Engagement as perception-in-action in process drama for teaching and learning Italian as a second language

Erika C. PIAZZOLI, Griffith University, Australia

This article takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining some core elements of drama education with sociocultural theory. It draws on the findings of a doctoral study exploring the nature of learner engagement when process drama is used to teach Italian as a second language. In particular, the article focuses on the construct of engagement as perception-in-action in improvised social interactions, in role, with adult learners at an intermediate-advanced level. The article opens with an overview of recent research on process drama for second language learning. It then provides the theoretical framework for the study, discussing process drama pedagogy and the construct of engagement. Next, the context of the study is discussed, in terms of methodology, methods, and participants. The discussion continues with an analysis of engagement as perception-in-action, first by zooming into a segment of classroom interaction, and then zooming out to three case studies. Finally, findings on engagement are discussed, in terms of agency as self-regulation in managing improvisation with language and with the elements of drama, including dramatic irony. The article concludes by pointing to dialogic interaction in process drama mediating, and being mediated by, dramatic tension, and the implications for second language learners and teachers.

Keywords: Process Drama; Engagement; Dramatic Tension; Perception-in-Action; Irony; Italian as a Second Language

1. Introduction

This article takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining some core elements of drama education and sociocultural theory for second language learning (Lantolf, 2000). It discusses a doctoral research that investigated drama-based pedagogy for teaching Italian as a second language. In particular, the focus of the research was exploring the constructs of learner engagement and teacher artistry, and their relationship in the L2 classroom. This article discusses findings related to the construct of learner engagement, manifesting as a cycle of ‘perception-in-action’ and culminating in different degrees of agency. The study supports previous research on drama and agency (Carson,
2012) and builds on this argument, to investigate how does agency appear and manifest in the verbal and non-verbal communication of speakers as they improvise, in a drama-based context.

The synergy between sociocultural theory (SCT) for second language learning and drama is not new. Indeed, both SCT and drama education are based on Vygotsky’s (1976) theories of play, dual affect, and Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD). McCafferty (2008) made a convincing case for mimesis as a crucial but underestimated aspect of second language acquisition. Haught and McCafferty (2008) validated this synergy through their study on gesturing as a regulatory function for L2 development, within a dramatic context including games, improvisation, and the enactment of scripts. Their findings suggested that dramatic play enabled learners to self-regulate by engaging in physical, cognitive, and affective activity. However, while their study examined drama games, the current research focuses on process drama (O’Neill, 1995), a form which differentiates from drama games in a number of ways.

As the name suggests, process drama does not focus on a product (i.e., a final performance), but entails an extended dramatic exploration. The main difference between process drama and theatre games, improvisation, or script enactment is the structure. A process drama starts from a pre-text (O’Neill, 1995), builds up through a series of interlinked episodes, or scenic units, and culminates in a reflection phase. Process drama origins date back to the seminal work of Bolton (1979), O’Neill (1995) and O’Toole’s (1992). Process drama is not based on a predetermined script, and does not involve an external audience; rather, the participants are simultaneously actors, directors and spectators. O’Neill (1995) defines process drama’s key feature in terms of the teacher leading, in role.

2. Background

2.1. Research on process drama and second language (L2) learning

Process drama for second language learning is a relatively new field of enquiry, which has gained momentum in the last few years (Stinson & Winston, 2011). The first study to investigate the effects of process drama on L2 discourse was conducted in a Taiwanese university, with 33 undergraduate learners of English (Kao, 1995). The intervention lasted 14 weeks; drama/language activities were coded for turn-taking using Van Lier’s (1988) classification of topic management, self-selection, allocation, and sequencing. Overall, the findings suggested that, when using process drama, the participants’ contributions in the target language where spontaneously managed, with participants taking 20% more turns than the teacher.
Importantly, Kao’s data suggested that a key factor provoking active participation was the dramatic tension within the drama.

Kao’s (1995) study was later incorporated into Words into Worlds (Kao & O’Neill, 1998), a seminal text for research on process drama and SLA. Drawing on Kramsch’s (1985) continuum of classroom interaction, Kao and O’Neill created a continuum from “totally controlled language exercises” to “open communication” (1998, p. 5). They argued that drama-based pedagogies can be very diverse, and fall under a spectrum of modalities, with scripted role plays falling on the controlled communication end, and process drama on the open end. In this pioneering text, they made a case for process drama as a “liberating” approach for L2 learning (p. 17).

Since these foundations were laid, a number of studies have explored the nature of process drama and SLA. Examples include Stinson and Freebody’s (2006) multiple site case study with 160 ESL learners (intermediate-advanced), aged 16, in Singapore; Stinson’s (2009) follow-up interventionist study, with eight teachers and 600 learners (intermediate-advanced), aged 13-14; Bournot-Trites, Belliveau, Spiliotopolous, and Séror’s (2007) mixed-methods study, with two classes in an elementary Canadian French immersion context; Araki-Metcalfe’s (2008) action research, with three classes of English learners in a Japanese primary school (beginner level), and their teachers; Yaman Ntelioglou’s (2011) ethnographic study, with 50 adult ESL learners (beginner), in a Canadian adult school; Kao, Carkin, and Hsu’s (2011) mixed-methods study, with 30 Taiwanese ESL learners (intermediate); Rothwell’s (2011) mixed-methods study, with one class of German (beginner) students in an Australian middle-years school; Piazzi’s action research on intercultural awareness (2010), and case study on foreign-language anxiety (2011), with adult learners of Italian (advanced), in an Australian university.

Overall, these projects suggest that process drama can be beneficial to stimulate purposeful motivation to communicate in the target language, and to promote intercultural awareness. In particular, it has been suggested that process drama activates L2 learning through the active management of the elements of drama.

2.2. The elements of drama

Since the Poetics (Aristotle, trans. 1992), drama theorists have agreed upon the existence of identifiable elements of drama used by playwrights, directors, and actors to create theatre or, in the case of drama education, to create learning through drama. Heathcote, a process drama pioneer, described her practice as a “conscious employment of the elements of drama to educate” (in Wagner, 1976, p. 13). Haseman and O’Toole (1986) formulated an influential
model, which features the dramatic elements as: (1) situation, (2) role and (3) relationships, driven by (4) dramatic tension, directed by (5) focus, made explicit in (6) place and (7) time through (8) language and (9) movement, to create (10) mood and (11) symbol which all together create the experience of (12) dramatic meaning (p. viii). These elements are interdependent, but at the same time distinct and distinguishable. These elements cannot be presented in a vacuum; their manifestation is dependent on the contextual factors. Following this consideration, an extended example is provided, in order to illustrate the elements of drama in the context of an L2 classroom, with intermediate to advanced adult learners.

Let us imagine a L2/drama teacher beginning a class by shouting: “Can anyone hear me? I’m stuck in the elevator!” This L2/drama teacher has chosen 10 words to evoke a specific dramatic context. Within this context, the element of (1) role in the drama would inform the choice of language: a claustrophobic woman stuck in the elevator might use different volume, pace, and intonation than, for example, the elevator engineer performing a routine check. In process drama, the teacher often works from within the story, in role. Through this strategy, the teacher-in-role can challenge the students to experience particular contexts. By manipulating status, a feature of role, the teacher can open up unlimited opportunities for spontaneous language, through a choice of register, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions (Kao & O’Neill, 1998). In the elevator example, by adding “Guys, I got in trouble again!” a lower status would emerge, as well as particular relationship between the speakers. This, it follows, would trigger a specific response in terms of register. As Stinson (2008) argued, adopting a role can be beneficial for L2 learners as, by taking on different personae, they are able to explore the language demands from “the inside”, rather than through discussion and reproduction of language from a textbook. Roles are not fixed in process drama; often, students take on different roles within one workshop, to stimulate different points of view. For example, within this workshop, they may alternate taking on the role of helpers, trying to help the woman stuck in the elevator; the role of fire fighters attempting to rescue her from the elevator; or the role of the elevator company manager, upset at the employees as an elevator has failed again; or they could all take a collective role as the woman’s consciousness, when stuck in the elevator.

By carefully choosing a (2) situation, the teacher can access a richness of subcultures within the target language. For example, by adding “Can anyone hear me? I’m stuck between out-patients and gastro in 3.15!” the subculture of co-workers in a hospital emerges, evoking context-specific vocabulary. This could be integrated with the teacher supplying a narration to enrich the story. If, for instance, participants knew that the woman in the elevator is an apprentice surgeon, on her way to her first operation, this would help paint a
particular picture.

When carefully constructed, situation and role will inject a degree of (4) **dramatic tension**. In our example, if the apprentice surgeon stuck in the elevator needed to perform this operation as part of her university training, a degree of dramatic tension would be present. This would create a sense of urgency, especially if, in the story, the operation was the last exam before she graduated from medicine. There would be a degree of **tension of the task**, with the (dramatic) task being escaping the elevator, or getting to the operating theatre in time for the operation. **Tension of relationships** may arise if the person who discovers the trapped woman turns out to be an antagonist, a jealous nurse perhaps, upon whom she has to rely to get out. **Tension of the mystery** may be involved if the nurses were heard whispering that that elevator always stops on the 17th day of the month, or when a particular person is spotted in the ward. **Tension of surprise** would imply an unforeseen event, or constraint, like a message or announcement creating unexpected conditions. Finally, **tension of metaxis** may arise when the events in the real world are questioned by emotional response to a paradox in the fictional world. For example, if a woman who is actually claustrophobic, in role as the young doctor stuck in the elevator, realises that she behaved in a manner opposite to how she would have in real life, and if she was moved by this realization, could experience metaxis at an intrapersonal level.

Another important element is (5) **dramatic focus**. By positioning chairs around the teacher, in-role as the woman stuck in the elevator, and creating a vacuum of space between the elevator and the participants, the dramatic action would become more focussed. Similarly, focusing the action in terms of being just 15 minutes before the operation, on a very hot afternoon, would help to generate a sharper picture in the participants’ minds. This, in turn, would help generate a kind of language indexed to the specific context. **Framing** is another key aspect of focus: reading the incident of the elevator failure in a newspaper would involve different language than experiencing it personally, or reporting it to a concerned relative.

Manipulating the dramatic elements of (6) **place** and (7) **time** would also influence vocabulary choices: language employed five minutes before the elevator stops would be substantially different from language five minutes after it has stopped; and language inside the elevator would be different from language outside of the elevator. Exploring the temporal and spatial dimensions of dramatic contexts can produce meaningful language and provide insights into culturally-bound responses to situations.

The element of (8) **language** itself highly influences the dramatic experience, and becomes paramount in L2 process drama. Johnson and O’Neill (1991) discussed the skills of a drama teacher in terms of being able to select
language as a dramatic element, so that it becomes a “vehicle of experience.” Indeed, both drama teachers and L2 teachers need to carefully select what strategies can inject further tension. For example, setting up an improvised role play between the nurses in the staff room, discussing this incident from a different perspective, may create new layers of meaning in the drama.

(9) Movement is the element which is perhaps most evident in a drama classroom; its manipulation impacts participants’ kinesthetic experience, influencing the language produced. Examples may include asking some participants to re-create a still image of the woman in the elevator, while others create captions for these freeze frames; participants moving quickly around the space, simultaneously speaking out the woman’s thoughts as she is growing anxious; standing still, lights off, until a noise is heard; depicting the woman’s movements in slow motion as she finally exits the elevator; with key-words to be repeated as a chorus. This sequence of strategies, or dramatic conventions, could make up the core of a process drama workshop. Each strategy would need to be alternated with pre- and post-reflective tasks to elicit and practice relevant language structures. (See Winston for several examples of structuring dramatic conventions in a variety of L2 contexts).

The element of (10) mood would emerge as the group co-creates and interprets the meaning generated collectively. Once again, this would substantially alter language choices: a mood of “helplessness for being stuck” would trigger a different response than a mood of “finding the courage to overcome phobias”. Moreover, choosing specific (11) symbols within the drama would allow participants to engage in metacognition; for example, “being stuck” may act as a symbol of a particular social condition in society, of the struggle of recognition of ethnic minorities, etc.

Finally, all these elements, skillfully orchestrated, would trigger the creation of (12) dramatic meaning. This would be the fruit of the experiential process lived in the target language, and made explicit in the final reflective phase. In the final phase of a process drama, the experience of the participants is discussed through semi-structured reflection, where participants are invited to reflect on: a) their language learning, b) their dramatic experience c) their intercultural experience. O’Toole (1992) defined process drama artistry as “negotiating and re-negotiating of the elements dramatic form” (p. 2). Had the teacher started this lesson by saying: “Today we will talk about being stuck in elevators: Who wants to begin?” the quantity and quality of the language would differ. Indeed, process drama artistry refers to managing the dramatic elements in such a way that language becomes a vehicle of experience, generating an urge, or desire, to communicate spontaneously and to reflect upon one’s meaning-making.
2.3. Engagement as perception-in-action

Vygotsky and Luria (1994) described the developmental process of learning as a “newly born unity of perception, speech and action” (p. 109). Van Lier (2004) drew on the work of Vygotsky to argue that ecological language learning requires an active perception or “perception-in-action” (p. 97). Preconditions for meaning to emerge are action, perception, and interpretation, in a continuous cycle of mutual reinforcement. Meaning thus becomes “an active relationship, or engagement, with the environment in which we find ourselves” (p. 92, my italics). Below, three angles of perception-in-action are considered: engagement as conscious attention (Van Lier, 1996), engagement as agency (Van Lier, 2008), and engagement as perezhivanie (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002).

First, engagement is discussed in terms of conscious attention. For Van Lier (1996) degrees of attention in the L2 learner fall on a continuum, spanning from the states of unawareness to vigilance, as the intensity of engagement increases. Van Lier (2004) also referred to this continuum as the “increase in the intensity of engagement as a result of perception and action” (p. 98). Overarching this process is consciousness, which can be defined, from a sociocultural perspective, as a phenomenon born out of social activity. For the L2 learner to reach vigilance, the higher end of the engagement continuum, a number of preconditions are necessary. First, the learner needs to be receptive. Drawing on Allwright and Bailey (1991), Van Lier (1996) defined receptivity as “a state of mind, permanent or temporary, open to the experience of becoming a speaker of another language” (p. 157). He linked receptivity to an attitude of exploration, curiosity, and play in the learner. Next, the learner needs quality exposure to authentic language. Van Lier (1996) defined authenticity as: a) the process of engagement in the learning situation; and b) a characteristic of the persons engaged in learning. Thus, authenticity relates to who teachers and learners are, and what they do as they interact with one another for the purposes of learning (p. 125). Authenticity here relates to how learners respond to the environment, using language that is indexed to a specific context. When exposure and receptivity are present, the speaker can attend to the language with various degree of attention. This may lead the learner to experience vigilance: the intense, all-absorbing state, when the speaker is alert and “ready to act on partly predictable, partly novel stimuli” (p. 52). In a vigilant state, the L2 learner is engaged, and processes language through a cognitive, emotional, physical, and social investment.

Second, engagement can be discussed in terms of agency. Van Lier (2008) advocated agency as key to engagement in the learning process. He framed agency as "something that learners do, rather than something learners
possess; in other words, it is behaviour, rather than a property” (p. 171). Drawing on Ahearn’s (2001) work, he provided a broad definition of agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (2008, p. 112), and identified three qualities of agency:

Agency involves initiative or self-regulation by the learner (or group);
Agency is interdependent, that is, it mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context;
Agency includes an awareness of the responsibility for one’s own actions vis-à-vis the environment, including affected others. (p. 172)

He proposed a continuum of agency, mapping learners’ initiative from passive to committed. Specifically, his scale of agency encompasses six levels:

- Level (1) Learners are unresponsive or minimally responsive;
- Level (2) Learners carry out instructions given by the teachers;
- Level (3) Learners volunteer answers to teachers’ questions;
- Level (4) Learners voluntarily ask questions;
- Level (5) Learners volunteer to assist, or instruct other learners and create a collaborative agency event;
- Level (6) Learners voluntarily enter into debate with one another, and create a collaborative agency event. (pp. 169-170)

As Van Lier noted, a degree of volition is present from level (3) onward; from level (5), agency no longer involves the individual learner, but groups of learners, in collaborative agency events.

Third, engagement as “perezhivanie” is discussed. From a Vygotskian perspective, the construct of engagement can be viewed in terms of the interdependence of cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. A key notion related to the experience of such interdependence is embodied in the Russian word perezhivanie (Note 1). This term, which cannot be directly translated into English, was used by Vygotsky (1994) to express the relationship between affect/cognition in an individual, and the environment. It conveys that the same situation may be “interpreted, perceived, experienced or lived through by different [individuals] in different ways” (p. 354). Vygotsky’s use of the term perezhivanie implies a unit of analysis to comprehend an experience across the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning. Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) described perezhivanie as the affective processes through which “interactions in the ZPD are individually perceived, appropriated, and represented” by the second language learner (p. 49). They argued that Vygotsky’s concept of perezhivanie plays a central role in
understanding the appropriation of social interaction. This article endorses their view, and further suggests that *perezhivanie* plays a key role in engagement as perception-in-action in L2 process drama social interaction.

**3. Method**

The study presented in this article draws on a doctoral research project aimed at investigating the constructs of *learner engagement* and *teacher artistry* in an L2 process drama Italian classroom.

**3.1. Participants**

The participants of the study can be divided into two cohorts: 46 student-participants and 14 teacher-participants. The student-participants (SPs) actively participated in the drama workshops. No-one had had previous experience in drama-based pedagogies, or had heard of the term process drama. Case Study One (CS1) was conducted in a public university. The SPs were 16 international students, all from China, enrolled in their second year of Italian (L2). The process drama course was offered as a voluntary program, as part of their applied linguistics course. Case Study Two (CS2) was conducted in a private school of Italian (L2), with six participants from Japan, Taiwan, The United States, and Russia. Participants volunteered to participate in the drama course as an alternative to their morning classes. Case Study Three (CS3) was conducted in a world-wide, international network for foreign language learning. The nine SPs came from Brazil, Japan, Iran, and Switzerland. The process drama course was structured as an extra-curricular activity, free of charge, scheduled after participants’ morning classes. The SPs were encouraged to attend the whole course, to ensure continuity in the experience. Their ages ranged from 20 to 53; their L2 ability level varied considerably, spanning from low intermediate to advanced.

The teacher-participants (TPs) actively observed the process drama workshops. Some had heard of, or were interested in, drama-based pedagogy. In Case Study One (CS1), three TPs observed all of the five workshops. They had little experience in teaching, and were enrolled in a Master Degree in Teaching Italian as Foreign Language. In CS2, four TPs observed the workshops, on rotation, and actively participated in two sessions. They were experienced L2 teachers, employed by the school, except for a pre-service L2 trainee, who was a professional actress. In CS3, seven TPs observed each workshop, on rotation, with no more than four observers at the same time. They were highly experienced L2 teachers employed by the institute, including the school director.
3.2. Procedures

The research is situated within a qualitative paradigm, grounded in reflective practice methodology (Schön, 1983), and drawing on multiple case studies (Stake, 2005). The data was collected in Milan (Italy) in a public university and two adult language schools. Each case study consisted of 15 hours of process drama with adult learners of Italian (L2) at an intermediate to advanced level of ability. Each process drama was designed and facilitated by the teacher-researcher, and was conducted solely in Italian (target language). All workshops were observed by a number of teacher-participants, teachers of Italian (L2) who took notes on learners’ engagement, and were interviewed before and after each observation. All workshops were video-recorded; some extracts of the videos were used for video-stimulated recall during focus groups. The research design also included five engagement questionnaires; at the end of each workshops, student-participants (SPs) were asked to self-evaluate their engagement in three categories: communicative, intercultural, and affective engagement. For each category, SPs were invited to choose one specific moment in the drama, and rate their engagement from 0 (disengaged) to 10 (highly engaged). These questionnaires were not analyzed statistically; rather, they were used as a platform for discussion, to trigger recall during the interviews. Observing teacher-participants (TPs) were invited to take notes using the same engagement categories. Ultimately, three Specific Moments in the drama (one per case study) were selected for analysis. Other research tools included interviews and focus groups; video-stimulated recall; the teacher’s reflective notes.

3.3. Dramatic context

In this article the discussion focuses specifically on Case Study Two (CS2), and on Specific Moment Two (SM2). In CS2 the student-participants were in role as a team of psychologists, members of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP), a struggling government organization which desperately needed funding to survive. The psychologists’ director (teacher-in-role) opened the drama by announcing the case of a man found inside an elevator, squatting down in a catatonic state, refusing to speak and to leave the elevator. This man, who worked as a teacher of Italian as a second language, appeared confused. The psychologists were hired to help the man, whom they named Mr Ferro, to get better. The psychologists also agreed to present the outcome of this case at the 10th International AIP Conference, which was scheduled for that week, and which was their only hope to obtain funding to keep their organization alive. In a way, thus, there was a degree of dramatic tension in taking on this case as a means to keep their jobs. The first task of the psychologists was to work out action plans to remove the catatonic man from
the elevator. This implied a degree of tension of the task. After several attempts, they succeeded to take Mr Ferro to the clinic. They discovered he had an obsession for mirrors, and a fixation on brushing his teeth.

The complete structure of this 15-hour drama has been documented elsewhere (Piazzoli, 2012). Here the focus is on Specific Moment Two (SM2), in the last session of a five-day process drama. In SM2 the SPs/psychologists, having talked Mr Ferro out of the elevator, are finally about to interview him. SM2 consists of a class discussion, where the SPs/psychologists are having a meeting with the teacher-in-role/director to brainstorm interviewing strategies. The meeting lasts 12 minutes, and is entirely improvised (unscripted). Towards the end of the meeting, an unexpected piece of news is broken: the patient, Mr Ferro, has run away from his room, and could not be located. This news injected tension of surprise, as the psychologists had built expectations about meeting the patient.

4. Findings

4.1. Engagement as perception-in-action

The analysis of Specific Moment Two (SM2) suggests that engagement manifested as a perception-in-action process. The process was initiated by an experience in the drama; this entailed exposure to “authentic” language (Van Lier, 1996), which magnified receptivity to the language, to the dramatic context, and to each other. This enhanced vigilance, and generated various degrees of agency. Throughout this process, fuelled by dramatic tension, the participants seemed to engage in meaningful dialogic communication.

**Exposure to “Authentic” Language.** The perception-in-action process begins with a dramatic action, that is, with a particular felt-experience within the drama. This affords exposure to a kind of language which, in accordance with Van Lier (1996), could be defined as authentic. The extract below, transcribed using the Conversation Analysis conventions, illustrates the kind of language that characterized the interaction, in role.

Excerpt 1:

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1  T - Erika: molto bene (2.5) molto bene uhm (1.0), allora
2   (. )prima di incontrare il nostro paziente (. ) ricordiamo
3   insieme (. ) le strategie (. ) che cosa dobbiamo fare?
4   very good very good so before we meet our patient let us revisit our strategies together
5   what are we going to do
6 ( .5 )
7  S1 - Olga: uh:::m pe::r (. ) sciogliere (2.0) [ro-] =
8   uhm to melt to bre
9  S2 - Yoriko [looking through her notes] = > [↑ghiaccio]<
10  ice
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SS (.)

S1: si per scio- per rompere il ghiaccio= [closed fist downwards]
yes to melt to break the ice

T: =si
yes

S1: e:::::h dobbiamo:::: >andare tutti insie:me< con spazzolini
ehm we have to go all together with toothbrushes

T: sì
yes

S1: al bagno perché sappiamo che (1.0) a: (1.0) fabrizio ferro
(. ) piace molto (1.5) lavare (1.0) i denti=
to the bathroom because we know that Fabrizio Ferro likes brush his teeth a lot

T: =lavarsi i denti ↓ (. ) certo
brushing his teeth of course

S1: per questo dobbia:mo (1.0) >incontra- trovare:< qualcosa
(1.5) insieme ↓ (1.0) come per (3.0) per (0.5) avere il
suo rispetto ↓ (1.0) e (. ) si e poi (. ) poco a poco
cominciamo a parlare (2.0) dei suoi proble:mi mentre:::
lavo:: [mimes brushing teeth]

T: yes, for this reason we have to meet, to look for something together as if if
to gain his respect. And then, little by little we begin to talk about his problems

while I wash [mimes brushing teeth]

Olga (S1) and Yoriko (S2) are two female students in their mid-twenties: Olga is Russian, and had been studying Italian for seven months. Yoriko is Japanese, and had been studying Italian for one year. The teacher-in-role (TiR) opens with an open question (1-3). A collaborative response follows: “to break” (Olga) “ice” (Yoriko) (7-9). “Breaking the ice” was an idiomatic expression encountered earlier in the drama. Yoriko shows engagement by identifying the structure Olga wants to use, retrieving her notes, and supplying the noun for “ice” (ghiaccio). This can be viewed as a form of dialogic interaction where learners draw on their potential “to form something of a collective expert” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 283). Olga’s self-correction (12) from “sciogliere” (“melt”) to “rompere” (“break”) is an indicator of conscious attention, of attending to the language (Van Lier, 1996).

Line 23 illustrates an example of the teacher giving feedback, in role, without breaking the flow of the dramatic context. If the teacher were to break the dramatic frame, she could have noted that we use the reflexive verb “lavarsi” rather than the transitive verb “lavare” to convey “brushing his teeth” (Note 2). Instead, the teacher remains in role and re-phrases this utterance, modeling the correct version, with the scaffolding occurring in role. This communication exchange empowers Olga as a speaker by letting her express an opinion (25-29). However, it appears that Olga is still not sure about the correct grammar form to employ: In fact, she mimes the action that represents the verb (29). As this analysis is not aimed at assessing language acquisition, but at exploring the nature of engagement in improvised drama, what is significant here is that, in line 29, Olga compensates for her lack of linguistic knowledge by performing a gesture, allowing her to self-regulate, expressing
meaning without breaking role. In this frame of SM2, the kind of interaction generated by the process drama seems to be dialogic in nature. In effect, the answer to the teachers’ question (1) emerges from a collaborative effort, thus creating collective ZPDs, interpreted, in accordance with Kinginger (2002), as a kind of “co-authoring.” The analysis suggests that, in SM2, the dramatic context afforded exposure to a kind of language that was dialogic and authentic. In this sense, “authenticity” is construed, following Van Lier (1996), as a process of personal engagement in the learning situation where the language produced is indexed to a specific context.

**Receptivity.** The analysis suggests that, when the SPs were exposed to authentic affordances, in role, their states of receptivity were amplified, and augmented, by the collective form of drama. In SM2, the state of receptivity can be observed from a variety of angles: the SPs seem receptive to the language, to the dramatic context, and to each other. To illustrate these notions, the analysis focuses on another segment of SM2. Here the SPs discuss, in role, the implications of using the formal/informal address when the psychologists will interview the patient. Yoriko mentions the patient Mr Ferro being a teacher as a justification for using the formal address; this denotes a degree of receptivity to the Italian language, where the formal register is used according to status, and to the dramatic role (the patient is a teacher). Hiru, in turn, is receptive to Yoriko’s contribution: She suggests starting with formal, but then switching to informal, once trust is gained. Here, Hiru is receptive not only to the Italian language, and to Yoriko, but also to the dramatic context. Sandra (early twenties; American; had studied Italian for one year) shakes her head and vocalizes the opposite point of view, in line with the purpose of the dramatic task: doctors trying to befriend a patient. From here, the other SPs seem to become receptive to Sandra’s idea. Olga considers the dramatic focus: she justifies the use of the informal as the interview will occur in a bathroom, “a very informal environment”. Finally Catherine (early twenties; American; Italo-American parents; had studied Italian for six years) endorses Sandra and Olga’s view on the use of the informal register. This exchange echoes Swain’s (2000) notion of collaborative dialogue, that is, “language use mediating language learning” (p. 97), also defined as “languageing” (2006), “producing language in an attempt to understand – to problem-solve – to make meaning” (p.96). In this process drama interaction, languaging occurred in role, and contributed to enhance receptivity to the language, to the dramatic context, and to each other: Interestingly, this state of receptivity seemed to be stimulated by, and to bounce off, each participant, creating a magnifying effect.

**Vigilance.** The analysis suggests that SM2 was characterized by a degree of vigilance. Significantly, while for Van Lier vigilance only occurs “rarely” (1996, p. 52), the findings point to process drama as provoking and enhancing the
rare state of vigilance. To illustrate these points, the analysis zooms into a frame of the formal–informal discussion analyzed above. The interaction is marked by a steady, fast-paced rhythm. As the teacher-in-role asks a question on the formal–informal choice, Yoriko swiftly responds, overlapping with Hiru. Similarly, Olga, Yoriko, and Sandra react quickly, embodying their responses through nodding, and shaking of the head. Here, the reaction time is immediate; there are no gaps, indicating an alert response to the language, which is not pre-planned, but improvised. In a particular moment, Hiru (S4) interrupts the teacher-in-role:

Excerpt 2:

34 S3: a::h io credo dovremmo::: >dargli del tu<
35 oh I think we should use the informal
36 T: del tu::?(.) >va bene allora< [vediamo chi:--
37 informal OK, let’s see who
38 S4: [all’ini- dall’inizio dall’inizio(.)del tu ↓
39 At the beginning? From the beginning? Informal from the beginning?

Earlier in the drama intervention, the teacher/researcher had noted that Hiru, a middle-aged Japanese woman who had studied Italian for five years, would always wait politely before asking a question. Specifically, in the first improvisation of the drama, when SPs had to negotiate their own turn-taking for the first time, the teacher noted that Hiru did not verbally contribute, speaking only when directly addressed (Reflective Journal, p. 64). In contrast, in Excerpt 2 above, Hiru not only intervenes, but actually interrupts the teacher’s utterance (38), an unlikely practice for Japanese classroom etiquette (Yorozu, 2001). Here, Hiru’s interruption may be regarded as “a readiness to act” characteristic of vigilance. This is also confirmed by her engagement questionnaire. Hiru selected this Specific Moment (SM2) and self-evaluated both her communicative and affective engagement as 9/10 (Note 3). When asked to comment on these figures, Hiru replied: “Every day more, I’ve been engaged more; and yes yesterday I’m very engaged, yes” (Hiru, pp. 3-4).

The presence of dramatic tension seemed to substantially increase the vigilance of participants. An example of interaction when the dramatic tension is high is Yoriko’s reaction when the escape of the patient is announced. The transcript below shows that it was actually Yoriko, a student, and not the teacher, who improvised the news of the patient having escaped from the ward.

Excerpt 3:

42 T: ma e g?me scusi (1.5) ma↑ (11.0) [talking to an imaginary nurse]
43 what do you mean but
44 T: cari colle:ghi↓ [slowly walking to the table holding the pyjamas]
45 my dear colleagues
Here *tension of surprise* is high as the escape news was broken. In this frame, Hiru (S4) and Yoriko (S2)’s responses indicates a degree of vigilance. As the TiR slowly walks towards the table, Yoriko looks alert, with a fixed gaze. When the group is addressed, Hiru is quick to respond (46), suggesting a degree of alertness. When the TiR announces that “something terrible has happened”, Yoriko promptly improvises a reply (51). This contribution shows a degree of readiness to act, not just to predictable, but also to *unpredictable* language. In the drama, this added to an existing degree of *tension of the task* prompting participants to stand up, looking alarmed, and to leave the meeting table to look for the patient. Throughout these processes, the body language of SPs suggests they sustained a heightened level of alertness. This is confirmed by the written observations of all the teacher-participants. One example, from an observation of SM2:

“They [student-participants in SM2] talk, they inquire, they debate, they discuss, they exchange expressions, they play and they always confront each other with a very high, definite threshold of attention. (CS2, TP OBS p. 3)

In turn, this high threshold of attention manifested as various degrees and forms of *agency*.

### 4.2. Agency in L2 process drama social interaction

In SM2, agency appeared to manifest in a variety of ways: learners self-regulating their behaviour in *verbal* and *non-verbal* communication, and learners self-regulating their management of the *elements of drama*.

With regard to agency as self-regulation in *verbal communication*, the SPs displayed a degree of agency in both *utterance design* and *turn-taking*. An example of agency in utterance design, in SM2, can be found in the discussion to allocate the interviewees. The TiR is asking how many doctors interview the patient, in the bathroom. As she asks: “*Non tutti?*” (“So not everyone?”), Hiru replies promptly, shaking her head: “*La camera non è molto grande!*” (“The room is not very big”). Here Hiru is faced with an open question;
instead of using it to scaffold her answer (e.g., “No, not everyone”) her response displays a degree of self-regulation; she is organizing her thoughts autonomously, based on the context of the drama, and on her imagination (the size of the bathroom). The data analysis shows that the great majority of exchanges are characterized by a degree of such self-regulation. In terms of agency as self-regulation in turn-taking, throughout SM2 there are copious instances of turn-taking being managed independently by the SPs. An example of autonomous turn-taking is the discussion on the formal register discussed above, an example of a “collaborative agency event” (Van Lier, 2008, p. 169-170). In regard to agency as self-regulation in non-verbal communication, each frame of SM2 is rich with examples of gesturing to self-regulate and embody meaning, including Olga’s iconic gestures as she self-corrects in Excerpt 1 (12); Sandra shaking her head, while the others are nodding in the formal-informal discussion.

Agency also manifested as self-regulation in managing the elements of drama, especially with regards to negotiation of role and status, dramatic tension, focus, language, place, and space. First, agency in SM2 seems to be characterised by self-regulation in the negotiation of status and tension. An example is the exchange between Olga and the others, to allocate the interviewees. The SPs appear to autonomously negotiate their status: Hiru decides that “not everyone” will interview the patient; this creates a degree of tension of relationships, as it implies a selection among the psychologists. Olga responds to this challenge selecting who should go to interview the patient, injecting further degrees of dramatic tension.

Second, the SPs exercised agency in manipulating focus, place, and space. Below is an extract describing the SPs brainstorming ideas for the improvisation following SM2:

As they work independently without teachers, they seem to be engaged in active, explorative dialogue: they stand in a tight circle, looking directly at each other. Catherine (usually quite shy) takes a directorial role. She moves the chairs and says: “This is the bathroom!” (Note 4) all of the others follow her idea and take chairs there. Hiru automatically accepts her role as director and asks: “Is this the bath tub?” Catherine: “Yes, this is the bath tub.” Once Catherine has set the scene, Hiru feels the space with her hands and then starts to act within it: She knocks at the door, opens it. Yoriko (in role as the patient) asks: What do I have to do? Catherine replies: You decide! (Reflective Journal, p. 83)

This extract indicates a degree of agency in manipulation of dramatic focus, evidenced by Catherine’s proactive movement of the chairs to create space; Hiru feeling the space by sweeping her hands, knocking and opening an
imagined door; and Catherine’s final comment to Yoriko. In this snapshot of process drama classroom interaction the SPs independently self-regulated the management of the elements of drama, in the target language.

4.3. Agency as dramatic irony

Agency also manifested as a sense of playfulness in manipulating dramatic form, with a degree of dramatic irony. Pavis (1998) argued that an utterance is ironic when, in addition to its primary, obvious sense, it reveals a deeper, different, perhaps even opposite, meaning, or antiphrasis. The data from SM2 suggests that the SPs exercised agency by injecting dramatic irony into the roles and situation.

As a first example, Catherine named her role “Dr Pazzarella.” The adjective pazzarella in Italian is a colloquial term for a woman who is slightly crazy. This is an ironic choice for the name of a professional psychologist. Here, Catherine is playing with her knowledge of Italian to create a verbal paradox, with an ironic effect. The irony here is to do with the opposition between the meaning of the word, and the concept it symbolises. This kind of playfulness with language entails “verbal irony” (Pavis, 1998), what Bergson (trans. 2008) called “the comic as language”: when the comedy is created by the language itself and cannot be translated, for “it is the language itself that becomes comic” (p. 53).

Another example of irony is more subtle, and involves the attitudes within the roles. As part of the drama, everyone was instructed to create a role as a professional psychologist. Yoriko constructed her role as a psychologist who is highly devoted to her dog, Mario. Her obsession with the dog pervades the drama as an ironic thread: she loves only her dog, and “needs no man”. Although she declares to be happily single, she also admits: “The only thing hurts me... when I see a couple”. This statement generated loud laughter in the group. Yoriko here exercised agency to construct a role that was blind to her own faults: a psychologist believing to be happy as single, but having a phobia of couples. This is ironic in a Pirandellian sense: something that is obvious to everyone else, except oneself, and for this reason becomes comical (Pirandello, trans. 1966).

As the last example of agency as dramatic irony, Olga creates the role of a psychologist who, until recently, was a busker in underground trains. The role is ironic as it is built on a contradiction (street busker; professional psychologist). This is a context-specific reference: buskers in Milan are often associated with Roma ethnic minorities, a highly controversial issue (Rodari, 2008). Olga’s decision to embody the role of a busker turned professional psychologist is ironic as it juxtaposes two concepts usually kept separate in Italian society: “the gypsy” and “the professional”. Her street busker career
bcomes a significant detail in the drama, as her signature folk song *Felicità*, an Italian eighties’ classic, was used as a leitmotif. For example, Olga used the word *Felicità* as a punch line to conclude the negotiations between the psychologists and the patient. It would translate as “it’s all good,” as well as “happiness”, the title of the song. This song is also particularly ironic in the *context of the drama*. It is a song about a couple living happily ever after; thus, it created a sharp contrast with Yoriko’s role, the single woman with a phobia of couples. Olga’s playfulness in using this expression denoted a level of dramatic irony, which triggered a response in the participants, manifested as laughter. In his seminal essay on laughter, Bergson (trans. 2008) described laughter as “a sort of *social gesture*” (p. 17, original italics). Here, the act of laughter binds the participants socially.

Irony is also weaved into the final role play of the drama, when the SPs get to interview the patient. Here Olga’s ironic playfulness consists in reincorporating previous elements into the drama, like the song and Yoriko’s dog, and twisting their meaning to mock the psychologists. O’Neill (2006) suggested that when irony is used, a message is transmitted in a manner that triggers a reinterpretation of meaning: “irony consists in asserting the opposite of what is taken for granted socially”. Through this process, irony provokes “an active response” (p. 148). Olga’s irony does provoke an active response, manifested in the participants’ verbal and non-verbal reactions. It also creates tension of relationships, and tension of the task, as the psychologists are trying to interview the patient, with no success. To reiterate, engagement manifested as a perception-in-action process, starting from a dramatic action, affording *exposure* to authentic language, engendering receptivity, inducing vigilance, and resulting in various degrees of agency. The perception-in-action cycle was mediated by the *dramatic tension* in the drama; this bound the participants in a collaborative agency event, and culminated into a new dramatic action, with the cycle of engagement feeding back into itself.

5. Discussion: Engagement and teacher artistry

The discussion now zooms out to interpret the findings of the cross-case analysis of the three case studies. Data from interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, video-recordings, and transcripts indicate that the perception-in-action process described above seems to have entailed the felt-experience of *perezhivanie*. Through this process, the SPs seemed to be operating within collective ZDPs, co-creating the narrative and symbolic threads of the felt-experience.

While all SPs appeared to exercise some degrees of agency with language, the nature of agency in terms of the elements of drama was *more diverse* across
the case studies. As Table 1 shows, in CS1, SPs’ agency manifested as self-regulation of role, situation, status, tension and playfulness with language; in CS2 and CS3 the participants’ agency also extended to playfulness in manipulation of focus, place, and space, as well as dramatic irony.

Table 1.

*Mapping of the Different Manifestations of Agency in Process Drama Interaction Across Case Study One (CS1), Case Study Two (CS2), and Case Study Three (CS3)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verbal communication</th>
<th>Non-verbal communication</th>
<th>Playfulness with language</th>
<th>Manipulation of dramatic form - role situation, status, tension</th>
<th>Manipulation of dramatic form - focus, place, space</th>
<th>Weaving dramatic irony into the drama</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>CS3</td>
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Table 1.

<table>
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<td></td>
<td>Playfulness with language</td>
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<tr>
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<td>CS2</td>
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<td>CS3</td>
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Obviously, differences in the typology of learners (background; proficiency; monolingual vs. multilingual group, etc.) in each case study impacted on learners’ agency. Nonetheless, Table 1 suggests that, by comparing the different *manifestations* of agency across the three case studies, CS2 and CS3 participants exercised agency in a wider variety of forms.

Moreover, based on Van Lier’s (2008) scale of agency, the cross-case analysis also indicated that the SPs reached different *levels* of agency, from level (3) (voluntarily answering teacher’s questions) to level (6) (voluntarily entering debate). This suggests that L2 interaction within process drama *has an agentic quality*, as there were no instances of communication below level (3). This supports previous research on drama as an agentic approach in the L2 classroom (Carson, 2012). Specifically, the analysis shows that the nature of agency seemed to also *intensify* across the three case studies: In CS1, the level of agency spanned from level (4) to (5) of Van Lier’s (2008) scale. CS1 student-participants did not appear to reach the highest level of agency (6). In CS2, the level of agency oscillated between levels (4) and (5) and occasionally (6). In CS3, the level of agency oscillated between levels (5) and (6), but most frequently was at level (6).

These significant differences in *forms* and *levels* of agency were cross-referenced with the reflective practice analysis, in line with reflective practitioner methodology (Shön, 1983) underpinning the research. Cross-referencing the findings on engagement and teacher artistry reveals an interesting picture. In essence, the analysis of teacher artistry unveiled that my reflective practitioner’s tacit beliefs clashed with my actions in the classroom. For example, although the teacher/researcher believed in sharing the creative process with the participants, at the beginning of the intervention (CS1), she struggled to consciously relinquish control, if the participants’
creative ideas contradicted her own pre-determined narrative. Through an introspective process of reflective practice, by the end of CS3 she was able to let the points of tension emerge from the group, rather than from the pre-determined plot she had created. Through a growing ability to reflect-in-action, the teacher/researcher enhanced her capacity to spontaneously manage the dramatic elements – empowering participants to experience the drama with a renewed sense of agency. This key finding suggests that the teacher/researcher’s ability to internalize the art form of drama impacted significantly on the learners’ ability to self-regulate, both in their communicative and dramatic choices.

6. Conclusion

The positive effects on drama for language arts have long been known (Maden, 2012; Wagner, 1976). In this research, drama-based pedagogies were examined for second/additional language teaching and learning. The findings presented in this paper support and reinforce Carson’s (2012) argument of drama-based pedagogy as affording agency in the L2 learner. They indicate that process drama can be described as an action-based approach, that is, “an approach to teaching that puts agency in the centre of attention” (Van Lier, 2007, p. 46).

The research presented the case that process drama afforded exposure to dialogic interaction, fuelling a perception-in-action process that promoted various forms of agency as self-regulation, characterized by a sense of playfulness. The case for “playfulness with language” as social speech positively influencing engagement has been made already (Sullivan, 2000). This article further suggests that, in process drama, playfulness is not just limited to language – playfulness is expanded to all of the other elements of drama, in a process of languaging (Swain, 2006), in role, mediating, and mediated by, dramatic tension.

How is this relevant for second/foreign language educators? Obviously, process drama is not suitable to all educators. For those interested, the challenge lies in understanding how to integrate the artistry of teaching a second/foreign language, with the artistry of teaching drama – transforming the language classroom into a dramatic world. For that to occur, learners need to be exposed, practice, and reflect on spontaneous, meaningful language. In Van Lier’s (1996) words, to promote spontaneous communication, “the people in the classroom must speak and write as if they were somewhere else” (p. 123, my italics). Indeed, process drama is a system which can enable teachers to create such an “as if” environment. Yet, in order to do so, teachers need to apprehend the artistry of managing the dramatic elements, thus venturing into the mysterious realm of aesthetic education. As
to the most effective ways to integrate aesthetic learning and language teacher education, more research is needed to map out this exciting new terrain.

Notes:

1. From Russian: an intensively lived experience through emotion and cognition in a social context.
2. This nuance cannot be rendered in the English translation.
3. The questionnaire data of the other participants has not been included in this discussion because they chose to self-evaluate a different specific moment, not relevant to the analysis of Specific Moment Two.
4. These utterances have been translated from Italian into English.

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The Author

Erika Piazzoli (Email: epiazzoli@griffith.edu.au) is a Research Fellow at the Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Griffith University, Brisbane (Australia), where she has gained an Honors degree in Applied Theatre for Foreign Language Teaching, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Drama/Languages Education. Erika left her native Italy as a young adult and has lived in Brisbane since 2000. Since then she has taught the Italian language and culture, focusing on teacher training, drama-based pedagogies and aesthetic learning.

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