

# **Theoretical Background**

## **Teaching English through Educational Drama to Students with Learning Difficulties**

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Since the pioneering work of Dorothy Heathcote (1984) in the sixties in Britain, educational drama has been developed into a curriculum subject in mainstream education in some parts of the world and, with the research that has been conducted and the texts written, its success as a holistic subject for personal growth has gained strength. In addition a number of research papers have pointed to its efficacy as a methodology for teaching languages. It is not, however, a curriculum subject in the state school system in Argentina, although many of the private institutes and bilingual schools can attest to its success. In order to comply with the requirements of the new Law of Inclusion the Ministry of Education required an innovative project to provide access to foreign language learning for all and, more critically, to help students, currently in special education, to begin English classes and be propelled into a level of language proficiency at their age level when they were to be included in mainstream. Thus the project English in Action, teaching English through drama to SEN students, was developed.

Marsh et al (2005 p. 23) on language teaching provision for SEN in Europe, states,

Both the diverse approaches to diagnosis, and shifts towards inclusion, are a substantial transformation process across Europe. This has direct consequences for the teaching of a variety of subjects, including foreign languages. During such a period of major structural change it is essential for stakeholders to ensure that foreign language learning provision is available for the widest possible range of pupils.

The range of students with SEN in the city of Buenos Aires is diverse indeed but this research will be conducted at level B (mild SEN) of the total Special Education provision throughout the City of Buenos Aires. Typically, these establishments include Remedial Schools, Hospital Schools, Shanty town schools, Boarding Orphanages,

Foundations for Transplant cases and their families, and Home Tuition for young learners with lasting or terminal illnesses or immobility which will keep them away from school for more than 30 days. The school populations will be of varying sizes and with different needs but likely to include students suffering from disease, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, DOD, AHDD, physical challenge, deafness, school phobia, poverty and problems of conduct, behaviour and adaptation to formal educational settings. Many will be immigrants mainly living in the shantytowns which abound in the city centre or on the outskirts.

### **Conception of the project**

Firstly, drama as education was considered a solid framework to begin remediation at a whole class level and to establish the primary personal skills for learning a totally new subject. In this connection, referring specifically to dyslexic students, Miles and Miles (1999 p. 124) state, “There is now an extensive literature on study skills development; there are programmes aimed at improving more general thinking skills.” Dorothy Heathcote, even in early writings, mentioned the power of drama to develop Bloom’s taxonomy of the HOTS, the higher order thinking skills.

Secondly, drama deriving from purpose built ActionSacks was considered as a bridge to literacy and essential to move these students forward in language awareness skills, even though some are illiterate in their mother tongue. In her book, *With Drama in Mind*, Patrice Baldwin refers to the success of drama in developing literacy through explaining the theory and practice in seven chapters headed 1) Drama in Education, 2) The Brain, 3) Play and Learning, 4) Intelligences, 5) Thinking, 6) Creativity and Imagination, and 7) Drama, Thinking and Talk.

Thirdly, drama was seen as the appropriate vehicle for teaching English language to students who had already experienced learning difficulties in their own language in conventional and traditional educational settings. Also, drama is about learning by doing rather than listening to the teacher and appeals to the needs of young learners, “(the child) actively tries to make sense of the world.....asks questions.....wants to know.....Also from a very early stage, the child has purposes and intention: he wants to do” (Donaldson, 1978 p. 86). “Children bring to language learning their curiosity and eagerness to make sense of the world. They will tackle the most demanding tasks with

enthusiasm and willingness. Too often these early gifts are turned to fear and failure” (Cameron, 2001 p. 246).

Fourthly, drama is to be regarded as both process and product in that drama techniques will be used as a learning medium and the students will be encouraged to produce short presentations in English as a right to have access to the performing arts.

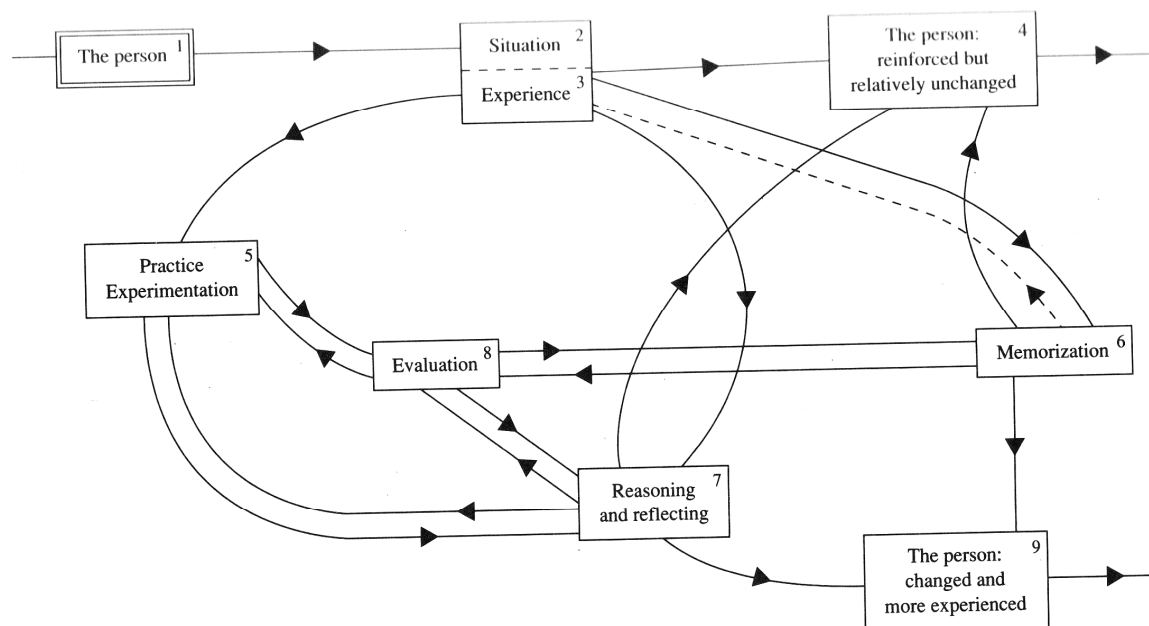
Drama and theatre are not mutually exclusive. If drama is about meaning, it is the art form of theatre which encompasses and contains that meaning. If theatre is about expression, then it is the dramatic exploration of the meaning which fuels that expression. (Morgan & Saxton, 1987 p.1).

For the purposes of this research educational drama is defined very broadly and includes all aspects under the broad umbrella of drama: language games, voice work, body movement and body language, singing, storytelling, storyreading, poetry, chants, role play, improvisation, playing with sounds and rhythm, acting out, process drama structures and frames.

Drama is especially significant for students with SEN who may have had very few diverse experiences in their lived lives. “The significance of drama as an expressive form of thinking and feeling lies in its concern with the process of personal engagement with the objective world” (Bolton, 1979 p. 20). In explaining her levels of student involvement in the meaning frame Dorothy Heathcote says, “I must first attract their attention. If I have their attention, I can gain their involvement. Then I have a chance for their investment and from that their concern. If I have their concern I have hope for their obsession” (in Morgan & Saxton, 1987 p. 22). As drama is the discipline of self control in all its aspects and moves students into both real and imagined worlds it has a profound effect on all the growth processes of the young learner. Drama works at all the learning requirements at the same time: social, physical, cognitive, creative and emotional. “The most significant kind of learning which is attributable to experiences in drama is a growth in the pupils’ understanding about human behaviour, themselves and the world they live in” (O’Neill & Lambert, 1982 p.13)

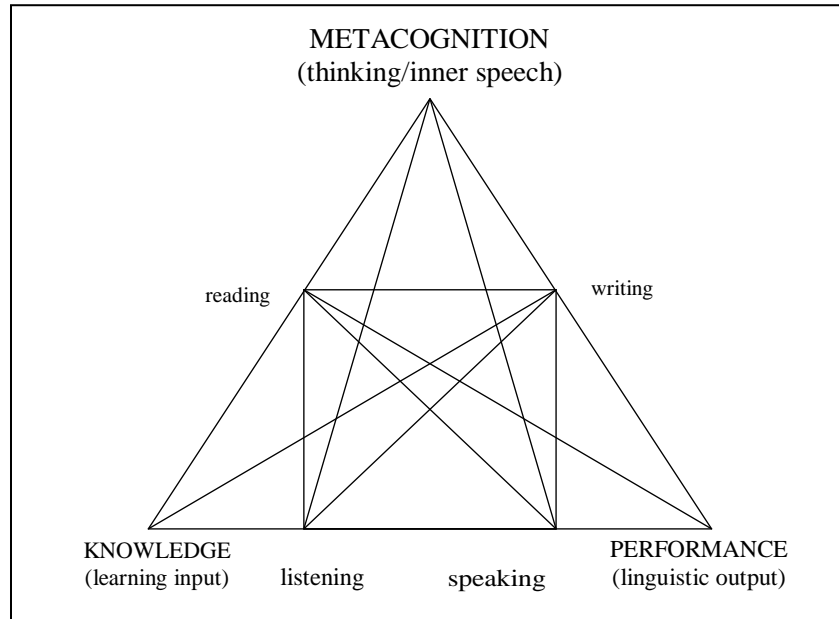
Learning English, in this project, is subsumed under the broad definition of learning, combining a number of models which I have found appropriate through experience. In Jarvis (Jarvis, 1992 p. 71) change to the person is seen as essential through practising strategies and spiralling through situations facilitated by the teacher such as instruction through experiences, practising, scaffolding, application in new situations, evaluating in the public forum, reasoning and and the student emerging with new, additional

Figure 5.2. A Model of the Learning Processes.



observable skills. In Jarvis' model of learning the learner is at the core of the process: See fig 1 above.

In addition *Fisher's Triangle of Language Learning* (1998) indicates that it is vital for students to "perform" in order to develop proficiency. By this he means that students need to have ample opportunities to use the language and not just understand how it works in a simply receptive manner. Students need to have a need to use the language in a variety of near to true life situations especially if they have little exposure to the language in their reality outside the classroom. Fisher suggests that students must move from the receptive to the productive where the language joins with thought and the double process acts as a means towards developing higher order thinking skills and a higher competence in language proficiency.



(Fisher, 1990, p.16)

The third model which supports the positive effects of using drama in learning relates to Cummins' notions of context embeddedness and cognitive demand.

“Research has convincingly shown that that the determining factor in children’s ability to perform particular intellectual tasks is the context in which the task is embedded” (O’Neill, 1995 p.vii, Heathcote & Bolton, 1995).

|          |                         |   |         |
|----------|-------------------------|---|---------|
|          | Cognitively Demanding   |   |         |
| Context  | B                       | D | Context |
| Embedded | A                       | C | Reduced |
|          | Cognitively Undemanding |   |         |

(Cummins & Swain, 1986:43)

As drama is polysemic (multiple meanings through multiple signs) it becomes an enabler of multiple literacies. By using drama techniques the teacher can cope more readily with placing words in a context to enhance their meanings and allow for different possible interpretations. This conforms to the *horizontal axis of Cummins Four Quadrants for Language Learning* where he advises embedding the language in literature, realia, real contexts, first hand experiences and moving the learner, both physically and internally, rather than using the spoken or printed word only. Drama, by

its very nature, embeds the language in role play, improvisation, interpretation of a script or transformation of a different form of text into a dramatic act. Not only this, but according to Cummins it is important for language learners to be stretched to employ higher order thinking skills or as he terms it, more cognitively demanding tasks, and it could be argued that drama in all its guises pushes students to move out of the arena of lower order thinking skills into greater heights. Patrice Baldwin (2004) presents new insights into the relationship between drama and thinking skills, and therefore more sophisticated literacy skills, in her chart comparing high quality thinking with high quality drama.

The research into drama as an effective methodology for language teaching is positive though scant. Those on the shop floor see that it works and do not need convincing. “As mutually exclusive evidence confirms, however, all drama forms appear to be effective in English language learning. Ample research shows that developmental drama allows children to enhance not only their intellectual but also their physical, social, emotional and spiritual abilities and provides them with psychological support that is not found in other areas of the curriculum” (Wilkinson, 2000 p.1). The reasons are attributed to the holistic nature of drama,

No field, especially one dealing with human behaviour, advances when the whole is forgotten. Foreign language teaching deals with the full range of human behaviour and should be considered a behavioural discipline (...) It is important to remember that the basis of human interventions with language is not only cognitive, it is social and personal as well. To speak is to be human and to learn how to speak a new language is to find new ways to express that humanity. (Di Pietro, 1987 p.12) and its very nature as a firsthand experience.

A meta-analysis of drama and language research (Wagner, 1998), listing 55 pages of empirical studies, indicates repeatedly that dramatic forms of expression increase the development of language skills. (in Wilkinson, 2000 p.3).

In addition, Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences, neuro scientific studies on how the brain works and research into learning styles all point to the efficacy of drama as a learning medium especially as language learning now starts at a much earlier age all over the world. As Wilkinson (2000) points out,

That connection became clearly evident six years later, when American drama-language specialist Rike (1974), using guided dramatic play based on her earlier one-to-one play with toddlers, tested four disadvantaged Headstart kindergarten groups in four key language skill areas: following directions, perceptual motor skills, animal naming and body awareness. The 50 to 100% improvement in the drama groups during a ten-month period contrasted with regression or minimal improvement in the control groups. This led to Rike's conclusion that disadvantaged children tend to be physically-oriented and to learn kinaesthetically. (Wilkinson 2000 p.6)

The point that seems to be missed by most language teachers is that students learn a language by speaking in meaningful contexts: they learn to speak by speaking just as they learn to walk by walking and drama activities provide essential impetus to speak.

The starting point for an interactive approach to (second) language instruction is getting the students to generate their own discourse. The motivational value of self-generated discourse for students is evident when compared to discourse that is contrived by the teacher. (Di Pietro, 1987 p. 40)

Vygotsky's work on the connection between language and thought supports the notion that language can be taught more effectively through play and drama. Lozanov in his development of suggestopaedia, a programme to develop speed language acquisition, used role play and the mask of the theatre in his work. Many researchers have pointed to the efficacy of drama in developing confidence and fluency, "Learners who have limited access to authentic communication with native speakers also benefit from their drama experiences in which they can try out various roles, learn social rules of conversation, develop communication strategies and thus gain confidence" (O'Neill & Kao, 2006 p.114).

Some educators recognise the flaws in the methodology currently employed in the ELT curriculum where de-contextualised "skills" and competencies are taught, where the obsession with arbitrary measurements has priority, where the lack of challenge and hence improvement goes unquestioned and where the use of a transmission mode of teaching remains the norm. Some are beginning to recognise the importance of interpersonal interaction in the classroom and the need to break away from viewing language teaching as information transmission. Carkin (2008) studied the effects of

three genres of drama on University students at the Tainan University of Technology, Taiwan and found what the students themselves felt:

Students with low proficiency and low confidence can benefit greatly from drama, just like the “good” students. Students can benefit from participating in group-work as well as in pairs. Drama provides them with a broad range of opportunities in learning English, and Drama motivates them to learn English and gives them more confidence to learn English. (2008 p.23)

Finally, a message from Wilkinson (2000)

Language learning through drama as supported by the drama, brain and language research reviewed here can no longer be ignored. Drama involves the whole body and the whole brain in learning in a fictional context; it engages all of the multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1985) and matches the learning styles (Kolb, 1983) of all children. Enjoyable physical movement embeds the emotional impact of multi-sensory experiences on the cells of the body to form deep neuronal patterns in the brain and thereby enable memory and recall more readily than methods having lesser sensory impact. (Wilkinson, 2000 p.27)



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