



English Tales and Theatre for Disadvantaged Learners

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Abstract

*This paper will illustrate, in brief, how the stories contained in a Victorian novel [Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*] and a Shakespearian tragedy [*Romeo and Juliet*] were successfully exploited, through storytelling, singing and process drama², to improve the English-language [L2/L3³] competence/ performance of a multi-ethnic, 5th-year primary-school class, including two special-needs pupils, in a disadvantaged area of Rome, using a blend of traditional (hardcopy books and live storytelling/reading) and ICT-based methods (e-book, MP3s, DEVs, YouTube) in a low-pressure, learner-centred environment favourable to inter-ethnic and overall social integration. The two main and the single epilogue module led the pupils through a series of activities from listening to process-dramatization. The two main stories, different in setting and style, dealt mainly with love and hate, crime, justice and injustice, moral dyads that the children had no difficulty in appreciating and using to create their own process dramas.*

As all human beings of all ages and cultural-linguistic backgrounds love stories and enjoy entering the realm of fiction and make-believe, it made sense to exploit my learners' natural curiosity and enjoyment to improve⁴ my pupils' English.

Although storytelling and dramatization are often believed best suited to small children, they work with learners of all ages, also because everyone wants to know "what happens next". When it comes to learning a second language, storytelling is a valuable tool -especially with learners who find it hard to speak or perform before others.- when seeking to enhance receptive (listening, reading, watching) and productive (retelling, predicting, elaborating) performance.

As languages, besides grammar, vocabulary and phonology, also involve mimicry, gesture and body movement L2 learning can be boosted by recourse to kinaesthetic memory. Dramatization is particularly fruitful with multi-sensory learners who find it easier to learn by associating words, concepts and movement.

Another important, general-educational advantage of storytelling and of dramatization, in particular, is the self-confidence learners acquire. Process drama, unlike school plays, provides an unpressurised environment where learners may use language while developing some of the interactive, social skills they need for the rest of their lives.

Introduction

As all human beings love stories, music and the thrill of entering the realm of fiction and make-believe, it made perfect sense to exploit storytelling, song and process drama to respond to the natural curiosity and desire for enjoyment of my 11/12-year-old, primary-school pupils, to teach them English as a second (in some cases third, even fourth) language. As I had already experimented this mixed-method approach to improve their use of Italian (the L1 of the majority of the pupils, the L2/L3 of the immigrant children in the class) I was confident it would not fail with English either. Storytelling, singing and drama are often considered suitable for small children alone, but they work with learners of all ages, because almost everybody enjoys listening to/telling stories, singing with others and making believe.

When it comes to learning another language, acquiring competence in the receptive (listening, reading, watching) and productive (retelling, predicting, changing) skills, these three modes of expression are valuable tools, especially with learners who find it hard to express themselves in front of others.

As languages, besides grammar, vocabulary and phonology, also involve facial mimicry, gesture and body movement, L2 learning can be boosted immensely by exploiting kinaesthetic memory. I found that dramatization, especially process drama, catered especially for multi-sensory learners who find it easier to learn by associating language and movement.

Besides the benefits to language competence and performance, the use of listening, repetition, singing and acting out in class, most of the pupils benefited from a boost to their self-confidence. Process drama proved

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² This kind of dramatization permits teachers and learners to enter an imaginary world where they can address challenging issues by acting out scenes they create jointly availing of either fact or fiction. In this case the pupils and the teacher acted out the themes of love and hatred, justice-injustice inspired by *Oliver Twist* and *Romeo and Juliet*, because another feature of this kind of dramatization is that the teacher takes part in the drama, which, unlike the classical school play is not performed before an audience.

³ For some of the pupils their native language was not Italian, which made Italian their L2, English their L3.

⁴ They had been studying English from nursery-school on.



particularly advantageous in this sense because, unlike traditional school plays, which can produce paralysing stage-fright, acting took place in class in the presence of the class and teacher alone, a safe unpressurised environment where everyone was allowed to use what they learnt while developing some interactive, social skills they needed for life.

For this particular project, I designed two main modules, one based on Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, the other on a Shakespearian tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, to which I added an epilogue module focused on free-topic process drama, for a multi-ethnic, 5th-year primary-school class, including two special-needs pupils, in a disadvantaged area of Rome, availing of a blend of traditional methods (hardcopy books, live storytelling/reading by the teacher) and ICT devices and materials (e-books, MP3s, DVDs, YouTube) in an environment favourable to inter-ethnic and overall social integration. Continuity between the two modules was created because, the stories, though different in setting and style, dealt with love and hate, crime and punishment, justice and injustice, moral dyads none of the children had any difficulty responding to. The language and educational skills acquired in the first two modules were consolidated in the epilogue which focused on free-topic storytelling and process-drama improvisation. All the modules departed from narration to arrive at dramatization. In the case of the *Oliver Twist* module, the songs chosen by the pupils from the film *Oliver!* were sung not only during the specific module, but became the signature tunes of the entire project.

1. The context

1.1 The school

The project was carried out in a state primary school, on the north-eastern outskirts of Rome, a depressed, mixed autarchic-immigrant-population area. Many of the inhabitants may be considered materially, socially and educationally underprivileged. This school, with the associated nursery and middle schools has always made a special effort to provide quality education to the residents of the area and encouraged projects like the ones presented here despite the cuts in public spending introduced by the government's spending review. Fortunately, the equipment required for the project had been purchased and the project itself carried out before the clamp-down.

1.2 The class

The class was a fifth-year primary year consisting of 13 boys and 11 girls, of whom 21 native Italians and three whose parents hailed from Romania, the Ukraine and Bangladesh and whose first languages were Rumanian, Ukrainian and Bangladeshi. The class also included two special-needs pupils with physical disabilities and mild learning difficulties, supported by a classroom assistant. Every effort was made to create a non-pressure, collaborative atmosphere where material, social, cultural and religious differences proved to be an asset.

1.3 The class's language level

Most of the pupils had begun English at nursery school thanks to a project financed by the school where a group of outsourced native-speakers provided L2 tuition availing of a ludic approach. At primary school, the pupils continued English with their regular teacher so that in fifth year their level was between A1 and A2 of the European framework. The level of three pupils, for family reasons, was B2 and one child had near-native-speaker competence as her parents' second language was English. The special-needs pupils, whose disabilities were physical, had no serious learning problems. The project, with all this in mind, tailored its approach and contents to the class's needs using a learner-centred, work-in-progress approach where every effort was made to integrate the children's abilities and avail of the advanced-level pupils' competences to facilitate learning.

2. The Modules

The two main and epilogue modules were designed to occupy the entire school-calendar year and took two hours per week for a total of 40 hours to complete: *Oliver Twist* 17, *Romeo and Juliet* 17 hours; the remaining 6 were devoted to the epilogue.

2.1 Oliver Twist

This first step consisted in visiting YouTube sites⁵ featuring excerpts from the film and stages versions of the musical *Oliver!* to motivate the class, encourage prediction and allow the pupils to choose songs to learn and sing. They chose *Food, glorious food*, *Consider yourself* and *Who will buy this wonderful morning?* which they learnt, first accompanying the recording, then karaoke-style, and finally autonomously. These songs, once memorised, were used with great gusto to introduce and conclude each lesson.

The second step was storytelling which began with a reading of a simplified version of the story by the teacher during which the pupils grasped the overall gist, asked each other and the teacher questions and

⁵ See reference section.



provided answers. They then listened to a professional recording of the story following an illustrated e-book text projected on the IWB. This permitted the pupils to glean a more detailed account of the story, tell it in their own words, provide changes to the plot and make hypotheses about the main themes.

The next stage paved the way towards process drama, when the DVD, divided, for reasons of time, into four episodes was viewed, and scenes chosen by the pupils to act out and used to help them reach consensus regarding the main themes which for them were love, hatred, poverty, wealth, crime, punishment, justice. The scenes chosen were Oliver asking for more gruel and Fagin teaching the art of pickpocketing.

The final stage was process drama where each of the story's focal themes were dramatized with the teacher and the pupils as actors.

The module concluded with an in-class performance of the songs from *Oliver!* to which the pupils themselves invited the head teacher and other members of the staff and asked permission to screen the DVD for the whole school, which was granted

2.2 Romeo and Juliet

This module followed a similar pattern, though in this case no songs from *Romeo and Juliet* were available. This was compensated for by the class's continuing to sing the *Oliver* songs until the end of the year.

Here the storytelling phase was shorter while dramatization took the lion's share. Many scenes were chosen for emulation of which the sword fights, the suicide and the Capulet-Montague reconciliation scenes were the favourites.

The themes highlighted for process drama were love, hate, rivalry and peace-making.

2.3 The epilogue

This brief module was devoted to storytelling and process dramatization of two topics suggested and voted by the pupils themselves: bullying and aggression.

2.4 Grand finale

The class, as school-leavers, obtained permission to perform their songs and their favourite scenes for the whole school and their parents before leaving primary school for middle school.

3. The Outcome

The results were not only were the class's L2 competence and performance enhanced, (monitored by continual assessment) as hoped for, but the pupils' acquisition of social skills and the boost to their self-confidence attained levels beyond expectation. The fact that pupils, even the shyest, actually offered to perform, first for the head teacher, then for the school and parents, requires no further comment.

Conclusions

The bottom line is that children, like all humankind, love listening to and telling stories and also enjoy making believe and that when these natural inclinations are positively harnessed through stress-free dialogue supported by ITC devices and resources, they undoubtedly favour the L2 teaching/learning process. The same modalities, I believe, might be fruitfully applied most areas of education, including CLIL. When all comes to all, storytelling and process drama are the very stuff our perception of self, others and the world are made of, an on-going process which accompanies us from the cradle to the grave. Why do not take advantage of it in school?

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 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9ZoZhfd00A> [Food Glorious Food, with lyrics]
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Agm5Hc6p6u8> [the *Please Sir, I want some more!* scene]
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD8WqLi4Eew> [Who will buy this wonderful morning]
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YVAmZBGdXw> [You got to pick a pocket or two]
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVu22vEJDJY> [Puppet show of a Hip-Hop version of the story of Romeo and Juliet, American pronunciation]
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3N73mju_Pw [British Council cartoon version of the story of Romeo and Juliet, in modern dress, British English]
- [18] ICT and audio-visual devices availed of
- DVD projector and screen
 - IWB (interactive white board) with PC connection and access to YouTube