



Empowering Students to Write Language Learning Materials

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Abstract

The article focuses on the process of writing the language learning materials created as part of the Glottodrama European project in which EuroEd Foundation participated. Glottodrama is a very flexible methodology which combines drama as well as foreign language learning techniques and requires the presence of two teachers (drama and language) in order to achieve real communication situations in the classroom. The target group was a group of international students studying at the School of Medicine in Iasi and learning Romanian as a foreign language. Video films were used as useful tools of reflection, error correction and stimulus for materials writing. Students were actively engaged in the learning process and were encouraged to improvise and reflect on their own personal contributions and knowledge.

The materials and texts (Teaching Units) used during the course were first written by the two teachers, who took into consideration the students' field of interest (medicine), linguistic difficulty and attractiveness of the story. Once the initial teaching unit was launched in class the students were encouraged to improve it, which resulted in a new version of the teaching unit: the Satellite Teaching Unit. A Satellite Teaching Unit is based on the initial unit/ the initial plan devised by teachers, it is what happens with the teaching unit in class when teachers interact with students. It is the plan in action carried out by students and teachers and changed in order to achieve the objectives according to the real situation in class. The project fosters student empowerment in the learning process as it provides each student with a learning experience that meets their personal needs. Contributing to the texts empowers students to demonstrate and share knowledge, deepening their own understanding. Students are given a voice in the learning environment, they are able to build up knowledge by working together with their teachers. This creates a powerful learning community that ensures the success of the project.

One powerful method empowering students to contribute to writing learning materials is promoted by the Glottodrama project [6], implemented by EuroEd Foundation Iasi, Romania. The method uses IT elements: video films and the internet. The former is used as a means of reflection with a view to correcting and improving while the latter becomes a resource for language practice.

1. The Glottodrama method and its principles

The Glottodrama method is based on several drama and language principles which stir students' interest and create a need in the students to ask for more information and thus contribute to language materials. According to Glottodrama principles, learning a foreign language is "learning by doing": knowing how to do something is not limited to its rules and it is acquired through intense practice. The pleasure of "learning by doing" is an incentive towards increasing students' motivation and leads to creativity and independence in communication [4]. The method involves students in an active and oral intensive use of codes by removing emotional filters from learning through processes of imitation, creative representations of target linguistic behaviors and spontaneous use of L2 [4]. The common classroom is turned into a theatre company which shares a common goal (project work) and is closely bound by intense emotional personal exchanges and by a strong feeling of belonging. The method has a strong humanistic orientation focusing on students [3], who are perceived as whole persons with physical, emotional, affective, social cognitive features [5]. The Glottodrama physical, emotional and intellectual activities enhance students' motivation by engaging them body and mind in learning experiences [1].



2. Target group

The method was applied to foreign students from several countries studying at the School of Medicine in Iasi, Romania, all with a low level of Romanian. They were interested in having the basic kit (vocabulary/ structures) in everyday Romanian as well as in medicine as exchange students but also as doctors in their relationships with patients [2].

3. Language course

The 90-hour Glottodrama language course gradually developed both linguistic and acting skills by involving students in a wide range of activities (dramatization, role-play, story-telling, monologues, and improvisation). The language course was delivered by two teachers (drama and language). The students were familiarized with the drama techniques and the Glottodrama method (free experimentation, link between gesture and word or socializing activities). Romanian was gradually introduced by means of short funny texts based on a doctor-patient dialogue, first presented by the two teachers. The topics of the course (Parts of the body, Clinical chart, Diseases, Symptoms, Medical instruments etc.), vocabulary and grammar structures were carefully selected considering students' needs. All sessions were equally demanding as students found themselves involved in both acting and contributing to the writing of the learning materials [2].

The classroom had a stage (a slightly raised platform), which was used for staging activities. All performances were filmed.

4. Teaching units

The method was applied to foreign students from several countries studying at the School of Medicine in Iasi, Romania, all with a low level of Romanian. They were interested in having the basic kit (vocabulary/ structures) in everyday Romanian as well as in medicine as exchange students but also as doctors in their relationships with patients [2]. The course was divided into teaching units. Each teaching unit was carefully designed by the two teachers and then its activities were implemented and later developed with the students. The initial version reflected the main strands to be followed.

Example of a teaching unit [6]:

Communicative Typology: Micro-text; Macro-text; Textual input; Situational input

Activity title: Accidents and emergencies

Level CEFR: A1; A2

Target languages Skills: Oral Comprehension, Written Comprehension, Oral Production, Written Production, Interaction

Linguistic functions: asking/ answering questions, asking about details related to accidents

Main grammatical structures: prepositions

Vocabulary and phraseology: vocabulary related to describing accidents and emergencies

Activity description:

- Introduction to the lesson topic and warm-up activities:

Mime: Teachers ask students to stand up and imitate their movements.

Same line, different place: Teachers divide students into pairs (student A and B), each student being allocated a line: How did it happen?/ I was playing football. The pairs are asked to create a scene in which the two characters use only these two lines. Students perform for the other students.

Two lines: Teachers ask students to exchange two lines in a whisper; student A: Good afternoon. What's the matter? Student B: I have a pain in my leg. Then they walk away from each other repeating the two lines again, this time raising their voices; they repeat this several times until they yell at each other at the top of their voices and they get to the other sides of the room. Once they reach this point they start getting closer to each other lowering their voices until they come back to their initial places.

- Performance: language in action

The drama teacher and language teacher act out the dialogue in front of the group. Then they elicit from students the main details of the dialogue based on who/ what/ where/ when/ why, in order to help students get an idea of what the dialogue is about.

Students get into small groups, read and discuss the dialogue monitored by the tutors who walk around and provide students with the necessary help (correct pronunciation/ understanding the text). Direct translation of words is not encouraged (paraphrase and mime are used instead).

- The initial dialogue:

Patient: Good afternoon.

Doctor: Good afternoon. What's the matter?

Patient: I have a pain in my leg.

Doctor: How long have you had this pain? How did it happen?



Patient: An accident. I was playing football. It is a bit swollen.

Doctor: Yes, it is. You have sprained your ankle. You need to have your ankle x-rayed.

Patient: Ok.

Once students are familiarized with the dialogue, they are asked to act it out in pairs and then in front of the group. Their performances are recorded.

- Language and grammar corner: reflection on vocabulary/ grammatical structures:

At this stage students are encouraged to ask for grammar and vocabulary explanations. The teachers' role is to explain each sentence, vocabulary and grammatical aspects if asked.

Students do vocabulary exercises (matching pictures to words, selecting vocabulary needed in a communicative situation, filling in) and grammar exercises (making up their own sentences using the prepositions, filling in sentences with the right prepositions in a text, personalizing the information in a text).

Students check out the following site. <http://www.crucearosi.ro/activitati/prim-ajutor/sfaturi-de-prim-ajutor.html> and choose two cases/ their first aid measures and present them to their colleagues.

- Actor Studio: reflection

Students watch the videos and reflect on their acting and language performance (voice, nonverbal ways of communication, acting). Teachers encourage students to do the exercises which help them relax mentally and physically, reduce inhibitions or correct certain signalled mistakes (pronunciation, posture, gesture etc.) or do vocal drills.

- Back to performance

After the reflection stage students get in pairs and repeat the dialogue making any adjustments they think necessary. Then they act it out in front of the group, who listens to each pair's version, chooses the best one and rewrites the dialogue.

5. The Satellite Teaching Unit

Once the initial teaching unit is launched in the class the students are encouraged to improve it, which results in a new version of the teaching unit: the Satellite Teaching Unit. The result is what happens with the teaching unit in class when teachers interact with students. It is the plan in action carried out by students and teachers and changed in order to achieve the objectives according to the real situation in class. The initial dialogue stirs students' interest and creates a need to study the corresponding vocabulary and grammar structures in order to master them. The actor's studio session (students' comments on videos) is part of the language learning process. The use of a video camera and of devices for reproducing class recordings (DVD unit, video-projector or TV set) is a specific feature of the Glottodrama language course.

Here are several issues raised during the reflection sessions after watching the videos [2]:

- The video films raised students' awareness about their strong and weak points in terms of their language learning. The films taught them where to focus and what to work on. The reflection stages resulted in suitable solutions: "I realized that these activities helped us with language learning. Once we spotted our mistakes we worked on them and we soon noticed the difference in our performance".
- The role of mistakes: "Mistakes are useful steps in learning a language".
- Pronunciation problems were highlighted and vocal drills and breathing exercises helped students work on their voices. "I learnt how important breathing is in learning a language. Whenever I find Romanian difficult to speak I do some breathing exercises... Such exercises relax me so I can get my mouth round Romanian words more easily".
- Actor Studio engaged students in interesting discussions about cultural competence and its role in communication; cultural differences and similarities were also highlighted (gestures, eye contact, space etc.).
- As far as improvisation was concerned students thought this helped their creativity and independence as language learners. It taught them how to deal with uncertainty: "Improvisation is a useful skill. In real you don't plan what you're going to say beforehand. You have to react on the spot and spontaneously create."
- Body language in communication was another point: "I often use gestures when I speak with Romanians because I can't speak Romanian very well".
- There were also comments on the students' learning process and the way drama techniques helped them: I felt that all drama rehearsals helped me retain the language in an easy way; I felt comfortable although sometimes I spent a lot on a line. Drama gave another meaning to repetition."

In The Satellite Teaching Unit students are encouraged to be original and imaginative and produce their own dialogue. The following creative writing tasks helped them experiment with language:

- Students write a story about an interesting patient.
- Students act out the same dialogue expressing a certain feeling (annoyed/ happy; the other students are supposed to guess the feeling alluded to).
- Students act the dialogue: the doctor uses language/ the patient mimes his part.
- Students mime the dialogue in front of their colleagues and another student explains what is going on.
- Students shorten/extend the dialogue by adding new lines - improvisation is encouraged.

Students' version:

Patient: Good afternoon.

Doctor: Good afternoon. What's the matter?

Patient: I have a pain in my leg.

Doctor: How long have you had this pain? How did it happen?

Patient: An accident. I was playing football. It is a bit swollen.

Doctor: Yes, it is. You have sprained your ankle. You need to have your ankle x-rayed.

Patient: Ok.

Doctor: Ok, you have sprained only your ankle. Here are some drops for your eyes as well.

Patient: Doctor, my problem is my leg, not my eyes.

Doctor: I know but you should have paid more attention to the way you were running on the football pitch.

6. Conclusions

Glottodrama project facilitates student empowerment in the learning process in keeping with personal needs. Contributing to the texts enables students to demonstrate and share knowledge, deepening their own understanding. Students are given a voice in the learning environment, they are able to build up knowledge by working together with their teachers. This creates a powerful learning community.

Alternative assessment can be introduced as students value peer assessment as a way of consolidating their language knowledge; having students check each other's writing also improves their cooperation and collaboration within the group

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