Language and Hearts are Important: Building “Affective Athleticism” in DIESL

by Cameron Culham

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Several years into my career as an ESL teacher, I became aware of a certain barrier that prevented clear communication in my classes. Not only did I speak a different verbal language from my students, but we related quite differently non-verbally as well. I recall very clearly the incident that first brought this to my attention, and I mention it here because it is certainly by no means a unique incident. In fact, misunderstandings, as you can well imagine, are an ongoing occupational hazard and as such, my story is symbolic of many intercultural misunderstandings that arise in this field of study and illustrates the extent to which non-verbal communication plays a key role in my work.

At the start of term a few years ago we gathered as a class at a downtown shopping mall for an activity in which the students would take pictures of local people and buildings. As class members arrived, our group began spreading out to the point where local merchants in our meeting area became visibly concerned. No one else in my group seemed aware of this. I began to feel somewhat anxious and in an effort to diffuse a potentially difficult situation, I began gesturing to the group (a direct pushing motion) to move back and allow a passage way for shoppers. This action on my part seemed to satisfy those in the shops but my students paid little attention to me; they did finally react when a security guard arrived to ask us to move. Somewhat agitated by this time, I tried to apologize to the people around us and found myself frustrated at the seeming rudeness of my students.

As many of the students I teach come from Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Korea, Thailand and other populated countries, what I and the other “locals” had perceived to be an overcrowded gathering area was perhaps not so at all to most of my students. The gesture I had so fixedly been employing in my efforts to move them back was, I later discovered, being misread by them as saying either “Stay where you are” or “Keep quiet!” What I considered to be a universal gesture was clearly not so, and the emotion I believed to be clearly etched on my face was also not as clear to the students as I had thought. No matter how animated I became with the gesture that I perceived to signify “Move back”, their cultural reading of my sign was telling them a different story. How often, when misunderstood in a foreign country, do we make no other adjustment than to increase our volume? Was this what I was attempting to do with my students in a non-verbal way?

To set the context, I invite you into the world of my classroom of students with some abilities in English, a world in which a large part of our interacting is non-verbal and gestural and full of shaping and signing and waving and at times grasping - and even gasping! I ask my students to close their eyes and make a gesture without words. I assure them that this is not a performance. I instruct: “Now, with eyes closed, can you use your face, hands and maybe even your posture if that feels appropriate, to illustrate the sentence, ’I’m sorry but I can’t hear you’. Try a few ways and settle on one that feels right. Now, with your eyes still closed, I wonder, can you show me, in the same way, ’No, I would rather not’. And, finally, how about this one? ’Come here, please’”. Trying not to rush and yet taking care not to make it go on for too long, I then invite students to open their eyes. I comment that I saw a range of expressions and gestures and ask them to talk to the person next to them about the gestures they used and, if they liked, to compare.
Drama in ESL (or DIESL as it is referred to in the lexicon) is proving to be an effective means of drawing our students out and towards one another. I argue, in this paper, that its activities reach students directly at the level of affect. Affect is that area that covers feelings, emotions, mood and temperament (Chaplin, 1975); affect learning not only involves learning about feelings and exercising feelings, but also discovering how you feel about learning about feelings. Arnold (1999) in *Affect in Language Learning*, emphasises that “the affective side of learning is not in opposition to the cognitive side” but that “when both are used together, the learning process can be constructed on a firmer foundation” (p.1). Affect displays "are body expressions which indicate the emotional state of the communicator . . . [they] tend to be less consciously controllable than [body gestures]. Consequently, many people carefully watch affect displays as a way of checking up on the veracity of verbal statements" (Eisenberg, 1971, p. 27). With regard to affective learning and its important role in second language learning, Stern (1992) points out that "language teaching theorists have been rather slow to recognize the important part that affect plays in language learning . . . It was only in the early 1970's, as part of the general reaction against audiolingualism, that humanistic language teaching theory...placed affect and personality at the center of attention" (p.85).

In any actor training program the onus is on the creation of a safe and collaborative setting in which all actors can freely express themselves. There the inevitable anxiety of taking on new roles and projects is mediated; there risks may be taken; there feelings can be explored without constraint. In theatre, there is and always has been, a deep understanding of the intrinsic value of the affective domain and of the environment that encourages its development. In performance, if an audience is to be reached, the actor, the director, the designers all need to “speak” the language of “affect”. Russian director Meyerhold says that “the essence of human relationships is determined by gestures, poses, glances and silences. Words alone cannot say everything...” (in Braun, 1969, p.155). Peter Brook’s practice and writings continually explore the threads that connect actors and audiences from diverse backgrounds. Antonin Artaud (1958) in *The Theatre and its Double*, offered the term “affective athleticism” to describe the sort of training that actors, to be effective, must undertake:

One must grant the actor a kind of affective musculature which corresponds to the physical localizations of feelings. The actor is like the physical athlete, but with this surprising difference: his affective organism is analogous to the organism of the athlete, is parallel to it, as if it were its double, although not acting upon the same plane. *The actor is the athlete of the heart* (p.133, italics mine).

When I introduce DIESL activities that allow for a momentary departure from grammar and a peeling away of the often cumbersome language layer, I find there to be a pure relating of emotions amongst my students: inciting laughter, easing tension and embracing chaos. But drama also sets the stage for the development of an ease in language use and provides a purpose for language use. This makes sense because, as Stewig (1973) points out in *Drama: the Spontaneous Language Art*, you don’t speak unless you have a reason to do so. In many of the traditional ESL activities, the purpose for speaking is to demonstrate correct use rather than to convey meaning. It is the expressive language of the everyday that students need to be able to use. It is in expressive language that words are generated by the impulse of feelings (Brook, 1968). In my experience teaching ESL, students gain that ease and confidence in language only when they are given opportunities to develop and flex the muscles of the language of the heart.

I have held several workshops in which Shannan Calcutt, a Canadian performer trained as a clown, has led my students. Her results with these groups have been significant. Shannan’s teaching of clown techniques, mostly in the non-verbal frame, allowed my students to explore communicating on an affective level. Describing that work, Calcutt (1999) observed, “They said so much without using words at all. In fact, the entire room seemed to shift focus... they were a part of my world and [of] each others’". By building a strong sense of community in the classroom, an objective this workshop fulfilled, a transformation had occurred. The clown, of course, addresses the audience on an affective level.
Dörnyei and Malderez (1999) in their study on group dynamics in foreign language learning and teaching, see “the 1.2 [second language] teacher as a juggler rushing to keep the various plates of ‘skills’, ‘pace’, ‘variety’, ‘activities’, ‘competencies’ etc. all spinning on their sticks”. They warn that “this job is doomed to failure if the affective ground in which the sticks are planted is not firm” (pp.156-157).

The adult learners in my classes have not yet mastered their target language, English, nor do they share a common mother tongue with their classmates. Despite these barriers, it has been my experience that by the end of a term, my ESL learners have, in addition to grammar skills and pronunciation skills and all of those “predictable outcomes”, somehow developed a way of communicating with one another and with me that seems to transcend verbal language.

When I first began introducing drama to my students I met with only partial success. I discovered I was either imposing scripts or trying to engage students in activities that were artificial and of little meaning to them. More often than not, ESL students are already anxious and when I cast out the invitation to “perform a skit” for their peers, you can imagine the difficulty that caused. The workshop that I have devised and now use involves a considerable amount of physicality, interaction and humour, and it does not isolate any one individual (Culham, 2002, pp.99-101). It taps into their worlds, their experiences. The drama work I do is not theatrical in the sense of producing a play, although there is great linguistic and intercultural merit in that sort of work as well (see Leavitt, 1997). In my work the students are rarely called upon to perform, but I use theatre techniques as a way of inviting students to express what verbally is perhaps inaccessible to them or what interculturally might transcend words or verbal expression.

One of my greatest challenges in this non-performance work has been to validate it to the students. In his book Emotions and Adult Learning, More (1977) suggests one of the difficulties in classes with adult learners, such as mine, stems from the fact that students perceive their teachers to be “knowledge-disseminators” (p.39). This is especially true of students who come to me from formal educational backgrounds. It is only natural that the introduction of drama work challenges and shakes to the very root the students’ paradigms of learning. They initially perceive what they are doing to be “playing” (which it is and I quickly acknowledge that). With some groups there is a feeling that theatre games should be put in at the end of the class, once more substantial work has been done or, perhaps, saved for the class party at the end of term. Current research in the field of DIESL, however, suggests otherwise (Kao and O’Neill, 1998).

Here is an exercise I have used successfully. In it you will see those elements of play and game that give rise to the students’ hesitation. Using a scarf (or sometimes a pencil), I invite my students to sit in a circle (already a very foreign concept for those who have been through years of “row” learning!) and I simply pull out a scarf, folding it in different ways to generate imagination. I invite them to play asking, “I wonder how many different times we can change this scarf by using it in different ways?”. I try to repeat words that encourage originality in the task, such as “different” or “in your experience”. I then demonstrate and, to introduce small elements of theatricality, sometimes add music or dim the lights. At this point-and you can imagine my students: all adult learners with university backgrounds and each holding his/her own pre-conceived ideas about drama-I get some puzzled looks. Puzzled but intrigued. The play begins. I always give students the option of “passing” as the scarf comes their way, but one by one they are drawn in. By the end, that simple scarf has made its way around the circle and been transformed into kites, wedding veils, a baby, Sumo gear, a bullfighter’s cape and so on. The mood has shifted in a tangible way and laughter has been shared. Japanese students, proficient in origami, have dazzled us with their talents and Brazilian soccer players have displayed their skills.

It is a familiar theatre exercise and one that we all know and have done, but what is important to me is the energy, vitality and the shared pleasure of discovery! There is the safety in that no language is required of the participants, yet those so wishing can freely share in the reflection. Significant and meaningful dialogue has transpired each time I have introduced this activity because the participants are delighted with themselves and each other and want to know more: their language is driven by a need to know and a desire to share their experiences. A transformation has most clearly taken place through this simple drama game. We have, for that moment in time, transcended language limitations and connected as individuals with stories, emotions and empathy for the other. Furthermore, a simple and accessible activity
such as the one I have described, equips the students with tools for improvisation and serves as a
springboard to future drama activities.

Among the benefits I have observed from using simple drama activities with my students and in
teacher-in-service workshops:

1. Students are able to express themselves in ways other than through words. When
words do not come easily, non-verbal opportunities allow students to reveal themselves
and learn about others in more direct and intuitive ways. The sign (gesture or facial
expression or posture) is often less abstract that the word.

2. Drama activities offer community building opportunities in a classroom where there
are students of varying levels of language proficiency (for example: see student
comments that follow).

3. Teachers are also able to use non-verbal cues to demonstrate caring and concern for
students in a way that more formal language instruction does not allow, bound as it is by
the physical constraints and the pressure to understand.

4. Non-verbal activities provide an excellent means of releasing the stress of language
learning. The atmosphere of play prevails and yet important learning is going on (Bolton,
1984).

5. Students, often hesitant to speak out, can become confident when the language
expectation is removed entirely. They will take an initial step (in its most literal sense)
more readily than they will utter an initial word (see Maley & Duff, 1982).

6. “Total Physical Response” (Asher, 1977, see also Krashen & Terrell 1983), an
established tool in ESL methodology, is enhanced through drama activities. The body is
as much a part of thinking as is the mind, and non-verbal activities force everyone,
teacher included, to “listen” in a different way (Cremin, 2001). All become more astute
readers of sign and readers of the body (Morgan & Saxton, 2000).

7. In all drama work, power dynamics shift as the teacher becomes a participant alongside
the students. This “shift” enables teachers to be seen in ways that mitigate the sense of
authority that can intimidate students. As well, students can reveal expertise previously
hidden by verbal (or sometimes cultural) domination of other less inhibited members of
the class.

8. Non-verbal drama activities transfer directly to verbal ones, and subsequent verbal
interchanges are triggered by these non-verbal activities. ESL teachers need to be
reminded that all words begin as impulses that are stimulated by attitudes and feelings
that demand to be expressed (Brook, 1968).

Artaud (1958) raged against the theatre in Europe that did nothing but talk. It was a theatre he
discounted as “digestive”, devoid of “physiological sensitivity” (p. 125). “It is,” he writes, “by cultivating
his [sic] emotion in his body that the actor recharges his voltage” (p. 40). Neclands (1995) takes that
understanding to the totality of theatre performance. Theatre, he writes, is “the art of actions not of words”
(p. 42). The power of working through the affective domain has, from the beginning, been instrumental in
the creation of strong theatre. Its implications in other fields is only now being recognized, researched,
qualified and quantified.

Theatre transforms. And theatre activities introduced to an ESL classroom also transform. Like
actors to their audiences, DIESL learners express through emotions. As in the theatre experience, DIESL
students enter inside a particular moment together in a shared space and time. The essence of who these students are as individuals, what their struggles have been, where they have fears and frustrations and, most importantly, what unites them, are all foregrounded through drama, providing the firm basis upon which the language teacher can more effectively keep all the "plates spinning" as she or he "juggles" all the other variables of ESL teaching. "Recognizing oneself as an active participant in [a] culture is the first, essential step for learning to be a self-confident participant in all kinds of cultural practices," writes Mullen (1995, pp. 32-33). For ESL students, our art form opens the doors to language acquisition by enabling their first participatory steps as novice athletes of affective expression.

**Ayako:** I hate scarf. Because I don't like thinking idea to make thing, so I had no ideas. [for the scarf activity described at the beginning of this article] I was bored. But I had fan [fun]. Because things that other people did is very fun. So I was glad to seeing things that other people did. I enjoyed this class. My ideas about drama was that I can't do. But now my ideas about drama is that I can do. I became to like drama.

**Kumi:** My idea about drama before was I couldn't do it. I became frightened when I had to do in front of everyone. I got nervous. After I did it, my idea about drama changed. The drama activity was exciting. It was very interesting. I liked it. I was surprised, because a lot of different ideas appeared...I think drama activity will be helpful to me. When we talk with someone using gesture, the conversation becomes more powerful. I think gesture adds words to a power.

**Satoko:** To show my opinions actively was required the courage. But it helped with me to communication with many friend. I thought that communication, eye contact, and body language appeals to basic to know each other. I couldn't eye contact with not close friend before. So I was under extreme tension. I realized that is very important for me.

**Megumi:** It was very interesting. I can begin to be aggressive. I was happy to make action and imagine...It needed imagination and communication, body language, watching. I think that learning English also needs those. So when speaking English, I don't have to strain and be nervous.

**Sachiko:** Before I thought that drama is playing a role and I felt nervous. Because I hate improvisation and impulse. After it was exciting. But I thought that I need more imagination myself...It was good stimulation because I always avoid the risk (improvisation things).

**Yoko:** After that I thought that drama is difficult. The actor has to act and express how he or she feels. But it's good for us. Because sometimes we have trouble in it.

**Yuka:** When I did the silent communication activities, I thought that language is not the only means of communication. It was interesting that we could gather from friends' looks or friends' gestures how they feel.

**Hitomi:** I don't make eye contact with not friendly people. But today I got some new friends by the game. I said in my heart "Please show me! Please!!!", then I got someone. Next time, we were friends. Besides, I wondered why we started running at the same time. Other things, we had clapped at the same time. I think that I can get my will across for other ones. That's fantastic!

**Izumi:** I thought conversation plus silent communication activities can express what oneself means. The drama activity I enjoyed the most was "name game", because I was interested that look everybody's expression. I had not known someone until then, but I know a little now.

**Toshie:** When I did silent communication activities I felt it is difficult to catch what my partner wants to say, and I thought "Don't be shy" because one can't make oneself understood if one is shy, and these games were very useful for making friends with members of the class. They were so funny. I was excited by expecting what the others did. I will never forget Megumi's posture (physical illustration in name game).
Rie: I think we communicated by our hearts. I understood we communicate with other people not only [with] languages but also hearts. Maybe it is not so much important to communicate by language as by heart. Even if this is true, I must learn English hard! Both languages and hearts are so important.

I can, of course, paint you a fine argument for drama in ESL, but the proof lies in student responses. These comments (used with permission), come from the journals of young adult Japanese students who participated in a DIESEL workshop in the summer of 2002 at the University of Victoria. The students’ reflections were written halfway through their 6 week ESL course. They speak to the “exercise” of those affective areas, that “language as by heart”, that is so often underutilized in the delivery of ESL course work.

References


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