

Reflections on a Teacher-In-Role Approach in the Classroom

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Abstract

This project investigates children's responses to visual communication in an English primary classroom in an EFL context. A teacher-in-role approach was adopted to introduce drama into the classroom. Children of primary school age, from a range of backgrounds, studied English vocabulary and sentences with eight student teachers utilising drama techniques to facilitate the teaching of English. Student teachers designed a play based on a famous tale to attract young learners' attention and with an interactive approach to learning. The results show that young learners were better able to understand better items of English. Moreover the experiment was of considerable benefit to the eight student teachers in their understanding of pedagogical issues as they grappled with the challenges and implications of using drama and sketch books in the classroom.

Keywords: teacher-in-role, drama, storytelling

1. Introduction

The use of a variety of teaching methods and of meaningful learning material is often expected to provide adequate support for young learners and to promote English second language acquisition. Accordingly, this project concentrated on the usefulness of strong visual forms of communication to stimulate young learners' motivation to learn English.

Visual communication is usually more clearly and therefore more easily understood than just words. Visual communication is not a new tool. Many teachers have recourse to various forms of visual communication including pictures, posters, slides, drama and video in the language classroom (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Britsch, 2010). Therefore, this study explores how teachers can incorporate a broad range of types of visual communication such as, for example, the dramatisation of a well known tale. A teacher-in-role approach, when teachers act out a role or roles in a play, is used to support learning. Instead of explaining the printed content of a coursebook, they used dramatic techniques to present a popular story. When a student teacher plays a part, it is expected that a learner's attention will be attracted and retained. This study examines these expectations and also investigates the interaction between student teachers and young learners.

2. Literature Review

There is a lot of research supporting the view that visual elements are able to enhance students' learning (Plass et al., 1998). The reason is that visual representation provides a holistic understanding that words alone cannot convey (Racine, 2002). The study draws upon three elements that focus on educating and motivating young learners using storytelling, a teacher-in-role approach and drama.

2.1 Storytelling in the Classroom

Storytelling captures interest and attention (Spaulding, 2011). As Davies points out:

Storytelling entertains and excites, which is an important part of learning. If children are having fun they are involved, and motivated to learn more. (Davies, 2007, p.6)

Teachers tell the story using different voices and intonations that attract student attention; in this way, stories encourage students to ask questions and teachers can thus get a better idea of what students have learnt. Sheu (2008, p.4) states that "*Stories have the potential to help them make the links with their prior knowledge, and to make the foreign language classroom less foreign.*"

Storytellers use body language and facial expressions to communicate with the audience (Haven & Ducey, 2007;

Roney, 2009). Good stories have the potential of arousing the interest of students, of helping them concentrate on the lesson and of stimulating their imagination (Matulka, 2008). Accordingly, storytelling can be considered as a way of developing children's ability to interpret and understand learning material. As Wright (1995) states, when children can tell a story in their own or a second language, the language becomes theirs. However, who is the best storyteller in a classroom? Obviously, the answer is the person who so often dominates classroom talk-the teacher and in the following section we discuss how the teachers can enhance their storytelling techniques.

2.2 Teacher-In-Role

Teacher-in-role is an important convention and teaching strategy. It means the teacher acts a role in a dramatic context. When a teacher adopts a role, it motivates student interest, as such an approach can "*provide an initial stimulus for the lesson or to challenge decision or attitudes*" (Goodwin, 2006, p.41). The teacher-in-role technique creates a meaningful learning environment and student attention is sustained more effectively than by simply giving instructions in a traditional lecture mode (Prendiville & Toye, 2007). This is an efficient way to shift the balance of power in the classroom because it changes the status of the teacher and the students by transforming the classroom into a new virtual setting.

When a teacher plays a role, students can hear keywords repeated in a meaningful context and acquire a clearer understanding of words and sentences. After a teacher's role play, students memorize words and sentences more easily by following the teachers' expressive intonation (Doecke, Brown & Loughran, 2000). In this way, students not only derive pleasure but also become more interested in learning English, which, in turn, increases their self-confidence, an important element in language-acquisition. The relationship between story and role-playing in education is a complex one. If teachers want to interpret a story in a dramatic way, it indicates their belief in its pedagogical benefit.

2.3 Drama in English Language Teaching

A number of researchers have shown how drama supports the learning environment and can contribute to the learning of English (Baldwin & Fleming, 2003). Thompson and Evans (2005, p.14) point out that drama is an excellent tool for 'developing language skills, encouraging social interaction and group participation and teaching children how to listen and respond appropriately'. Drama helps teachers and students to participate and interact in the classroom instead of just sitting passively.

Heath (1993) remarks that drama allows students to use their imagination in a language classroom and even though they do not understand everything the characters say, they still are able to 'understand' the context from the characters' gestures. Students are sometimes requested to participate in a drama activity in class and often they are not able to act a role in a story with which they are not familiar. Whereas if a number of teachers plays a role they can identify more closely with the characters and it can make learning more exciting. Therefore, this research looks at such a flexible technique and explores its value both from the learners' and the instructors' perspectives.

3. Methods

In the literature review section, it was established that drama and storytelling can benefit English teaching. The investigation tended to focus on how student teacher may facilitate or discourage the learning of English. Accordingly, the initial questions used in this research project are laid out below:

- 1) How can teachers use drama and storytelling resources more effectively as teaching materials for young learners?
- 2) What is student teachers' perspective of their initial teaching experience?

This research consists of a case study and explores the perceptions of a specific group of students and student teachers within a teaching situation and how they change over time. Yin (2013) defines a case study as one which investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. The evidence is gathered from a single source or from a variety of sources including interviews with the case subject and with those who regularly interact with them (Creswell, 2013). The data was collected from a students' survey and from student teachers' reflective writings and individual interviews. The whole process took eight weeks and examined young learners' feedback on the use of two visual forms of communication: a teacher-in-role approach and drama.

3.1 Participants

In all, twenty-nine students and eight student teachers took part in the study in the second semester, 2009. Student participants were from a primary school in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. There are six grades in the primary education system and the participants were in the third grade. They were nine to ten

years old. Most of the students had studied English for two years. They liked studying English especially listening and speaking. Sometimes, although they did not understand everything, they still liked someone to talk to them. They generally found that reading and writing were difficult. The majority of students disliked reciting vocabulary from the course book and they considered repeating vocabulary unpleasant and also their writing ability was poor.

As well as the twenty-nine young learners, there were also eight student teachers. As Larsen-Freeman and Long (1992) notes, many teachers feel attracted by research in second language acquisition as it can provide an 'insight' in to the teaching-learning process. Accordingly, the eight student teachers used a reflective process to help them explore and examine aspects of teaching and learning. After each lesson, they discussed their teaching approaches and the young learners' reaction. After that, they made some changes to their approach or to their materials so as to improve their teaching practice. Their reflective journal became a source of valuable data which will be discussed later.

3.2 Teaching Materials

The main teaching material used was a popular story, *The Three Little Pigs*. The tale of the *Three Little Pigs* is a well know folktale. Three pigs are sent out into the world by their mother. They have to seek their fortune and they encounter danger. Student teachers took the story as the basis for a drama. They used cardboard paper to make props including three pig masks, a wolf mask, costumes, a straw house, a frame house, a brick house, a chimney, a hammer and trees. Pig bodies were made from plastic bags. The brick house was a colourful painting which attracted the young learners' attention.

Two student teachers assumed instructor roles, explained the teaching material to the whole class and narrated the story. The other six student teachers acted roles which roused the interest of the young learners. For example, when one teacher with big wolf mask appeared, young learners screamed but were also delighted.

3.3 Instrumentation

All research depends to a large extent on the quality of the data collection tools. In this case, questionnaires and follow-up interviews were utilised. The questionnaire is a way to obtain information about students' background, their ability and their interest in English. A questionnaire was completed at the beginning (Questionnaire 1) and another at the end of the course (Questionnaire 2). Questionnaire 1 was concerned with the young learners' perspective of drama, their studying habits and their preferred approach towards learning. At the end of the course, they were asked to fill in Questionnaire 2 so that their attitude to learn English based on drama and on being taught by their teacher could be assessed. In order to help the students express an opinion, each group was assisted by a student teacher. The interview questions were based on the questionnaire and learners were invited to explain the reasons for their answers. Moreover, eight student teachers' reflection journal notes were taken into account when planning lessons.

4. Findings

This section reports young learners' feedback to teaching based on the drama and the teacher-in-role approach. Each issue is discussed, comparing Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2

4.1 Young Learners' Perspective of Learning English

According to Table 1, only 38% of the students liked learning English at the beginning of the study. 48% were indifferent and 13% disliked doing so. At the end of eight weeks, 89% of young learners stated that they liked learning English learning and only 7% remained indifferent and 3% disliked it.

Table 1. Students' attitudes towards learning English-before and after the teaching exercise

Do you like studying English?										
N: number, %: percentage										
	Strongly Like		Like		Acceptable		Dislike		Strongly Dislike	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pre-test	5	17%	6	21%	14	48%	3	10%	1	3%
Post-test	14	48%	12	41%	2	7%	0	0%	1	3%

The play, *The Three Little Pigs*, succeeded in arousing and keeping students' attention. Student teachers, using

the teacher-in-role approach, created an emotional response from the learners. The data showed that they were greatly encouraged and helped by the multiple teaching techniques and by the introduction of drama.

4.2 Learners' Perspective of Stories

The learners were asked about their opinion to fairy tales on both questionnaires.

Table 2. Students' attitudes towards fairy tales

Pre-test & post-test: Do you like fairy tales?										
N: number										
	Strongly Like		Like		Acceptable		Dislike		Strongly Dislike	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pre-test	9	31%	17	59%	0	0%	2	7%	1	3%
Post-test	12	42%	14	48%	0	0%	2	7%	1	3%

Table 2 shows that 90% of the students expressed a liking for fairy tales before and after the exercise with 11% changing their preference from 'like' to 'strongly like'. This positive change may come from the fact that learners have some difficulty with reading fairy tales because of the vocabulary and because the complex structure obscured the meaning. However, *The Three Pigs*, which included visuals and action, was immediately and intrinsically more interesting; even if they had not completely understood the words or sentences used, the story in dramatic form clarified it's the meaning and had the added novelty of being performed by their teachers.

4.3 The Effectiveness of Drama

As can be seen from Table 3, young learners were attracted by the drama, *The Three Little Pigs*.

Table 3. Students' attitudes towards *The Three Little Pigs*

Post-test question: Do you like Three Little Pigs?										
N: number										
	Strongly Like		Like		Acceptable		Dislike		Strongly Dislike	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Post-test	11	38%	11	38%	7	24%	0	0%	0	0%

For the majority of students, this was the first time they had listened to a story in dramatic form. It was not surprising they were curious about the dramatised story and would have liked to participate in some of the scenes. When the student teachers who took the part of the bad wolf came to the pigs' house and said, *Let me in. Let me in. Little pig or I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in*, the other assistant teachers said, *blow the house, blow the house quickly*. All the young learners felt involved and enjoyed 'huffing and puffing' and subsequently they acquired a greater vocabulary.

Table 4. The effectiveness of drama

Pre-test & post-test: Do you like drama?										
N: number										
	Strongly Like		Like		Acceptable		Dislike		Strongly Dislike	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pre-test	13	45%	10	34%	0	0%	2	7%	4	14%
Post-test	9	31%	12	41%	8	27%	0	0%	0	0%

Before the course, 45% of the students claimed they strongly liked drama. Interestingly, only 31% of them

maintained this view after eight weeks. The possible reason for this may be that many of them, although they enjoyed watching the play acted by their teachers, they were afraid of acting themselves in front of the whole class. They would have preferred telling rather than acting a story as their final presentation task. The thought of appearing on stage frightened them. Their reaction stresses the importance of using the teacher-in-role in a classroom play if it is to be successful as a teaching technique.

5. Reflection on Teaching Practice

This section mainly presents eight student teachers' thoughts on their first formal teaching experience in an elementary school. They fall into two categories: the teaching approach and the teaching material.

5.1 Thoughts on the Teaching Approach

Several approaches were employed in the project including course-book-based teaching, drama and a teacher-in-role approach. The data from the reflective journals showed that these approaches actually motivated these inexperienced teachers and they appreciated the benefits of utilising plentiful visual aids to increase young learners' attention. For example, student teachers wrote:

Using different teaching approaches attracted students' attention. Teaching was not just about how to teach students but also how to make them want to study English which is the most important issue. (student teacher 6)

Drama and storytelling are useful tools to teach students. They are different from traditional teaching methods. These approaches are expected to help students focus on learning English. (student teacher 4)

The teacher, working as an actor or actress, is an important stimulus for learning. Further, the teacher-in-role approach provides the class with a whole variety of experiences because it involves everyone in the process. Student teachers' comments about a teacher-in-role approach were:

Through the play, The Three Pigs, a lot of dramatic effects are interesting to learners. Also, each character's body language was an important factor in stimulating learning. (student teacher 6)

The Three Pigs was useful to facilitating young students learning. Although sometimes learners could not understand what the teacher said, they still can get information from teacher's body language. Teacher-in-role is a good way to explain the context because students could get some clues from teachers' presentation. (student teacher 5)

I am glad that all the learners were impressed by our performance. Furthermore, the Three Pigs, gave them live and dynamic contextual use of vocabulary and phrases. (student teacher 3)

In the past two months, we acted a play, Three Little Pigs, in the hope that students would concentrate more on learning. Maybe students did not know some words in the play but they often got the meaning through our body language. We used an interactive approach, trying to get the students to participate more in the class. (student teacher 2)

The student teachers gained a sense of achievement by teaching in the primary school. They hoped that multiple teaching approaches would help young students learn more. It was an enormous challenge for them. However, when they appreciated that their ideas for teaching could be realised and were effective, they felt a sense of achievement.

Many students do not like traditional teaching methods. They like to play games, sing songs, draw pictures, or role play. (student teacher 6)

Teaching students in the primary school is a particular experience. Using a unique teaching approach is an enormous challenge to us. According to the questionnaire, most of the students liked these activities. It was surprising that they not only accepted these methods but also enjoyed the course. (student teacher 3)

In the past, some teaching approaches did not attract elementary school students but made them feel bored. Therefore, the problem was how to change and improve such approaches. We realised that everyone's language proficiency was different. We hoped to make some changes to improve our teaching. (student teacher 1)

I was so happy that we had a good relationship with those young learners. They enjoyed the course very much. I felt a sense of achievement. (student teacher 7)

Student teachers' feedback on their teaching experience offers a reminder to teachers that they should keep learner differences in mind. Accordingly, they should use a variety of activities to engage their students in the learning experience. This study has attempted to apply a teacher-in-role approach to achieve just that.

5.2 Thoughts on the Teaching Materials

Preparing a variety of teaching materials is important if a teacher wants students to pay more attention to the course and become involved in learning. Student teachers' comments about *The Three Pigs* were clustered in two main areas: authenticity and practicality.

Firstly, the teaching materials created an authentic situation for the learners. Student teachers designed all the props for *The Three Pigs*. They used simple materials such as coloured paper, posters, and coloured pens to design the three pigs' houses. Learners no longer passively received a paper-based textbook. Instead, they were motivated by the authentic learning materials. Student teachers' views of such materials include the following:

It was very time consuming to prepare the teaching material. However, when the teaching material was presented on the stage, it held the learners' attention. Learners' facial expression encouraged us to use appropriate material. It not only helped the students focus on the lesson, but also reminded teachers of the learners' needs. (student teacher 3)

Many interesting teaching aids motivate students in their study of English. The Three Pigs, made use of simple but imaginative props to help engage the participants. (student teacher 6)

The wolf in Three Little Pigs has always been popular with the students. At the final performance, a group of students acted a play with a revised title, called Three Little Pigs with a Bad Wolf. (student teacher 7)

These comments show that student teachers considered an interesting tale helpful in supporting learning and felt encouraged to introduce variety into their teaching methods. Teaching materials should be simple to use and should provide a medium for learners to understand what they are going to learn.

We prepared a lot props based on The Three Little Pigs. There are three pig masks, a wolf mask, costumes, a straw house, a frame house, a brick house, a chimney, a hammer and trees. Further, we used bin bags to make a pig body and paper to make some props like carnations, pig masks, pigs' houses and trees. These teaching aids attracted the students' attention more. (student teacher 1)

At the beginning, we did not make costumes. When we acted the play on the first day teaching, students did not pay attention to it. For this reason, we added costumes designed by ourselves. Using more materials helped attract students' attention and led to more interaction with them. (student teacher 2)

The play, *The Three Pigs*, showed that a lot of visual elements improved the learner's chances to make sense of complex images. Although young learners may struggle with the written word, they are still able to understand different reactions, moods, messages and emotions in a dramatised version of the story.

6. Conclusion

There were twenty nine students with two student teachers and six tutors. Most student teachers did not have any teaching experience in primary schools. This was their first time they taught young learners. Therefore, they had difficulty in handling discipline problems in the language classroom. However, they actually improved their classroom management strategies after using the teacher-in-role approach. The data from learners' attitudes indicates that flexible teaching materials and approaches do indeed promote learning. The student teachers too benefited in a number of areas such as teaching practice, teaching material design and classroom management. As this study has shown, language educators should not overlook the significance of a teacher-in-role approach for language learning, especially foreign language learning.

This project had three main areas of importance. The first and the most significant aspect of the project is that it provided student teachers with the opportunity to improve their teaching technique. It also enabled them to work together and discuss techniques. Finally, it showed other teachers how effective teaching-in-role could be. Teaching methods may need revising so as to be more suitable for elementary schools by enabling young learners to participate actively in the classroom.

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