Demonstration DIESL Class: A (Nonverbal) Drama Workshop at UVic

Presented at the Imagination and Education Research Conference, S.F.U., Vancouver, B.C., July 2003, and IDEA International Drama in Education Conference, Ottawa 2004, and regularly at ELC, University of Victoria. Invited to present at the upcoming IDEA 2007 World Conference in Hong Kong.

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Lesson duration: 1.5 hours

“Language acquisition,” O’Neill and Kao (1998) explain, “arises from the urge to do things with words, and this need becomes paramount in process drama, when participants are required to manipulate the dramatic circumstances to achieve their own goals” (p. 4). This is a DIESL (Drama in ESL) workshop that has been conducted over the past 10 years with hundreds of students in adult ESL groups at the University of Victoria (Culham, 2002, pp. 95-112); it acts as a helpful vehicle to encourage student involvement, creativity and the exploration of new avenues for self-expression, through movement and imagination. Language production is one of the outcomes though, paradoxically, language is not an explicit part of many of the activities. The effective “hook” question is along these lines: “I wonder in what ways we, as social beings, communicate that are not necessarily through the use of words?” That usually is sufficient to ensure engagement and fuel the ensuing workshop:

Introduction: a Group Discussion
Running time: 5 minutes.
Activity: Pair discussion; whole group discussion.
Focus: To get students thinking about the relevance of the work their own language learning experience. Teach concept of 80% nonverbal / 20% verbal.
Questions: “In what ways do people communicate gesturally?” and “Have you noticed ways that people in Canada gesture differently from people in your country?”

Activity 1: Group Warm-up
Running time: 10 minutes.
Activity: “Follow the Leader”, whole group (and other games, like Candle Tag or Sun and Moon).
Focus: To introduce physical work to help make students comfortable with one another.
Questions: “What sorts of things do we have to think about when we lead?”

Activity 2: Physical Name Game
Running time: 15 minutes.
Activity: Standing as a group in a circle, one person introduces him/herself (name only) with one action that describes them. Everyone repeats that action and name, and so on around the circle.
Focus: To give them words with which they are familiar (their names) and invite them to add a movement that helps them to remember classmates. To have students play physically with familiar language and at the same time provide an ice-breaker that helps them learn each others’ names.
Question: “What sorts of things have we learned about each other?”

Activity 3: Passing the Claps
Running time: 15 minutes.
Activity: A clap is passed sequentially around the circle; the clap is then passed between A and B who must now clap together, then B and C clap together and so on around the circle. Once a rhythm is established, extra claps can be introduced by the leader.
Focus: To work on group rhythm and establish eye contact with classmates.
Question: “In what ways did you communicate to your partner that you were making a connection?”, and “What were some of the difficulties you had with this game?”
Activity 4: Circle Cross
Running time: 12 minutes.
Activity: Students are still in a circle and must negotiate their exchange of places by eye contact only. Only one pair of students may exchange places at any given time.
Focus: To encourage participants to take a risk using only nonverbal communication.
Questions: “What sorts of risks were involved in your deciding to make a move?” and “Can you think of some reasons that prevent us from going?”

Activity 5: What are you doing?
Running time: 15 minutes.
Activity: Person steps into the middle of circle and mimics an action. Whole group supports that player by mirroring his/her action. When students in circle have discovered the name for that action, they turn to a neighbour and name it. Person miming action says the action out loud, which is the cue for another student to step in and quickly begin to mime a new action. Game continues until all have taken a turn in the middle.
Focus: Students develop improvisational skills and learn to listen and react in a spontaneous way.
Question: “How is this game similar to learning a language?”

Activity 6: Group Mirrors
Running time: 15 minutes.
Activity: First the students work in pairs mirroring each other. A leads and B follows. Reverse. Next the whole group is in a circle mirroring together. A classmate leaves the room and the circle selects a leader and begins mirroring. The classmate returns to guess the leader. Repeat.
Focus: Connecting and helping a disparate group of students engage with each other safely, while freeing them to interact physically.
Questions: “When was it easy to tell who we were following and when was it more difficult?”, “What kinds of clues helped you to discover the leader?” and “Where in life might we need the skills that mirroring” requires?”

Activity 7: Scarf Sculptures
Running time: 15 minutes
Activity: Students sit in a circle. Teacher throws a scarf into the middle of the circle. She or he shapes it into a recognizable form, helping with sounds and reactions so that students can see the object it has become. Teacher then invites students, one by one to step into the centre and do the same; with a quiet group, the scarf is passed around and student by student, it is reshaped, until it has been all around the circle.
Focus: Introducing mime and use of props. Encouraging imagination and participation. With an introductory level class this can be a useful vocabulary exercise.
Questions: “What were some of the things that we recognized?”, and “What were some ways that were used to help us understand what was being made?”

***If time remains, a tableau activity can be introduced in which students in small groups are invited to make pictures (frozen) for a "Visit to Victoria" Souvenir Photo Album. Teacher invites all but one group to "unfreeze" and look at the pictures one by one, moving about the room and commenting on what they see.
***Once students have (and they most likely will) observed that a large part of language is impulse and response, there are many nonverbal activities to explore, and the possibilities are endless.

“So, where is the language therein”, many ESL teachers initially ask. Although these activities are, in fact, primarily nonverbal, the instructions I give introduce students to new words and the reflective questions provide expanded language opportunities for the participants (Morgan & Saxton, 1991). And they always ignite conversations. The importance of establishing shared experiences through the reflective questions and subsequent storytelling allows the focus to be on making meaning (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). For example, in activity 2 the actions students choose to share often provide a glimpse into their cultures, personalities and interests. In one class alone we discovered, in this activity, a Thai dance step, Tae Kwon Do techniques and how fishing in Japan is different from that in Canada. The language is generated from the desire to know more, and interactive drama activities such as these help lighten inhibition.
This workshop is based on a communicative model of L2 pedagogy, in which students are able to simultaneously employ several language skills (listening, speaking, pronunciation, gesture, grammar, vocabulary).

References


*******there are many other references from which I have drawn activities; quite often some modifying for ESL suitability is required. Many times it just involves making shifts as you go. You might look up publications by: Augusto Boal, Viola Spolin, and a wonderful and useful book of drama games modified for the L2 classroom, called Pinch and Ouch.