The Role of Drama Techniques in Freeing the Learned Language

Daria I. Ter-Minasova

Abstract

The final goal of learning a language is the ability to express oneself clearly and freely. A communicative approach with the focus on creative activities otherwise known as drama seems to meet the goal; yet, students are still limited by their texts. The work questions if creative tasks further the end of freeing the language, highlights what escapes teachers' attention and suggests ways to improve the situation. Drama is looked at from two perspectives: exploiting academic course book for dramatic purposes and applying a 'let's pretend' approach in creative tasks. To achieve the aim, Konstantin Stanislavsky's 'me in the given circumstances' and Michael Chekhov's 'improvisation' and 'the feel of the whole' are introduced, which means learning both from the book and from action. The study reveals the positive effect of implementing these techniques in the language classroom and proves that students not only use the language but acquire it.

Keywords: text acquisition, freeing the language, fluency, creative activities, drama techniques

Andrey Tarkovsky starts his film Mirror with the phrase *I can speak*. The question I pose is why after many years of studying a language students still find trouble speaking fluently. Another question would be what we as teachers do to break the tradition and free the language.

At first sight, teachers do what they need to do: hold a lesson in a foreign language, explain the material, practice etc. At the

same time, the focus of the teacher and students' attention will most likely be on the use of vocabulary and grammar, some will be reflecting on the mistakes, others will be preparing a phrase to say. All this leads to monotony, clichéd language and canned text given out as spontaneous, which can hardly be taken for fluent speaking abilities. There is also a postponed reaction to the partner, missing the idea, or not understanding one's own statement.

The problem is not new, and a communicative approach was introduced with every course book now having tasks aiming at making students free the language. Holden sees these tasks as drama and believes that they "are concerned with the world of 'let's pretend' and ask the learner to project himself imaginative-ly into another situation, outside the classroom, or into the skin and persona of another person" [Holden 1981: 1]. Hubbard calls drama "a wide range of activities that have an element of creating present" [Hubbard 1986: 317]. Davies in this context specifies that students do their acting for language and imaginative activity, and not for exhibition, and gives a list of such activities, which are "mime, role playing, extended role playing (for improvisation), simulation, interaction activities, such as various forms of dialogues, and dramatized story-telling" [Davies 1990: 87]. He concludes by stating that drama can take several forms in the language classroom, but above all it should be a communicative activity where it is the student who makes the choices.

American Psychological Association [APA 1997] clearly states that the learning process is rooted on the principles, among which are:

— learning is influenced by social interactions and interpersonal relations;
— what and how much is learned is influenced by the learner's motivation.

This in mind, the challenge is to teach students to get into that skin and persona, create present and interact; in other words, make them active users rather than passive receivers. Stanislavsky's 'me in the given circumstances' may be applied when working on dialogues, but it is no less important in understanding a simple sentence in the fill in the gaps exercise. Michael Chekhov created his acting technique observing real life situations; today his methods, namely improvisation and the feeling of the whole, can become a key to a successful role play or case study.

Thus, the questions to answer in this essay are:
— Does drama really help in freeing the students' speaking abilities?
— Do we as teachers use drama to the full or is there something that escapes our attention?

To answer these questions, drama is to be looked upon from two perspectives:
— traditional tasks for drama purposes;
— creative tasks, which in their essence imply a let's pretend approach.

The target group is the ESP students of MGIMO University, faculty of international relations, with a B2-C1 level of English. At the exam they are to improvise on a suggested topic; what is assessed is content, language accuracy and form. Students are penalized for the lack of contact, and it is where even the best of them may fail.

Good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary turns out to be insufficient to understand the statement or convey the message. The root of the problem lies in the traditional approach to teaching, where both teachers and students completely evade the fact that a sentence in the exercise is whole, was written by someone in certain circumstances, and to understand it one needs to acquire

it. Instead, students find it impossible to relate the words in the sentence to a real person in a real life situation, or, as Linklater has it, they are "unable to transform the text in print to the text in sound" [Linklater 2006: 187]. Stanislavsky's me in the given circumstances, where one speaks as if he found himself in the given situation, can help see beyond the words, understand the context and find the true meaning and message of the statement. Teachers in their turn are to blur the line between academic and creative and make students personalize the statement forbidding reading for reading. Then mechanics will eventually give way to involvement and the course book will be used to its fuller potential.

Every student has his own background, fears and desires and brings all this to the classroom. He is enslaved by thinking twice before he speaks, and with every year of studies the cage bars become stronger. Preparing for a round table, a student carefully studies the role, writes, memorizes, rehearses, prepares for the Q&A, works on vocabulary and grammar, i.e. does everything proper academic preparation requires. Still, it does not happen to be enough to succeed in the task and contradicts the big idea of using drama in the learning process. Chekhov believes that if an actor confines himself merely to speaking the lines and seeks no opportunity to improvise independently, he makes himself a slave to the creations of others. He goes on to say that every role offers an actor the opportunity to improvise and truly co-create with the author. The given lines are the firm base upon which the actor must and can develop his improvisations. How he speaks the line are the open gates to a vast field of improvisation. Chekhov suggests that one needs to begin by refusing to resort to worn-out clichés and see his text not as a straight one and concludes with the idea that once the actor develops this ability to improvise, he "will enjoy a sense of freedom hitherto unknown to him" [Chekhov 1985: 37].

This does relate to the needs of the language students. Like an actor confined to his lines, students who stick to their notes are enslaved to what they prepared, and if something goes wrong, students freeze and won't proceed until they remember. This usually results in them running out of time and not completing the task, which, in turn, means penalty and lower assessment overall. To avoid such a mishap, texts should be acquired, and Chekhov's method of improvisation proves valid.

Traditional preparation is by no means disregarded, as a pre-requisite issue is that students know their lines. Practice would have them recite the lines and move simultaneously, with their bodies becoming indispensable contributors to the process of text acquisition. Students are invited to learn through proprio-ception and start considering the body as an instrument for ex-ercising creative ideas. They are to decide on the first and the last physical step and then leave the desks and start moving and speaking at the same time. This provokes thinking about balance, speed, obstacles, sound etc. Another necessity is to make pauses, and students notice that pauses will appear in the least expected but absolutely necessary places. As Chekhov puts it, "real and true freedom in improvising must always be based upon neces-sity; otherwise it will soon degenerate into either arbitrariness or indecision" [Chekhov 1985: 38]. In the end students give the same statement at the desk with physical movement in mind. The goal of the exercise is to learn to trust oneself, rely on the impro-vising spirit and leave prepared logic behind the curtains. The best conclusion here would be that of Linklater, who says that one should let the words happen.

Another instrument to help compose and acquire a text is the feeling of the whole, or, as Chekhov calls it, Entirety. On stage the actor who plays his part without regard for what he did before or what he will do after will not understand it as a whole, which will

make it inharmonious to the audience. In the classroom, if a student assumes the role in the round table discussion within the limits of the task only, s/he will be torn apart between the character and one's real self, which will inevitably make the part incomprehensible. The students see it better if during the preparation they pay due attention to the details and imagine the background story of the person in question. Where are you? What school did you go to? Are you married? etc — these at first sight simple questions give the statement flesh and blood and help keep the link with the assumed character. Putting oneself in the skin and persona of another person does not mean illustrating it; it means seeing further, making up, knowing and believing in the story.

Seeing the situation as a whole is essential in making a decent impromptu talk. Still, preparing for it, students mostly concentrate on how to say rather than what to say hence they speak not knowing what exactly they are driving at. To focus on the whole, during a 1–3 minute preparation students are advised to first think of a conclusion and then come up with the claim, i.e. think backward. This technique, with a focus on the concluding idea, helps to contain the logic of the argumentation. Linklater rightly says that "unless the speaker has found out exactly what he or she is saying, how it is said will be arbitrary, narcissistic and misleading" [Linklater 2006: 185]. As it is on stage, the feeling of the whole helps to highlight the essentials, follow the main line of argumentation, sound natural and keep the attention of the partners. Chekhov says that with Entirety acting will become more powerful; so will the impromptu talks.

To conclude, drama does help to find synthesis of language and form, free strangled voices, and master physical involvement. It should not be confined to activities only. From this perspective, the above mentioned drama techniques and exercises provide

invaluable help in achieving the settled aim. Me in the given circumstances, the art of improvisation and entirety are the ones that do further the end. Drama should not be something special in the learning process; on the contrary, it should be integrated in it and become its indispensable part.

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About the author

Daria I. Ter-Minasova
PhD in Culture Studies, Senior Lecturer, MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia;
email: d.ter@inno.mgimo.ru