenticity is more likely to be achieved if we ensure that there is some kind of tension implicit in the drama. As Dr Erika Piazzoli demonstrated at the Grenoble summer school, if we take a simple role-play scenario such as trying to exchange an item of clothing, we can inject more meaning if we add a sense of tension. For example: it's almost closing time, the customer desperately needs a suitable outfit for a wedding the next day and the shop assistant is completely distracted by her mobile phone. Such dramatic elements increase the learner's motivation to use the language and encourage our learners to move away from simply repeating a series of standard lines learnt from a book.

Another profound impact drama can have on adult migrant learners is that of empowerment. This really

dawned on me when, prior to making my overseas fellowship journey, I made contact with Melbourne-based teacher, presenter and resource writer, Carmel Davies, having discovered she had previously undertaken a Churchill Fellowship on a similar topic. From the moment we connected, I was fascinated to learn about Carmel's prior experiences of creating powerful large-scale performances with refugees to empower them to share their stories. Subsequently, during my fellowship journey I gained further insight from Fiona Dalziel (co-convenor and keynote speaker of the Grenoble Summer School) and Angelica Galante (Montreal), into the ways that drama in the language classroom opens up a space for adult migrants not only to share their experiences performatively, but to work through challenges they might be facing on a daily basis.

How to start?

Change the space

A key message that I took from several presentations and workshops throughout my journey was that the first step towards creating a drama environment is to change the space. One of the wonderful things about drama is that so much can be achieved with an open space and a group of bodies. By simply pushing the tables to the edges of the room (where possible) and setting out a circle of chairs, the scene is set for collaboration and creativity. While it may initially cause feelings of uneasiness for our learners, I have found that within a short time, students generally adapt and express their approval of working together in this way. This is exemplified by the comment below, made by one of my students at the end of a recent drama-based lesson:

It makes you confident to communicate with others, you know, especially when, you know, if you sit down there [pointing at tables], you don't know what you are doing, but with the group like that, [indicating the circle of students in the open space] you feel comfortable to express yourself.

Go gently

Another key to successfully introducing drama into the EAL space is to start gently using activities that are non-threatening. Gradually leading into the drama with breathing, physical and vocal warm-ups helps to prepare, engage and relax the whole class. This notion of the whole class should definitely include the teacher, as students will

always be more willing to try something if they see us doing it with conviction and enthusiasm. While there are countless drama warm-ups available in books and online (see recommended list at the end of this article), here are a few that are easy to use:

- **Group sighs.** Everyone breathes in deeply then engages in a collective exaggerated sigh. You can extend this by asking students to let their bodies flop down as they let the air out.
- **What are you doing?** All stand in a circle and students take turns to walk into the circle and mime an action in detail, e.g. walking a dog. The next student enters the circle and asks '(Name), what are you doing?'. The student miming then answers with something completely different to the action they were miming, e.g. 'I'm washing the car'. The one who asked the question then mimes washing the car and so the cycle continues.
- **Columbian hypnosis.** In pairs, one person leads their partner around the space by an imaginary string that connects the leader's hand to the nose of the one being led. They can also connect hand to hand, hand to elbow, etc. This works best in an open space where learners can experiment with a variety of heights. (Boal, 2002).
- **Cup and Saucer.** Students move around the whole space in a relaxed manner (encourage them to make their own interesting paths on the floor rather than all walking in a circle). When you call out a pair of objects or elements, e.g. 'cup and saucer', 'notebook and pen', 'fire and water', students have to pair up with the nearest person and quickly create a physical representation of what you have called. This is a great way to revise vocabulary you have been working on or to connect students with elements of the drama activities to follow.

In addition to warming the students up physically, vocally and creatively, such activities tend to promote a sense of trust and an element of fun and laughter. These factors enable learners to relax and become more open to using the new language and experimenting with new concepts. Once students reach this state, we can introduce more involved performative strategies, some examples of which I will outline below.

Process drama

In both Grenoble and Zug, I had the great privilege of participating in process drama workshops run by a number of leaders in the field, including Erika Piazzoli, Patrice



In a process drama workshop run by Patrice Baldwin in Zug, Switzerland. Photo by Stefanie Giebert

Baldwin, Jonathan Neelands and Eva Göksel. The term 'process drama' refers to a style of teaching in which the whole class (teacher included) take on roles to participate in a series of activities connected to a story. The teacher launches the story using what is known as a pre-text, e.g. photograph, news article, historical event, folktale or painting. From here a drama is built (often over a series of lessons) drawing upon a range of dramatic conventions and the learning occurs as the students become immersed in the world of the story. As Patrice Baldwin highlighted in Zug, 'the contexts are imagined, but the learning is real.' The more our learners become physically and emotionally invested in the story and its implicit tension, the more motivated they are to make natural, spontaneous use of the target language, leading to greater fluency. Additionally, as one workshop facilitator, Sharka Dohnalova, pointed out, process drama is a great way to enable learners with low literacy levels to experience a story in an accessible, meaningful way.

Examples of process drama conventions are:

- **Still images (also known as freeze frames or tableaux).** In small groups, students create a picture of a scene using their bodies to represent characters or objects from the story. The scene could be a moment from within the story, a prediction of a future moment or an imagined event from the past, thus creating a backstory.
- **Thought tracking.** While a group is showing their still image, the teacher taps each student in turn on the shoulder (or gently clicks in front of them), the student has to spontaneously voice what his/her character is thinking at that moment.

- **Teacher in role.** The teacher takes on a particular role in the story in order to drive the story further, and students respond in character. E.g. the teacher becomes a king asking his subjects what is causing unhappiness in the village. While some teachers are comfortable acting (in fact many will relish this opportunity to set their inner thespian free!), others may be daunted by this idea. It is therefore worth noting that it is more important to convey the character's attitude and status than to be a brilliant actor. Donning a simple costume item such as a hat or jacket can also help to make the transformation clear.

Importantly, process drama can be designed so that it incorporates language structures you want your students to practise, e.g. making polite requests, forming questions, using the passive voice. Getting your students to identify and reflect on these language learning outcomes goes a long way towards convincing them of the value of this style of learning. There are also limitless possibilities for engaging learners in contextualised writing tasks as part of the drama, e.g. a journal entry or letter from the perspective of one of the characters.

Rehearsed performances

The idea of organising a student performance has the potential to inspire dread in many teachers, but it is important to remember that there is a wide spectrum of performance contexts. These could range from performing a short scene in front of another class during the day, right through to a full scale production with sets, costumes and lighting. In reality, most teachers in the adult sector would struggle to find the resources and time to produce the latter, but a smaller scale performance is often achievable. I learned about many of the benefits of EAL student performances through attending two presentations by Allison Larkin Koushki (at DiE Days, Zug) and Stefanie Giebert (at the Grenoble summer school) respectively, as I will outline below.

Inclusivity: Those not keen to perform can be involved as directors, costume designers, scriptwriters, program designers. Each of these tasks develops crucial language skills and employability skills.

Language benefits: The repeated rehearsal of a scripted scene or play allows significant targeted practice of linguistic and paralinguistic features (Maley & Duff, 2005) and pragmatics (Savage, 2019). In addition, there is enormous scope for students to engage in spontaneous,

collaborative communication through planning, directing and reflecting.

Motivation: The chance to perform their work to friends and/or family can be highly motivating for learners and additionally foster a deep sense of pride.

Flexibility: When working with diverse groups, teachers can vary the size and complexity of roles to suit individual learners.

Depending on the needs, abilities and interests of the learners, the performance script could be:

- class-devised – perhaps stemming from a series of improvisations done in class
- written by a teacher – with this option teachers can incorporate their learners' interests
- an existing published play script
- an adaptation of a short story – the process of adapting could even be done by students as a writing task.

Reflections and plans

The extent of what I have gained so far, both professionally and personally, through the ISS Institute Fellowship cannot be measured. One of the greatest outcomes for me has been to connect with a community of like-minded practitioners both overseas and now in Melbourne, through some of the workshops I have been running. Working in isolation is never easy, but with drama in education, collaboration is essential. For this reason, I have recently created a Facebook Group called DiALLA (Drama in Additional Language Learning Australia), with the aim of providing a local community of practice for interested teachers. This forum for sharing resources, ideas and PD opportunities, is open to all language teachers, regardless of whether they have drama experience. The daily expressions of interest in this group strengthens my conviction that forming such a community is a worthwhile pursuit. Ultimately, if we teachers come together to support and inspire each other in this way, it is clear that when it comes bringing benefits to our adult EAL learners through drama, the sky's the limit!

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DiALLA (Drama in Additional Language Learning Australia) Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2199921460063190/>
Drama Resource Website: <https://dramaresource.com/>

Jodie Whitehurst teaches EAL at Williamstown Community and Education Centre and recently completed a Master of TESOL at the University of Melbourne. She has a passion for bringing drama and music into her English classes and loves to sing and write songs in her spare time. In 2018, Jodie was awarded an ISS Institute Fellowship to travel to Europe and Canada to research the benefits and best practice of using drama in adult EAL education. You can read more about her ISS Institute Fellowship on her blog: <https://medium.com/@jodiewhitehurst73>