Process drama for language learning

The power of 'teacher in role'
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Sir, will you give me some change?
No.
But please...
Move out of my way.

Consider this dialogue. Where do you think it comes from? A real-life encounter? A film? An urban story? It actually comes from an Italian language *process drama* workshop. The exchange, translated from Italian for the purposes of this article, is an extract from a longer role-play which I recorded and transcribed for research purposes. The class was conducted with third year University students, and was part of a series of workshops for learning Italian through drama.

For this particular activity I was following a *process drama* strategy known as **'teacher in role'**: I consciously 'dropped my role' as language teacher, and adopted the role of a young beggar to engage the students in an experiential role-play. As such, the classroom power dynamics had temporarily shifted: I was a lower-status uneducated beggar, relating to an older, educated upper class passer-by who looked at me with pity and contempt.

This role-play is very significant to me because it represents a linguistic breakthrough for Tina, a student who participated in the course and whom I selected as a case study for the research. Tina was an analytical, grammar-obsessed language learner, who had struggled with Italian for some years, before, reluctantly, stumbling across my Italian process drama classes. She had a solid grammar foundation but lacked the confidence to speak; for this reason, her fluency greatly suffered. In this role-play, Tina managed to engage in a spontaneous dialogue for the first time after 5 workshops.

In this activity the students were asked to improvise a conversation based on a story we had negotiated together. The story was generated from a **pre-text**, an initial stimulus, which I presented at the beginning of the class to fuel the learners' imagination. The stimulus was a photograph that portrayed a young Roma child standing in front of a caravan park in a Gipsy camp in the outskirts of an Italian city. Students were asked to brainstorm a context for the photograph and discuss a possible scenario for the child. In this way, students began to unravel the socio-cultural and linguistic layers which the stimulus presented, creating their own meaning. What I have described here is a typical **initiation phase** of a *process drama* workshop: introducing a stimulus, discussing it and generating a story that stems from it. The story can be explored and expanded together as a group.

After the initiation phase, which aims to build belief in roles and situations for the drama, a typical workshop would then feature an **experiential phase**, a series of activities designed to involve the learner in a communication process which engages both the cognitive and the affective dimensions. Participants were asked to become the Roma children living in that Gipsy camp and to portray, through dramatic strategies, scenes of everyday life in a typical camp. Consequently, they created an improvisation, taking the role of Italian parents at a

school meeting, discussing the possibility of their children going to school alongside Roma children. Through this scenario learners were able to view this complex social issue from different perspectives, increasing their emphatic understanding.

Finally, in the **reflective phase** of the workshop, the participants were encouraged to reflect on what they had experienced, processing their implicit learning through meta-cognitive reflection. This sequence of initiation, experiential, and reflective phases represents a typical structure for a *process drama* unit (O'Toole & Dunn, 2002) which the drama/language teacher can rely on to construct meaningful language learning opportunities that expose learners to authentic language.
But what exactly is *process drama*?

Process drama is a pedagogical approach which involves both students and teacher in the co-creation of a story, developed through a sequence of scenarios, or **episodes**; experiencing the relationship between the episodes has been compared to creating a 'web of meaning' (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). By using the metaphor of the web, Kao and O'Neill suggest the *process drama* approach can offer a circular, multi-faceted perspective to an educational objective, enabling the teacher to present the educational focus under different viewpoints.

In my experience as a teacher of Italian as additional language, I found that *process drama* can help to generate authentic contexts for communication, within which language learners can communicate spontaneously in the target language. Most importantly, I found that this approach aligns well with the pedagogical needs of intercultural language learning (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009) offering opportunities for metacognitive reflection and positioning the speakers as makers and **mediators of meaning**.

The *process drama* unit outlined above was part of my Honours research project (Piazzoli, 2008), which aimed at investigating what happens when *process drama* strategies are used in the additional language classroom, at an advanced level of proficiency, to enhance intercultural awareness. For this research I designed and facilitated six process dramas, I filmed the workshops and I interviewed the participants - individually and through a focus group, using concept mapping and video stimulated recall techniques to elicit their opinions on *process drama* for language learning. The outcome of the research indicated that the approach increased the speakers' spontaneous communication and triggered opportunities for intercultural awareness.

In particular, through the medium of **role** both myself as the teacher, and the participants themselves were able to 'drop the social mask' imposed by classroom expectations, and take on other personae, experiencing different status and registers. Also, the creation of **authentic contexts** for communication provided the participants with a culturally-rich environment and allowed their interaction to occur in a natural and realistic setting. Finally, **dramatic tension**, the energy generated by dramatic suspense, acted as a potent agent to produce higher motivation to communicate in the target language.

To return to the role-play illustrated above, Tina had adopted a new role, in an authentic context for communication, injected with dramatic tension. In that context, it was the power

of the '**teacher in role**' strategy that motivated her to engage in a meaningful, spontaneous interaction. In my reflective practitioner journal following that episode, I wrote:

As I worked with Tina, teacher in role proved to be an excellent strategy: I was playing the child begging for money, she was playing the adult passer-by. Very often she stopped and reverted back to English, relating to me as 'the teacher' and asking me to help her conjugate a verb; if I did, I would have broken the spell... Instead, I stuck to my role, repeating that I didn't understand, I didn't speak any English... I just wanted some money... do you have some money? It took three times for Tina to grasp what I was doing; when she understood that I wasn't the teacher anymore, but a young street beggar, she gave up on me and realized she was forced to use her own resources to communicate. When she did, she finally started to work with the vocabulary she had at her disposal. In that moment I got goose bumps as I recalled Willis' (1996) stating that, if the need to communicate is strongly felt, learners will find a way for getting around forms they cannot remember. Finally, through processes of drama, Tina had felt a strong need to communicate!

Tina herself, reflecting on her own learning progress during the interview, mentioned this episode, commenting that:

...It took me a little while to think I could... I thought oh, I can build on this! You know it was sort of developing that... thing about myself [...] I've overcome a few of my fears, I suppose, a little bit of that fearfulness...

In this comment, Tina engaged in meta-cognitive thought to reflect on the effects of the *process drama* approach on her language learning. Her own words capture the essence of the pedagogy as she continued:

It's like a role-reversal, isn't it? And therefore process drama gives the students more confidence in trying to speak the language!

Indeed, through *process drama* strategies like 'teacher in role', language learners can experience an increased confidence to communicate spontaneously and purposefully in the target language, negotiating their own intercultural meaning. This, as Liddicoat and Scarino (2009) remind us, is our primary goal as teachers of additional languages.

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Engaging students through process drama
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"...as long as we're not 24/7 sitting at our desk ..." "...sitting and listening and listening and listening..." "...nothing but write down stuff..." (PhD Data, 2009)

The research into drama in education in all kinds of fields and subjects leaves little doubt that it is an engaging and effective pedagogy both as a stand-alone school subject and when applied to other discipline areas. In the light of the student comments on language lessons, above, I am going to discuss a process drama which I used in a Grade 8 languages classroom. In the article I provide an overview of the design of the first part of the unit with reference to the learning experiences I used over a term. Since this was a *participatory* project reliant on ongoing student feedback I have also integrated some of the comments from students regarding the process and outcomes.

The dramatic narrative in process drama is flexible – stories can be rewritten, interrupted and challenged. Learners work with open- ended scenarios and relationships which make room for more spontaneity and more use of personalised language. The narrative and enrolment in the classroom drama can connect students to their own personal worlds and their place in their local communities. It can also connect them to the globalised world, its questions and dilemmas through the imaginative world created in the classroom. Process drama helps to make language learning part of the world beyond the classroom *and* gives it an immediacy and a purpose which no textbook can ever achieve.

The introductory quotes for this article illustrate the fact that students often wish for a more varied and/or active classroom life. As in traditional units of work, process drama provides opportunities for students to communicate in oral, written, digital and kinaesthetic modes. In particular, by its very nature drama provides the contextual and physical space to integrate the use of bodies and faces into communication. Almost 100 years ago. John Dewey (1916/38) wrote that "the pupil has a body, and brings it to school along with his mind" (p. 141). In most curricula, however, the body and mind are educated separately; drama integrates the two. Students expressed enthusiasm for the physical work through statement such as, "[It's] more fun to learn and easier to memorise words that had actions..." (St.16[1]). and "[drama is] fun and entertaining and interesting...it was easier to remember things doing them hands on" (St. 8). The many comments in the same vein suggest that the kinaesthetic activity both engages students and supports learning by acting as a mnemonic for the new language.

The research project

The unit of work for my action research project was developed for a mixed Grade 8 class in an Australian state secondary school. The students ranged from absolute beginners to learners with about three years of (limited) prior learning at primary school. Two had mild learning problems. I taught the class over 5 months for most of their Grade 8 language lessons which amounted to about 160 minutes per week for 16-17 weeks. Since this school

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[1] All students were allocated a number in the data. Quotes come from either questionnaires (Q) at the beginning and end of the project, or from student focus interviews (I) before and midway through it.

condenses their Grade 8 language program into half a year, this was the majority of their Grade 8 language work.

The process drama and student reactions

The pre-text

A process drama begins with a 'pre-text' which acts as a way into the field, a peep at the language and content which will frame the dramatic process. This pre-text 'sets the scene' in terms of narrative and language content and, very importantly, stimulates the imagination. It can be anything – a complete story, a film clip, a photograph, a basket of food, a garment, etc. Our pre-text was from Shaun Tan's picture book "The Arrival". It was a picture of a man and woman standing by a suitcase on the kitchen table. It stimulated both description of the scene in the target language and talk in English about leaving one's home.

The narrative framework: strategies and language to build belief in the imagined world

After pondering together what they could see in the picture students were led into a migration scenario where they were the families on a departing ship, forced to leave Australia because of their German names and travelling to Germany to live. To be accepted into their new land they had to prove they could speak the German language. According to drama in education research, students working in role can be in role to different degrees. By 'building belief' in the drama they can move to deeper levels of enrolment which can bring deeper learning outcomes.

This process of building belief is particularly challenging in the beginner classroom as it constantly demands that the teacher make decisions as to which language to use, and it involves gradually developing and practising useful target language vocabulary and phrases while still developing the story. In the research unit this building belief stage was prolonged, but still largely embedded in activities related to the drama. The first cycle of work included the following experiences and language functions.

- choosing a new identity from authentic German passenger lists (reading old script, pronouncing names),
- *freeze frames*[2] and *shoulder taps* – students show how they felt at leaving (expressing emotions),
- being photographed for government records (writing caption for photo, giving name and age to captain),
- meeting other families in the cabin (exchanging family information)
- *gossip mill* -students describe what they could see, hear, smell, touch and taste aboard this old, rickety ship (describing places).

Once belief has been more strongly developed, dramatic tension can be introduced to deepen the learning engagement.

Dramatic tension

Moving the narrative along and developing tension in the plot and relationships is a key part of any drama and an important aspect of student engagement. The moments of tension in this drama are in bold in the sequence below:

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[2] All drama strategies mentioned in the text are explained in the Appendix

- *soundscape* chant about the storm at sea (describing weather)
- **invent , *freeze frame* and listen to stories of the nasty consequences of the storm**
- describe their feelings through these experiences
- **challenge the captain about their problems in a *hot seat* activity** (See Appendix) (expressing emotions, asking questions).
- ***spontaneous role play:* undergo immigration interview on ship's deck in front of each other without using English (**responding to questions about selves, families and the journey).

In this last assessment activity some of the questions were familiar, some were less so, ensuring the tension was maintained. Many students identified this session as the one which they remembered best or which was significant in terms of their learning because they were 'forced' to think and speak. For example, because on family group suddenly had a stowaway to cover for, one student reflected that "we had to think about our answers twice" (St.8) – the language had to fit the altered situation. Another student appreciated the session as s/he had to "think on the spot" (St. 1) and one appreciated the learning experience because the interview was 'fun' and s/he "learnt what I can and can't do". Such statements bear out the insistence in the research literature that tension in the narrative is an important key to student engagement and learning.

Exploring a problem through dramatic enrolment: intercultural learning

Every process drama has a focus question linked to an important human social question or dilemma, and this is one reason why it is a useful pedagogy for an intercultural language program. Students experience authentic written, spoken and digital language exchanges when they are in role as fleshed out 'real' people. They connect these roles with events, behaviours, traditions and vocabulary linked to the cultural, political and social past, present and future of the target country. For this project the question was "What is it like to leave your home country forever, to live in a new land using a new language?".

During the project students discussed, in English initially, the feeling leaving one's home could engender and the 'need' for migrants to speak a language before entering a country. Later in the drama they pondered the reasons locals might be hostile or friendly towards new arrivals, relating them to their own beliefs and behaviours towards migrants in their own diverse Australian culture. Then, using their minds, bodies and imaginations they took on group roles as welcoming locals, angry locals and the nervous migrants coming down the gangplank. In groups, they used the target language provided to express their welcome or rejection of the new arrivals. This provided a meaningful context for students to practise the language of protest, rejection and welcome. As usual, focus on form games and activities were interspersed. The students then made more personal use of the language when enrolled as individual employers, accepting or rejecting migrants asking for jobs.

Research affirms that it can be difficult to assess shifts in attitude and understanding in the short term, but some students did connect the unit of work with the wider community language issues in remarks such as, "I feel really sorry for these people. They had no choice and risked their lives ... I have learnt history that I didn't know before" (St. 17), and "People who really got through it are unlucky and.to go through an 'imaginary' experience was a fair

amount for me" (St. 4). Finally, another student made personal connections which perhaps enriched her learning from the unit, "I went through the migration process because I moved from South Africa when I was 6. Our move wasn't as hard though."

Teacher in role

This is a necessary element of process drama. The teacher can disrupt the usual classroom dynamics and encourage more authentic language by persuading students to pretend they are *not* students or teacher for a time. I enrolled as the ship's captain while students were in role as angry, starving passengers and invited them to challenge me, a thing most of them would be reluctant to do in the normal classroom. As the classroom video shows, several students were content to be involved spectators, but for some of the more confident learners it was a challenge they revelled in and rose to. Moreover, two of the far less confident learners were also spurred on to participate.

For teachers with little formal drama training (like me) taking on roles can be intimidating; as Morgan and Saxton (2001) write it is, " a moment of risk", "teaching without a net" (p.211) but as the classroom videos and later comments attest, students found it exciting and productive for language learning. One student commented, "She [teacher] pretended to be the boat's captain and we would put her in the hot seat and ask questions. It really shows what you know" (St. 6). Other reactions to the practice of teacher in role in general included, "The teacher in the role of Frau Schmidt knew something we didn't so it got me to think more of what it could be and it made me want to get more into the drama to find out what happened" (St. 4) , and " When [teacher] was the ship's captain...she was scary!" (St. 10) .

One reason for the lack of drama in language classrooms could be the hesitation teachers feel at embarking on a pedagogy which involves them as well as the students in adopting roles in the drama. Process drama, however, is not a course in acting; it requires neither the learner nor the teacher to produce a polished performance for an audience. It requires students and teachers to speak and act 'as if' they are another, not to convince an audience they really 'are' another. Assessment of participation in a process drama is of the language learning, not the acting.

Conclusion

Furthermore, since much of the role play is in groups the process can be used to protect and extend both the nervous actor and the beginner/weaker language student in the early stages. This characteristic combined with the open ended nature of much of the work also makes process drama very useful in the diverse or mixed level classroom. The complete consensus of appreciation for the process drama in this multi-level Grade 8 adds weight to this argument. Students almost all mentioned the word 'fun', but, although fun for them does mean the playful like quality of the drama activities, many students also appreciated the opportunities to think and to work out language. Many commented that they felt they had learnt an appreciable amount of language and those who were continuing with the language felt they had moved on. Some students attribute their learning to the consistent enrolment in the drama: "... we got to act like we were German so a fair amount of the time had to respond in German and translate what you said" (St.4: Questionnaire, PhD data, 2009). Since we never actively translated my words, I take this to mean that they had to

concentrate and think what I meant in order to work out a response. Another student commented on the positive effect "I have been able to learn by doing not by writing...with the family you have to put yourself in the role of that person" (St. 9). In the same vein one student told me that "...it's easier to get German to come to you, like to speak and do German if you're in a German environment" (L151-2 Interview 3 A). Another student (St. 15). stated that the family group activities were effective because "we were having fun and learning at the same time".

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Tan, S. The Arrival

Appendix

Drama strategies referred in article

I have found these useful. These and many more can be found, clearly explained, in:-
Neelands, J., & Goode, T. (2000). *Structuring drama work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pre-text
The realia or text used to stimulate the drama initially

Role play
This happens throughout the drama as students take on many roles. In this drama keeping the students in their family roles and just switching from refugees to migrants seemed to be enough. It is not as varied as true process drama enrolment but it limits the language needed. Instead I relied on many different places and times to vary the attitudes and interactions needed. Also the continuity of role helped minimise disruption to the process which was already continually interrupted by the need to practise language. I think perhaps the family group also gave these students a sense of unity and identify through their first term of high school language study.

Storying

Developing the story and the relationships in new ways as the narrative unfolds. It can be teacher planned with minor student led diversions, or it can be very flexible.

Freeze frame
A moment in time; students freeze in the midst of an action or scene and pose as for a photograph. This is a symbolic communication so the pose, gesture, expression and spatial relationships they adopt should communicate something to the audience

Shoulder tap
Tapping a student on the shoulder during a freeze frame to ask them a question or allow them to speak

Soundscape
Use and arrangement of voices to make meaning or focus attention on something (very useful for memorising and focus on form as well as creating atmosphere)

Gossip mill
In a specified location (on the deck, at the bus stop, in the pub, etc.) students walk around, gossiping about a person or an event. Conversation doesn't have to be extended, just a series of relevant comments is fine. Encourage students to draw on language from all their learning experiences

Teacher in role
The teacher adopts a role in the story. With beginners I found it best to be an authoritative figure, but as we got to know each other and they had more language, adopting a lower status role became easier. Just the 'silliness' of wearing a symbolic hat or apron in a high school classroom seemed to engage the students initially. They never took advantage of this in a disruptive way. This diminishing of the traditional relationships is all part of 'doing difference', of allowing students more space.

Hot seat
The teacher takes on a role in a tense spot in the story and students in role have to ask probing questions and push for answers. This is very difficult in L2 with beginners, as we found when they hot seated the captain when the food disappeared in the storm at sea. It was very strained, but you could hear their brains ticking as they struggled to think of something they could say in German. As the videos show, it was excellent extension for the gifted language students. Later we experimented with my speaking German and students using both languages and this worked to a degree. It is also a chance for more advanced students to be hot seated, or, as we tried, to share it with the teacher.

Inside-outside circles
 2 circles of students 'cross examining' each other in turn as one circle moves around (good for both open questioning and focus drills)