Using Drama Activities in Teaching English to Young Learners in China

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Abstract. With the English educational reform, Communicative Language Teaching plays a key role in language learning. It is more important that pupils start to learn a foreign language in a supportive and enjoyable context, so that they may develop positive attitudes about foreign language learning. This paper based on a designed activity which aims to develop their communication skills, and gain confidence, as well as to enrich experience and remember for it long afterwards.

Introduction

I am interested in introducing dramatizing activity as an extra dimension in teaching young learners in my context. The aim is to provide a practical introduction of drama in the classroom and to provide a starting point from which teachers can develop ideas of their own. In this article, I would like to design a short drama activity which provides simple ideas for teachers who have little or no previous experience in using dramas. Firstly, I will describe the activity which consists of three steps, in addition to the suggestions for extension. Secondly, I will characterize what kind of class in China the activity is for and why use this kind of drama activity. Thirdly, I am going to refer to the rationale on using drama with children and teaching languages to young learners, to discuss how the activity reflects principles in the literature on drama. Finally, the potential problems will be discussed.

Drama Activity

Task title: market place
Age range: ten to eleven.
Group size: group of 4
Time: 60 minutes
Aims: Language: to revise vocabulary, to practice shopping language.
Others: improvisation, taking on a role.

What to do:
This activity is designed for a class of 12 learners, who are at elementary level, aged 10 – 12 approximately. It provides children with the opportunity to work in pairs to develop simple improvisations on a shopping theme. The situation is simple and tightly structured to help children gain confidence in working in this way. The children learn to work as actors and also have the opportunity to respond as audience to each other’s work.

Step One: Warm-ups (15 minutes)

This warm-up activity helps the children to revise the vocabulary they have learned and aims to familiarize them with the different types of shops in a market place.
First, the teacher gives each child a copy of worksheet and reads through it. Ask them to match the product with its description and the related shop, and do question 2 in the similar way.
Then, the teacher gives (or lets them draw lot) each child a card of different products which are from 3 different kinds of shops. Ask them to try to describe their own products by using ‘I’m____, _____, and you can______.’
After that, the children move around and describe their products by using gestures and find other children who are products likely to be sold in the same shop. For example, one type could be something sold in the stationery shop like a pen or a ruler, another could be things which can be bought from the greengrocer, such as an orange or a banana.

Note, as they are moving around, the person who has got the card of banana should say ‘I’m yellow, long, and you can eat me’, with the actions like stretching the arms for ‘long’, peeling the banana and putting it into the mouth for ‘eat’. The teacher should demonstrate several examples first.

**Step Two: 15 minutes**

The objective of this activity is for each group to obtain the products on their shopping list.

Seat each group round a table, put the rest of the tables aside.

Give each group their shop name as they have grouped in step one and the product card, and a shopping list. Explain that they are going to act as shop assistants and customers in different shops.

Discuss possible actions when doing shopping, such as paying for the fruits and packing them. Talk about how the shop assistants might greet the customers, how the customers ask for the products and remind them of saying such natural daily expressions as ‘thank you’, ‘bye’, ‘see you’ etc.

Note, at this stage, there is no fixed sentence structure. The teacher suggests sample sentences by asking questions, students may have different answers, which could be all acceptable. The teacher could demonstrate one sample with a student to show the rest of the class. Then let the children think and discuss how they are going to perform later.

**Break Time: 15 minutes**

**Step Three: 30 minutes**

Get the children to stand the sign of their shop name on their table. Ask them to imagine that the area behind the table is now their shop, and the table is the bar of the shop. Remind them of what the shop assistants and customers might say to each other and appropriate actions. In order to save time, 2 children could be sent out from their group to obtain the first 2 items on the list from the other shops. They should go to the right shop and ask after greeting, ‘Have you got any…?’ or ‘Do you sell…?’ If they are in the right shop, the shop assistant will put the appropriate product into a bag and hand it over with the picture of that product as its receipt. When they have got the products, they can return to their table and the next 2 persons can go off in search of the other items. Tell the children to sit down when they have got all the products on the list.

Look for children who can play the role appropriately and speak confidently during the activity. Give them feedback afterwards. After the activity, the teacher could choose several pairs who performed well to demonstrate in front of the class. Ask the rest of the children to watch, to pick up the things they like about the performances and any interesting things. Point out such things as shop assistants helping customers choose the good product, or the customers asking for specific date of the food. If these do not occur in the role plays, then encourage the children to include them next time.

**Suggestion(s) for extension**

If more time is available and it seems appropriate, the teacher could redo the task in a more demanding way. For instance, specify the number of products a shop has for sale and the prices on the list, ask the children to include a conversation about these aspects by using ‘how many/much do you want?’, ‘how much does it cost?’… The children are expected to buy the things as cheaply as possible. The group which can buy the most products within the same amount of money will be the winner. Encourage them to include as much relevant dialogue as possible.
How to Fit the Activity into a Real Class in the Chinese Young Learner Context?

In China, English language teaching is not compulsory in the primary school. However, most of the parents expect their child to get new knowledge in advance, so they pay extra money to send their child to a private class at the weekend or during a holiday. The teachers there usually use such course book as *Cambridge English for children* or design their own. There is a flexible syllabus for running this kind of class and no formal exam is required. Generally, there are about 12 students in a class, and each lesson is one hour long including two sessions and a quarter break. Thus, the teacher could apply the activity flexibly according to the level of the children. For instance, she may only use step 1 to familiarize children with different products in different shops, she may also add some extra points in the next steps, like finding the cheapest product or finding the position of the shop, to extend the activity.

Drama provides a powerful and effective way of learning but many Chinese teachers lack the confidence to use it in their teaching. According to Brown (1993), if you have had little drama experience but are enthusiastic, it is important not to be ambitious initially. Begin slowly by choosing simple pieces from among the scenarios and improvisations. Therefore, the activity I described above is a short drama including simple ideas for teachers who have little or no previous experience in using drama.

Rationale for the Activity

The Value of Drama Activities

Drama reflects a variety of styles, such as movement, reading texts, adopting role, group play-making, mime, acting, and a host of inter-related activities (Readman & Lamont, 1994). The activity I have described can involve children in movement and taking roles. Phillips (1999) asserts that ‘Drama is not only about the product (the performance) but part of the process of language learning.’ Children are able to recycle and consolidate previously learnt language and to practice real life communication in English through this activity. In drama, children draw on their observations and experience of the real world in order to create a make-believe world (Fulford, et al. 1990). According to Fulford, et al (1990), drama can play an important part in the development of spoken language, as it allows children to use language in a wider range of social situations than would normally arise in the classroom. It provides a more structured way of extending learning through the world of the imagination. Moreover, many writers who have contributed to this collection know that drama is a powerful way of helping children express themselves and grow in confidence (Brown, 1993).

Why This Activity Suits Young Learners?

Sharpe (2001) points out that unless the young learner is motivated there really is not much point in trying to teach a foreign language. In the first step of this activity, a drama is played as a warm-up activity at the beginning of the class. It involves revising the vocabulary by using actions, describing the products and grouping words with movements. The children’s interests and moods to enjoy can be stimulated through the actions. It is much better than repetition of each word because children have a limited concentration span. Moreover, research into the types of categories used in early childhood has shown that grouping vocabulary is particularly significant for children and hence for their foreign language learning (Cameron, 2001). When the children are finding their group members, some of them may just show their gestures or facial expressions to others, some of them who feel confident may ask their partner questions like ‘what did you get?’ or ‘who are you?’ and then, the partner responds with actions. As Perry & Sinka (1995) believe, warm-ups can be silent or involve language and should demand concentration and effort.

In a task, learners are focused on the meaning of content rather than on form (Cameron, 2001). Thus, in step 2, the aim is that children are focused on meaning. For young learners, language becomes even more meaningful when it is linked with a situation in which they themselves play an
important role (Finocchiaro, 1964). This activity creates a real-life situation—shopping as a task with rearranged classroom furniture, children’s vivid actions and facial expressions. Children not only learn what to say but how to say it, where and when to say it. They may have observed adults paying bills, and shop assistants serving the customers, this can help considerably to ensure that language is used in an appropriate context. The process of role-taking is a natural one for anyone who is socialized within their community. Learners need to know what natives typically say in various situations. Sharpe (2001) also agrees that it is vital to know the broader social and cultural context in which native speaker-listeners ‘live’ the language. In addition, as Cameron (2001) maintains, children are social learners, in this activity, children are asked to work and discuss in groups, which also reflects this point.

Step 3 could build up children’s confidence. Primary foreign language teaching should give children confidence in language learning (Sharpe, 2001). Acting for audience can help to increase children’s confidence and self-esteem. However, Chinese students are too shy to perform in public. In order to encourage them, in this activity the teacher requires them to act at the same pace first, then selects several pairs who are more confident to perform in front of the class. Gradually, less confident children could perform on the stage as well. As the children are asked to comment on others’ performances, to a certain extent, it can be said that learning takes place either by participation or observation. Perry & Sinka (1995) also agree that it provides the learners with audiences and the opportunity for giving and receiving positive feedback on work presented. In addition, it is important to find opportunities to praise children for good behaviour (Read, 1998), and therefore important to ensure this happens in the feedback stage.

Potential Problems

Use of the Mother Tongue

It is inevitable that children will use their mother tongue to some extent during the activity. I agree with Careless (2002)’s opinion, at first, the teacher should try to promote the use of the target language by giving more language support to children, trying to use gestures instead, and asking themselves to monitor each other. However, using the mother tongue by pupils during the activity is a natural act. Teachers need to tolerate a certain amount of natural L1, for example, in this activity, if a child even cannot understand their partner’s gesture and description of the definition of ‘banana’, use L1 to explain may encourage him/her to continue the activity.

Lack of Training for the Teachers

In China, teachers at primary level are often given less training. Teaching children is always thought to be easy or straightforward, so that many teachers prefer teaching children through repetition. In fact, As Cameron (2001) maintains, ‘teaching languages to children needs all the skills of the good primary teacher in managing children and keeping them on task…’ The teacher of children needs to be highly skilled to reach into children’s worlds and needs to understand how children make sense of the world and how they learn. It is hoped that the primary teachers have more opportunities to be trained on teaching children.

Conclusion

It is important that pupils start to learn a foreign language in a supportive and enjoyable context, so that they may develop positive attitudes about foreign language learning. Through this activity children can not only develop their communication skills, and gain confidence, but can also enrich experience and remember for it long afterwards. Finally, it is an excellent way of developing interpersonal and communicational skills and providing highly motivating lessons.
References


