



French Amateur Theater “KOMSA” and Learning Languages (French as a Foreign Language)

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Abstract

The article discusses the field of non-formal education for adults and conveys the idea of amateur theater as a means of personal development aimed at acquiring highly sought-after social skills as well as language skills in a foreign language, in our case, French. The application of theater-based activities has a long tradition in education overall and particularly in developing language skills. Dramatic pedagogy, applied theater, experiential learning, and process theater are just a few of the many theater-related methods that target a wide range of aptitudes and skills; they have been successfully applied at various levels of education and have not lost their relevance in the face of the challenges of the 21st century.

The article presents a case study of a French amateur theater group in Lithuania. The experience-based research explores the impact of performing on stage on the development of personal traits and social skills in adults, especially focusing on their L2 skills. We will also find instances that trigger or encourage an increase in motivation to learn a foreign language. The authors' conclusions are based on the analysis of data collected through an online survey regarding the personal opinions and reflections of participants in amateur theater: the data covers their attitudes and ideas based on their theatrical/acting experiences. The survey questions addressed the evolution of participants' socially relevant skills, such as collaboration, active listening, and critical thinking, as well as the development of their communicative skills, particularly in using French, which is L2 for most respondents. The author concludes with a summary of the results and suggestions for community-based learning methods based on theater.

Keywords: *theater, motivation, French, learning, memory*

Introduction

The research focuses on the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language (FLE) in Lithuania. French is not the most popular living language taught in Europe and we are therefore interested in the reasons and motives of learners for studying this language. Our study focuses on observations and reflections related to non-formal education. Our goal is to answer the questions: „What are the reasons and motivations for learning a modern language? What is the importance of the active approach, which aims to make the learner an actor of the training they follow, and what is the place of theatrical activities in such an approach? How does theater contribute to personal development, particularly by facilitating the improvement of language skills?”

We base our psychological or psychoeducological theories from the works of R. Atkinson, D. Beresnevičienė, G. Butkienė, Z. Dörnyei, B. Duffeu, H. Ebbinghaus, N. Gage, R. C. Gardner, T. Hatch, L. Jovaiša, P. Juceviciene, A. Kepalaitė, G. Petty, R. Pignarre, F. Rheinberg, R. M. Shiffrin, C. Tavis, and others, as well as on statistical data from a questionnaire distributed to members of the French theater “KOMSA” in Lithuania. We apply the descriptive, comparative and statistical research.

Learning Today

The evolution of new technologies, the increase in the quantity and speed of information, globalization, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have transformed our planet and people in recent times.



On the one hand, we become very addicted to information, on the other hand, we often get lost in the jungle of information and media. Besides, there is the need to learn and use several languages in new conditions: climate change, space conquest, reduction of inequalities, extremism and other. While the Internet and artificial intelligence are disrupting exchanges between people and everything around us, men and women must still invent a way of living in harmony among themselves and in their environment.

Antoine de Sainte-Exupery said: "The true teaching is not to speak to you, but to lead you" ("Citadelle", 1948). John Robert Anderson's categorization (Anderson, 2000) provides us with 3 basic stages: cognitive, associative, autonomous. At the beginning, when new information is presented to the learner, he consciously stores new knowledge of a static order (Tréville, Duquette, 1996). This is the "declarative and cognitive knowledge" (*ibid.*, 54) that we rely on to remember facts, word definitions, and grammar rules. Then, the learner gradually assimilates the rules for using knowledge to carry out complex tasks. In this stage, we use procedural and associative knowledge.

Anderson's classification comes from Benjamin Bloom's theory which illustrates learning as the intellectual abilities of individuals placed in different levels and in precise order (Grandmangin, 2006, 30-31). According to Bloom our memory and understanding are sought first for learning in order to then move to the higher level, "middle intellectual abilities", where the learner can analyze and apply, e.g., language facts which lead to synthesis and creation, that is, to expression.

Motivation

To learn, you certainly need to be motivated. The learning of adults based on their experience and skills while the working with children is based on a school curriculum. Adults know why they are learning and children often do not, especially if we talk about FLE. However, in both cases, we must choose methods that arouse or give rise to motivation. This term, which began to be widely used in education from the middle of the last century (Tavris *et al.* 1999: 22), comes from the Latin verb "movere" which means 'to move'. Motivation is closely linked to the concept of growth which explains an individual's action, that is, a motivated person wants to evolve and has goals they want to achieve. This is the factor of the affective disposition to learn.

We want and can learn any language if we are motivated. Without motivation, no cognitive process, which requires reflection, memorization, understanding and concentration, is possible. The didacticians Grazina Butkiene and Aldona Kepalaite place motivation alongside the agitation or excitement of human behavior linked to the individual psyche (*transl.*, Butkienė, Kepaitė, 1996); Nathaniel Gage and David Berliner explain it as '[...] needs, interests, values, attitudes, aspirations and inclinations' (*transl.*, Gage, Berliner, 1994: 263); Zoltan Dornyei sees it as a process causing '[...] a great force that stimulates human activity until our goal is achieved, even when another force tries to eliminate it' (*transl.*, Dornyei, 1998: 121). It is an inner power that guides us, encourages and helps us to go to the end of the path. If the learner is not really motivated, he gives up and eventually loses his learning battle.

Learners must have the answer to the question 'Why do I want to learn, or even win' because motivation is associated with achieving objectives: 'Motivation therefore constitutes a generic term which characterizes the nature of the force which produces a behavior or an action' (Masson, 2011: 19). It is the energy that makes us want to succeed: 'We can also situate motivation as an intention to do which is linked to activation' (Lemoine, 2008: 403). The role of the teacher is not only to transmit knowledge to students but it is also to accompany or support them in their intention to win. Geoff Petty distinguished seven principles of success: 1) believe in the importance of learning; 2) have confidence in your own strengths; 3) view the learning process as a personal challenge; 4) communicate; 5) rely on the teacher's help to structure and understand; 6) meet deadlines; 7) learn more about skills or competencies and less about content, that is, knowing and being able to employ theoretical knowledge in daily life and practice (Petty, 2009). We employed these principles of success in reflecting on the questions in our questionnaire which we will discuss below.

As already said above, modern learning is moving towards the motivation of learners and their active participation. This was accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, when teachers had some difficulty working remotely with learners, who were hiding behind their computers with cameras or microphones turned off. Another factor, which was aggravated following the health crisis of 2020-



2021, is the reduction in learners' ability to memorize and reproduce information. This was caused by the learner's decreased attention, concentration, regularity, repetition and emotions.

All these gaps can be filled through drama activities, e.g., role-playing, which has all the necessary components to solve the mentioned problems. Theater requires to learn and know how to control our attention, to develop our imagination and to reproduce a text or emotions. Scientific research has demonstrated the improvement of intellectual abilities in learners thanks to the memorization of meaning via generalized and systematized associations (Jacikevičius, 1970). This is how repetition becomes more productive and effective when learning a foreign language. Diversified and systematized cognitive links make it possible to strengthen memorization, therefore making it better, stronger and faster. For Robert Pignarre (1991) and Bernard Dufeu (1996), theatrical activities allow the learner to discover and feel more easily the rhythm, intonation, pronunciation, melody, structure, culture of a new language by expressing oneself with one's own voice and body, directed and guided by the andragogue or pedagogue. In our case, the activities of the French-speaking Lithuanian amateur theater "KOMSA" are directed by Karolina Masiulis, professional actress.

Theater "KOMSA"

The Lithuanian French amateur theater troupe currently numbers 13 people. The theater "KOMSA" was created in 2003 on the initiative of the Association Lituanie-France (https://www.facebook.com/Association.Lituanie.France/about_details?locale=lt_LT) and is directed by Karolina Masiulis who played for several years in France and participated in the work of a troupe of students from Vilnius University who also performed plays in French between 1998 and 2002. The Komsa troupe has already put on more than ten shows. The first show was called "Madame KA" and the last one is "*Impossible, ce n'est pas français*" (Impossible, it's not French). See more on: https://www.facebook.com/TheatreClef/?locale=lt_LT

Before starting to play or interpret roles and texts, actors must analyze and reflect on their characters as well as the content and importance of their words. The next step is discussion between the members of the troupe in order better understand their characters and the text. This allows participants to begin to build connections between their characters. The actors then come out on stage for improvisations, at first without words, then using their own words and finally memorizing the words of the play.

Mémorisation

Our memory is not only an important prerequisite for intelligence but it is also one of the most significant functions of our selective psychic functioning. Scientists found that after two weeks of lessons, adults retained only 5% of what they heard, 10% – of what they read, 20% – of what they heard or saw. This percentage would increase to 50% if the new information was practiced in discussion groups, to 75% – if learners used it at work, and to 90% – if others were taught (Danaitis, Usovaitė, 2010).

The memory model contains three basic components, according to Atkinson R. and Shiffrin R. M. (1968). This model is useful to us because of the meaningful representation of repetition appearing in the control process in the form of recovery. This is connected first of all to short-term memory and then to long-term memory. However, the informative relationship between the two types of memory is not strong or stable. What we keep in long-term memory can easily return to its earliest stage of memorization. On the other hand, repetition, based on reflection, analysis and the search for associative links, can serve us in the process of long-term memorization.

Scientific research has demonstrated the improvement of intellectual abilities in learners thanks to the memorization of meaning via generalized and systematized associations (Jacikevičius, 1970). These associations reflect the most important cognitive phenomena and relationships that are part of procedural memory which is a long-term memory. By searching for relationships between meaning, sound or visual representation, personal or common experience, we create links, systems or logical linguistic groups. This is how repetition becomes more productive and effective when learning a foreign language. Diversified and systematized cognitive links make it possible to strengthen memorization, therefore making it better, stronger and faster.



The factor of speed, even time, is very important for memorization. Scientists have noted the fact that the time between perception and reaction, the question heard and the answer spoken, the explanation and understanding should not exceed 0.5 seconds (*ibid.*). Otherwise associative memorization becomes abusive and ineffective. Experiences between humans and animals demonstrate this – both lose interest in the learning process. Many specialists in formal and non-formal education agree with the point of view recalling that the learning process requires the distinction of these criteria: a) need for knowledge, b) autonomy, c) experience, d) ability to learn, e) orientation, and f) motivation (Danaitis, Usovaitė, 2010).

Survey Results

We interviewed twelve *Komsa* members online. The survey questions were written in English and French. The amateur actors of the “*Komsa*” troupe are very heterogeneous in terms of their age and their professions. The actor’s ages range from 10 to 65. The professions include teachers, lawyers, IT specialists, managers and employees, actors, translators and others. They all share the passion for theater and the French language. Most of the actors are not of French origin and French is a foreign language for them. In this research, we wanted to know the criteria(s) or the reason(s) why the members of this troupe perform theater in French.

We reflected on the survey questions based on seven principles for success, developed by Petty (see above). Our investigation was divided into four main areas. The first covered personal information: age, profession, the level of French and other languages. The second section illustrated the origin of interest in the “*Komsa*” theater and the respondent’s attitude. Here are those questions: “Why did you join *Komsa*?”, “In short, how do you rate your *Komsa* experience?”, “Why did you like or dislike your *Komsa* experience?”, “Which of the positive impressions are closest to yours?”, “Which negative impressions are true about your *Komsa* experience?”. The third part of questions aimed at the analysis of the participation in *Komsa* activities and self-development: “Which character features do you think are most useful in *Komsa*?”, “Within your *Komsa* experience, which character features (see the list above) did you find most challenging to acquire or sustain?”, “Within your *Komsa* experience, which character features (see the list above) did you find most challenging to acquire or sustain?”, “Based on your *Komsa* experience, how important are the following social skills?”, “Do you feel you have developed/improved any social skills through your *Komsa* experience?”, “Which social skills do you think you improved or acquired in *Komsa*?”. The last fourth section was aimed at the respondent’s language skills. The responses in this area can be analysed in terms of Petty’s seven principles of success. We will come back to it after going through the answers to the questions in the second and third parts of our questionnaire.

Regarding firstly the origin, the reason, the impressions of the responders linked to the “*Komsa*” troop, we see that most of those questioned answered that the main reason is the love for theater (about [~] 85 %) and the desire to use or improve French (~65%). In third place is the answer “I was invited/asked by a friend” – about forty percent responses. The answer “I wanted to learn new things” received about 30 percent of votes. Surprisingly, just 14 percent of the respondents joined the theatre in search of popularity or in search of new challenges. Moreover, the vast majority of respondents (~75%) gave the maximum score - ten out of ten - the their experience in “*Komsa*”.

Regarding the overall “*Komsa*” experiences, here are some of the respondents’ remarks and suggestions: (I joined) “because it makes me feel younger, because it’s fun”, “I liked it because of ability to realize myself in theatre and other creative fields and very warm ambience and people”, “I liked because it was a creative environment where people from different cultures and generations could gather and create something fun/expressive”, “I liked it because I could improve my French language through the activity (Theatre) I was dreaming since childhood but didn’t choose it as my initial profession. It was great opportunity to be among people in love with theatre and French language. Great time spent and challenge accepted”. As we see, the human side and creativity come through these reactions.

As for the final result, answering the question “Which of the positive impressions are closest to yours”, the most frequent answers were “I liked to feel part of theatre” and “I made new friends”, seventy-five and sixty percent respectively. Here it must also be said that the people questioned too about their negative experience with the question “Which negative impressions are true about your



'Komsa' experience". We can therefore conclude that the general impression following participation in "Komsa" rehearsals or shows as well and very positive.

We will see below if this optimistic tone remains in the third part of the questionnaire linked to the human aspect of life and learning. The answers in the third part of the questionnaire were very eloquent because they showed us the real reason and motivation of amateur actors in doing theater and learning French. Here is the first question in this section and the answers (*Nota bene* - similar results are found in the table in French presented after this table in English):

Which character features do you think are most useful in "Komsa" ?

8 responses

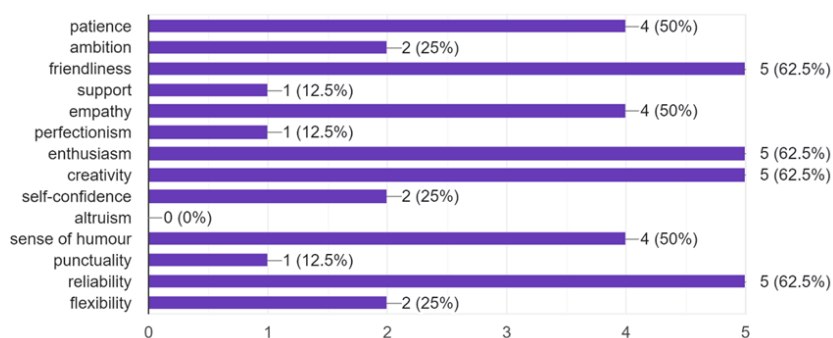


Table 1. Third section (in English)

Selon vous, quelles caractéristiques des personnages sont les plus utiles dans "Komsa"? Veuillez cocher au maximum cinq suggestions ou en ajouter d'autres



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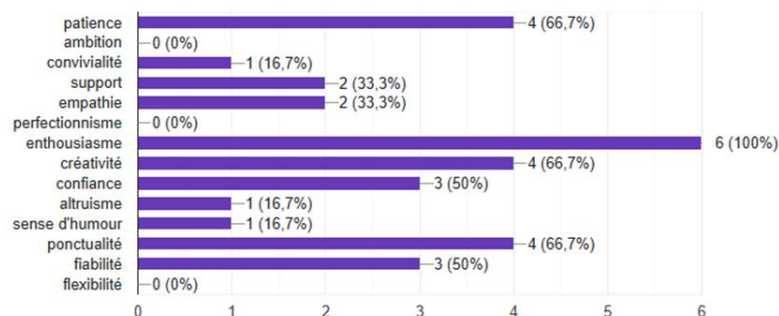


Table 2. Third section (in French)

As we can see, "Komsa" participants especially appreciate such personal features as enthusiasm, creativity, patience and reability (cf. Table 1 and 2). On the other hand, they pay less attention to human traits as perfectionisme and ambition (*ibid.*).

Regarding the difficulties linked to the acquisition of certain character features, the question "Within your 'Komsa' experience, which character features did you find most challenging to acquire or sustain?" received the following answers: "empathy, support in situations when my partners get frustrated; sense of humour, also self-directed humour helps in all situations; patience (willing to proceed much faster but trying understand other need more time to understand, prepare, discuss all possible variants; patience and flexibility becomes also critical in the last month finalizing new performance); flexibility required a lot of effort to maintain in order to adapt to the different availabilities of the actors; some actors were constantly available and others almost never, it was difficult to create the show while seeing gaps forming in the logic of evolution, due to the lack of rehearsals of certain actors; patience, enthusiasm, reliability, the planning was not quite set, so it could often be that not the whole troupe was present; collaboration, because of different vision of team members to the final



result”, etc. We can notice that respondents indicated the human traits that do not belong to the purely professional domain, such as empathy, patience or a sense of humor

The human aspect, which was discussed above, is directly linked to social skills. This is why this aspect was also introduced in the third section of the survey. Now let’s look at the most important social skills for “Komsa” troop members (we can find almost the same results in the table in French, cf. above):

Based on your "Komsa" experience, how important are the following social skills?

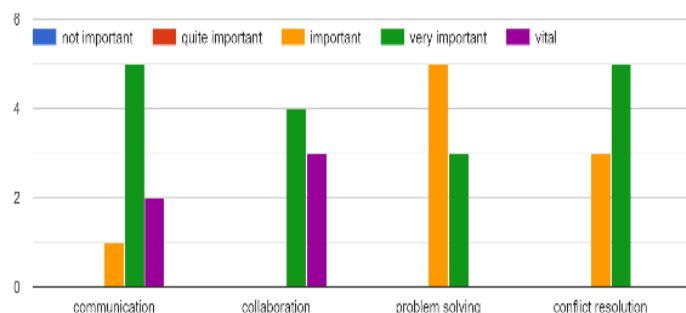


Table 3. Third section (in English) [*poursuit*]

D'après votre expérience à "Komsa", quelle est l'importance des compétences sociales suivantes ?

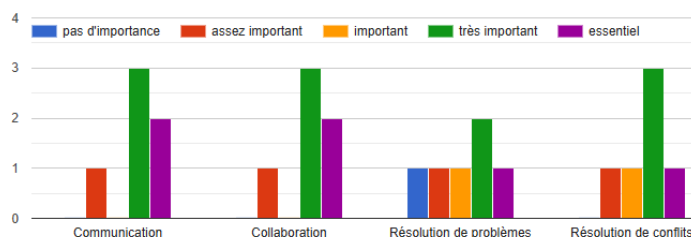


Table 4. Third section (in French) [*poursuit*]

We see that “Komsa” actors are most concerned with communication, collaboration and problem solving. This is linked to the second section of our survey, focused on the origin and reason of amateur troupe members for doing theater in French where most stressed the importance of belonging to a social group and finding new friends (see above). Note that almost everyone answered positively to the question whether their social skills were developed thanks to their experience at Komsa – eighty-five percent. The respondents highlighted the following social skills: active listening, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, patience and ability to connect with people from various contexts. This development and enhancement of social skills are becoming most important in the context of reduced real-life contacts.

As said above, the responses to the fourth part of the survey can well illustrate whether the participants of the Komsa troop were able to achieve seven success criteria. This part of the survey particularly concerns us because it is linked to learning French. Here are those questions and the answers:



How would you describe your relation with French?

8 responses

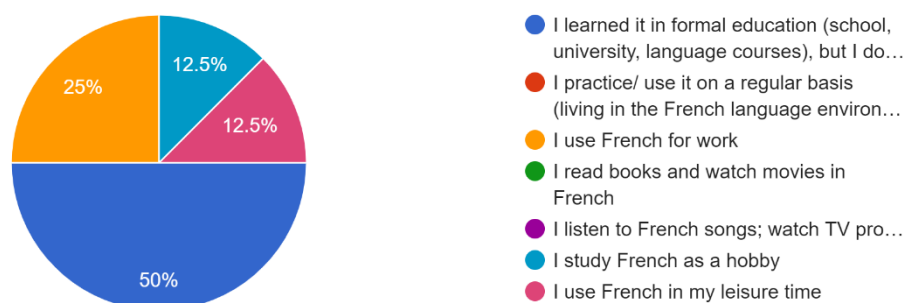


Table 5. Fourth section (in English)

Comment décririez-vous votre relation avec le français ? Veuillez cocher l'option qui décrit le mieux votre situation



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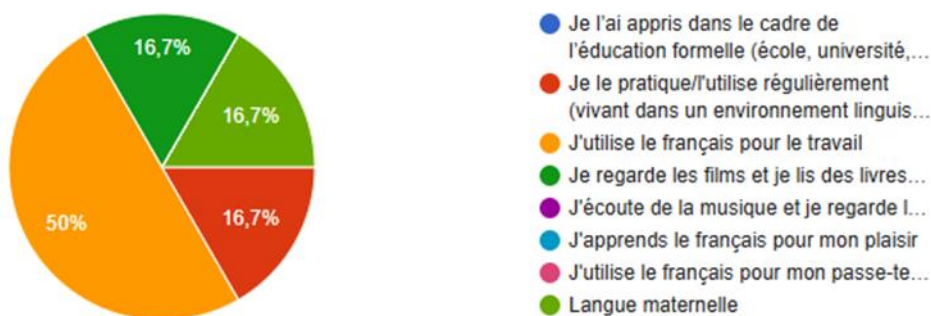


Table 6. Fourth section (in French)

As we can see, half of the survey participants learned French at school or university (50%) and the other part (~40%) uses it at work. There are also those who speak French for leisure (~13%) either listening to music or watching films in French (~17%).

Regarding progress in French following activities in “Komsa”, five percent see no progress, fifteen percent notice some progress, thirty-five percent assess their progress as high or quite high and ten percent – great progress. As for possible ways to improve their French, the majority find that they first should enrich their vocabulary (~55%), speak more or make more effort to understand (~40%), improve pronunciation and learn fixed expressions (~35%). The responses show that reading texts (~60%), communicating or working with native speakers (~50%), pronunciation exercises (~45%), memorization exercises (~30%) and lively discussions (~20%) can help or facilitate progress in French. On the other hand, in answering the question “Which language related difficulties did you struggle with”, 80 percent of the respondent name “improvisation” as the biggest difficulty. Other difficulties include inability to react spontaneously during rehearsals or performances (~40%), also memorizing the text (~35%). There were several respondents who admitted not being able to follow more fluent partners, or getting by other participants’ language errors (~12%).

Finally, here are the respondents suggestions concerning possible activities in a French-speaking theatrical context: “Yes, it is engaging and useful community based learning”, “Yes, because it is live communication encouraging to improve speaking skills even they are not very good”, “Playing in a foreign language means automatically entering the heart of the culture of that country,



understanding many things about it”, “Yes, because it is interesting way of learning through live communication”, “Yes, I would recommend theatre activities as a way of learning a language as one inevitably gets practice in different ways”, “Yes, of course, because theater is above all words well performed”.

Conclusions

Modern teaching/learning is increasingly linked to the need to speak several languages in multilingual and multicultural Europe. As said above, adult people have a need to move towards the motivation of learners and their active participation, especially in the teaching of second foreign languages L2, including French. Language education should incorporate not only the development of language skills, but also such features as creativity, empathy, respect, positive attitude, communicability.

The main trends in modern education are related to active teaching/learning and the policy of lifelong learning. Theatrical activities, including those of the amateur troupe “Komsa”, are part of lifelong training because the actors of this theater are of different ages. This theater is also an example of the combination of a playful activity, motivation and focusing or learning in a foreign language L2, in our case French. Drama activities can only be used by a motivated and competent teacher as additional teaching material. Theatrical activities, employed during the educational process, are conceived not only as never-before-explored and completely innovative things but also as a certain improvement of traditional techniques. These methods also make the learning moment more attractive and interactive by developing learners' personal and professional skills.

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