

ABOUT LANGUAGE

The aim of the article is to explain the importance of using drama techniques in teaching foreign languages. Drama attempts to put back some of the forgotten emotional content into language.

Most of us are familiar with the early stages of learning at least one foreign language. We may at certain times question, uneasily, the value of what we are learning; the language may seem irrelevant or artificial, the structures unwieldy, the vocabulary far-fetched. Yet we struggle on, saying «Son chapeau est sur la chaise» , «The pupils are opening their books» , or « Mein Bruder hat es mir gesagt» , in the belief that if the sentences are meaningful and correctly formed we must be learning something from them.

Much has changed in language teaching, but it is still true that the conviction that Vocabulary + Essential Structures = Language lies at the base of nearly every foreign language syllabus. Teaching in these lines takes account of only one aspect of the language – the intellectual aspect. But language is not purely an intellectual matter. Our minds are attached to our bodies, and our bodies to our minds. The intellect rarely functions without an element of emotion, yet it is so often just this element that is lacking in teaching material.

Many of the skills we most need when speaking a language, foreign or not, are those which are given least attention in the traditional text-book : adaptability (i.e. the ability to match one's speech to the person one is talking to), speed of reaction, sensitivity to tone, insight, anticipation; in short, appropriateness. The people we speak to during the day are not (thank goodness!) faceless citizens with conveniently pronounceable names like Brown and Grey, who rarely state anything but the obvious, and whose opinions are so bland as to give neither offence nor pleasure. The people we meet are busy, irritable, worried, flustered, tired, headachy; their breath smells, their armpits itch, food gets stuck between their teeth; they have quirks and tics and mannerisms, they speak too slowly or too fast, repeat they are alive. And so are we. In order to talk to these people, we need to know who they are and who we are. We need to know whether the difference in our ages matters, whether we are likely to see them again, whether it is worth trying to influence them, whether they are likely to be helpful or difficult, etc. It is all very well to be able to produce statements like «Had we not told them, they would not have come», but the words mean nothing unless we know who «they» are and why this was said.

Drama attempts to put back some of this forgotten emotional content into language – and to put the body back too. This does not mean that we must suddenly start leaping about the room in an exaggerated fashion, but it does imply that we need to take more account of meaning. Much language teaching is done through structures or so-called situations in the belief that once a sentence has been correctly formulated a use can always be found for it. First comes form, then meaning. This approach can be misleading, even dangerous, because it accustoms the learner to making sentences

fit into structural moulds. To use an analogy, such a learner is like an architect who designs a building before inspecting the site on which it is to be placed. There may be nothing structurally wrong with the design, but if the building is five storeys high with a stone facade, and is intended to fill the gap between two steel-and-glass skyscrapers, the architect will clearly have to put in some overtime! Practically any sentence will have an abstract meaning – a propositional or dictionary meaning – but this face value may have nothing to do with its concrete use.

Let us consider a few examples. The much maligned example that used to crop up on the first page of all language text-books, «Is this a pen?», has now disappeared (we hope). And why? Not because it was incorrect or meaningless or useless, but because it was unnecessary and inappropriate. Try walking up to a London docker, taking a pen out of your pocket and asking him: «Is this a pen?» If he doesn't take a swipe at you he will most likely answer, «What the 'ell d'you take me for?» or, «Listen, mate, if you're looking for trouble...» The question you asked was not understood as a question but as a provocation, which it was, for you were insulting him by suggesting he might not understand the self-evident. It is no less provoking to force the foreign language learner to go through the motions of answering inane questions simply because he or she has problems of vocabulary which the docker does not. It is not the question itself but the reason why it was asked that is at fault. After all, there is structurally no evident difference between «Is this a pen?» and Macbeth's famous line, «Is this a dagger which I see before me?» The difference lies in the feeling. Macbeth asks a question to which he knows the answer, this is true; but he asks the question because he does not want to believe what he sees. He has, then, a strong reason for speaking as he does.

Meaning, therefore, should not be confused with structure. Commands are often given in the imperative, but not always; continuous action in the present may be suggested by a verb ending in -ing, but not always. Meaning slips from one structure to another in a most elusive way. Take an innocent statement such as, «It's eight o'clock». This might be, variously, a substitute order («Switch on the telly»), a concealed warning («You'd better hurry up, they'll be here in a minute»), a form of persuasion («Don't you think it's time we left?»), and so on. In all these examples the statement «It's eight o'clock» takes its meaning from the intention of the speaker and his or her relation to the other person. To teach «It's eight o'clock» as a response (and the only kind of response) to the question «What time is it?» is to place an unnecessary restraint on the language.

Correct structures do need to be taught, nobody would deny this, but can they not be taught meaningfully from the very start? Consider an obvious example: the present continuous tense. This is nearly always illustrated in class by the teacher performing certain actions (opening a book, closing a window) and getting the students to reply to questions. Interest soon flags, because it seems pointless to describe what is going on in front of your eyes. Yet with a slight twist, the same actions can become interesting and the questions meaningful: all that is needed is that the observer should not know in advance why the actions are being performed. This is strikingly illustrated in two simple mime exercises : 3.17 What am I doing? and 3.18 The hotel receptionist.

Drama, then, can help considerably by ensuring that language is used in an appropriate context, to matter how «fantastic» this context may seem.

We realize, of course, that like all other activities in the classroom, drama activities cannot be «real» simply because they are subject to the constraints the classroom imposes. Unlike more familiar activities, however, which always remain external to the student because imposed from without (and largely for the convenience of the teacher, not the student), these techniques draw upon precisely those internal resources which are essential for out-of-class use of the language.

REFERENCES

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