

English Through Drama: Focus on Language and Literacy Skills

[In what ways can drama in education contribute to developing a student teacher's skills as an English language professional?](#)

In today's fast-paced world teachers and students alike are under great pressure to perform well on all fronts at all times. How can we slow things down during teacher training to focus on key language and literacy skills in the English classroom? In response to this question, the English department at the PH Zug has begun to work with drama in education, a holistic teaching approach borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon educational system.

What is drama in education?

Drama in education (DiE) has a long tradition in the United Kingdom and other Anglo-Saxon countries, such as Canada and Australia, but is still a fairly new concept in the Swiss educational landscape, where it is not systematically integrated into teacher training. Drama in education is an umbrella term that refers to using theatre practices, such as games and acting techniques, in the classroom in order to access learning through kinaesthetic (body), cognitive (mind), and affective (heart) channels, often in an imagined setting in which the participants actively take part.

Focus on Process

«In a staged theatre production, there is often more of a focus on rehearsal as a means to an end (that end being the performance). In drama in education, the process is the end in itself. The learning emerges out of the choices and decisions made during the development or improvisation.» (Andersen, 2004, p. 282)

Unlike theatre education (Theaterpädagogik), which tends to focus on the final product (the show), drama in education puts the focus on the process: It is not the quality of the acting but rather the quality of the learning that matters. Drama is thus used to solve subject specific tasks and to promote the personal and social development of the learners. As Neelands reminds us: «Through role taking students may discover a more complex sense of other, they may also discover a more complex range of selves or multiple subjectivities that now includes as the result of their role taking, a confident self, a powerful self,

a risk taking self, a compassionate self. Students can learn and un-learn through the process of constructing «others» (2002, p. 45). The method is particularly well suited to foreign language teaching, as the multi-modal nature of drama (Cope, Kalantzis, & Group, 2000; Siegel, 2006) allows learners to express themselves in different ways, both verbally and physically. It also lends itself well as an approach for actively teaching language and literacy skills (Tschurtschenthaler, 2013). It should be noted that while DiE is a newcomer on the scene, theatre education is well established in Switzerland and makes important contributions to the educational system.

Trying something new

In December 2017 the English department began collaborating with the Centre for Oral Communication (Zentrum Mündlichkeit, ZM) at the PH Zug. Sylvia Nadig, head of the English and Foreign Languages department invited Eva Göksel, a Swiss-Canadian doctoral researcher specialising in drama in education, to develop and facilitate several lessons on teaching and learning English through drama. These lessons included a 90-minute drama session introducing facets of Canadian culture as well as the acquisition of new vocabulary through a classic Canadian children's story «The Hockey Sweater» (Carrier, 1979). This lesson was integrated in the 2018 English Study week, which introduces first year students to both a variety of teaching methodologies and a range of English speaking cultures.

Another 90-minute lesson focusing on personal development through drama for beginning teachers was co-developed and co-facilitated with Olivia Green, also from the English department. This latter session is based on the Canterbury tale «The Wife of Bath's Tale» and was adapted from a process drama written especially for the English department by Sharka Dohnalova of Masaryk University, Brno, in the Czech Republic, one of the PH Zug's partner institutions. Process drama is a technique in which a group explores a fictional context in order to gain knowledge either of real world issues, or to more deeply engage with the characters and topics in a story. As Howell and Heap remind us: «process drama is both an art form and a pedagogy» (2017, p. 121) that invites participants to make decisions collaboratively: they ask questions, seek answers, and – useful for the language classroom – they acquire a lot of practice with the target language.

Learning by Laughing
 «I found it very interesting to experience different ways of learning vocabulary with drama. My 5th grade English teacher used to do similar activities and we loved it. I can remember those lessons because we laughed a lot.» Anonymised student feedback

Gestures Make Memories: The Hockey Sweater

The process drama «The Hockey Sweater» was developed with the aim of introducing student teachers to drama in education as a holistic teaching approach. The experience aims to show the potential of teaching through drama by showcasing various techniques such as teacher-in-role, hot-seating (when one character is questioned by the group), and still-images (frozen pictures), as well as by introducing subject specific content (i. e. life in rural Canada) via drama. The Hockey Sweater process drama explores small town life in rural Canada in 1946, examining the themes of ice hockey, of fitting in, and of English-French rivalries. The drama lesson also explores ways of retaining vocabulary via repeated gestures – a technique the student teacher participants were positively surprised by, as this reflection of the lesson shows: «actually seeing how much more interesting vocabulary revision can be when embedded into a teacher-in-role performance [...] really got to me» (Anonymised student feedback).

The Power of Performance
 Neelands and Goode point out that teacher-in-role aims «to stimulate curiosity, enquiry and commitment to role and the issue being addressed» (2015, p. 54).

What do English Professionals Want? – The Wife of Bath's Tale

The process drama «The Wife of Bath's Tale» is best facilitated by two teachers, who take on the roles of narrator and a knight on a quest. The participants are asked to engage with the knight's quest by re-creating a series of still-images to illustrate the story. A strong focus on detail shifts the learners' focus onto the power of body language, posture, breathing, and projection. The impact of showing confidence, even when it is not felt, is one of the many topics discussed during this lesson focusing on personal development for beginning teachers.

Looking Forward: Next Steps

The lessons outlined in this article are just a few examples of the drama and theatre work being done at the PH Zug. In the French department, for example, Emmanuelle Olivier works regularly with improvisation techniques in her lessons. She has also co-authored a publication «3, 2, 1 – Action!» (Olivier & Kunz, 2017) featuring theatre games for teaching French and English at A1 level. Theatre and drama pedagogue Marcel Felder has co-authored a theatre education handbook, now in its third edition (Felder, Kramer-Länger, Lille & Ulrich, 2018). At the PH Zug, the interest in applying theatre and drama both in foreign language teaching and across the curriculum continues to grow: student teachers are engaging with DiE research and development projects in the context of a second year module as well as in their bachelors' theses. It will be exciting to see how this interest grows and develops in the future.

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Eva Göksel shares a taste of Canadian culture with the help of the childrens's story «The Hockey Sweater».