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Acting French: Drama Techniques in the Second Language Classroom

by Patricia S. Dickson

LEARNING TO USE A SECOND LANGUAGE is, in many ways, like learning to become a different person. In a book entitled *The Theater Arts and the Teaching of Second Languages* Stephen M. Smith traces the parallels between acting and second-language learning. According to Smith, both language students and actors are involved in communicating a message to others. In order to be successful, both must decide what message is appropriate and how to communicate it and then they must perform competently to be understood by their audience (2). Smith sees the role of the language teacher as similar to that of the theatrical director. The teacher, like the director, should try "to create a setting conducive to language learning, and to direct the learners toward the attainment of their goal, that of effective communication" (4).

Acting is a way of learning by experiencing. Drama techniques integrate body, mind, and emotions and motivate students by allowing them to use their own personalities and experiences as resources for language production (Maley and Duff 6-7). As Lynn McGregor *et al.* state in *Learning Through Drama*: "Drama revolves around the process of behaviour, through interpersonal response. In acting-out, the individual himself is the prime medium of expression. Acting-out then is the exploration and representation of meaning using the medium of the whole person" (16). Drama forces students to interact because acting-out involves a "negotiation of meaning" (17). Drama puts the emphasis on meaning rather than on form and "forces us to take as our starting point *life* not language" (Maley and Duff 15).

Both acting and language learning involve self expression and require a willingness to take chances because "we risk our psychological well-being every time we try to speak" (Smith 6). The language teacher, like the director, must minimize student inhibitions by creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation in the classroom. Directors often use games at the beginning of a drama rehearsal to "warm up the ensemble" (Smith 6-7). As Smith states: "Games, used wisely, can help adults rediscover the freedom they knew as children. Games 'allow' the adults to 'play' in front of their peers. Through games, ensemble members become acquainted. The ensemble begins to operate as a unit. Its members begin to trust and to cooperate" (7).

Beginning a language class with a game can help the students to make the transition from English to the second language, to become acquainted while actively using the language, and to work together as a group. Smith describes an excellent warm-up game which helps students to learn each other's names, to recall vocabulary, to practice pronunciation, and to develop memory in the second language. Students sit or stand in a circle. Each person thinks of a word. Proceeding clockwise around the circle, each student says his or her word. Then the teacher calls the names of two students at random. The first person named must recall and repeat the word of the other student. The group helps with recall of the word when necessary. The teacher can gradually increase the tempo of the activity as students easily recall others' words. For the second round of the game, students must say and recall sentences (7). By having students think of words or sentences related to a certain theme—the restaurant, for example—this game could serve as a way of “priming the pump” for the vocabulary needed for role play or improvised scenes that could logically follow in the rest of the class period.

Language learning, like acting, involves the body as well as the mind. Learning to produce the sounds of a second language requires not only ear training to distinguish the sounds from the sounds of the native language but also depends on the ability to manipulate the vocal apparatus. The language learner must be able to make lips, teeth, tongue, and throat work in unaccustomed ways to produce the new sounds. Vocal warm-up exercises similar to those used by actors or singers could be used in language classes to loosen up voices and to make students more aware of intonation and rhythm in the second language. Smith describes an alphabet warm-up exercise that has the double benefits of helping the students learn the second-language alphabet while practicing articulation, breathing, pacing, and rhythm. The exercise consists of four steps: 1) reciting the alphabet in unison, trying to produce “an ensemble sound which sounds like one strong voice,” 2) reciting the alphabet in one breath, 3) reciting the alphabet in phrases of three to ten letters, varying volume and speed, and 4) reciting the alphabet five letters at a time, establishing a stress pattern (80).

Another technique used in acting courses which would also be useful for language classes requires students to communicate using intonation but no words. The class receives a selection of several dialogues, stories or poems to perform aloud using only intonation. Students work in pairs to interpret their passages. The other class members should be able to tell which piece they are hearing (Smith 77). For developing a sense of the rhythm of the second language as well as for practicing pronunciation, Smith suggests an activity called “Pass the poem.” Choose a poem which depends on rhythm. Practice it with the whole class until the rhythm is well established. Then, sitting in a circle, have the class repeat the poem with one person at a time reciting one or two lines. The object is to pass the poem around the group while keeping the rhythm and tempo even. To add more challenge, the

poem may also be passed by eye contact. Each person reciting makes eye contact with another person who must then say the next line without breaking the rhythm (78-79).

Communication not only involves language and sound production but also includes gestures, facial expressions, and body positions. Warm-up exercises used by actors for relaxation and release of tension could also be beneficial to language students to help them relax and focus their concentration on the language. Maley and Duff describe several activities in which the students sit with eyes closed while they listen to the teacher speaking in a soothing voice: "You are full of energy. It is like a fluid in your body. Try to feel it in your toes. Feel it moving very slowly, flowing into your feet, your ankles" and so on, as the feeling flows through all parts of the body. Another possibility is for the teacher to read or play a recording of a poem or story, still using a slow rhythm and a relaxing tone of voice (60-61). Having the class do physical exercises with directions given in the second language while listening to classical music is another class-calming activity (Macdonald and Rogers-Gordon 84). In addition to producing relaxation, these activities done in the second language could provide listening practice, focusing the students attention on the sounds of the language.

Perhaps the main advantage of using drama activities for second-language learning is that they help students to develop proficiency in using the language while progressing from very structured activities to partially structured ones and finally to free expression. At the elementary level, acting out helps students to connect words and meaning directly and adds interest by involving students actively and physically. In the early stages of language learning, students can demonstrate their comprehension of a command or question given by the teacher by responding in pantomime. They can act out the meaning of adjectives or verbs and give commands to each other to carry out. They can learn to do simple demonstrations, such as how to write and mail a letter, by first watching and listening to the teacher, practicing as a group by pantomime, then individually saying and doing the actions. Macdonald and Rogers-Gordon describe a similar activity which they call an "operation." In their version students brainstorm the series of steps for carrying out an action such as eating in a restaurant while the teacher writes them on the board. The teacher models the series, then students perform the actions as the teacher gives the directions. The next time around students give the directions while the teacher carries them out. Finally students give each other directions for doing the actions (71). This type of activity is effective because it unites listening comprehension with an immediate production of what has just been seen and heard.

The next step towards linguistic independence for the beginning language learner might be participation in a structured conversation. Richard Via describes a technique that he calls "talk and listen." The teacher prepares a set of conversation cards for each pair of students. Each student has the complete line that he is to say, but his partner's line is only cued by

giving the last word or two. This technique forces each student to listen more carefully to what his partner is saying. Via explains that this activity is adapted from a technique used by actors when learning a new play to help them respond to each other instead of just reciting lines (115–20). Smith describes the same type of activity which he calls “scripted dialogues,” explaining that when creating improvisations, actors often jot down ideas for their own lines on pieces of paper; but they must listen to each other carefully because they do not know what the others will say (88–89).

Another semi-structured way of creating a scene with three or four characters is to have each student in the class write one line that could be used in a scene in a certain context, such as a restaurant or hotel. Collect all the lines and divide the class into groups of three or four. Mix up the lines and pass them out so that each person has one line. The groups of three or four must then create a dialogue using all of three or four of the lines. They may add as many more lines as they want, but they must find a way to work in the given lines. Set a time limit of seven to ten minutes for each group to prepare their scene. If the class is new to this type of activity, it might be necessary to have them write their lines. A confident group can improvise lines without writing first (Smith 90). Another way of approaching this activity is to give pairs of students a two-line conversation in English. They have three or four minutes to translate the two lines into the second language. The teacher circulates and helps with any problems. Pairs of students read their conversations dramatically. Combine pairs into groups of four. These new groups must then combine both two-line dialogues into a sensible conversation, adding more lines if necessary. The groups then perform their longer conversations.

At the intermediate level students can handle dramatic activities which are only partially structured, leaving them more freedom to improvise what they say. The sequencing of dramatic activities is very important at this stage. The students need to be able to succeed at each step so that the group builds confidence and thus continues to develop the proficiency necessary for the next, slightly more challenging activity. A logical progression might be to begin with monologues, then move on to pair interviews, and finally to scenes with several characters.

According to the ACTFL guidelines, intermediate students should be able to talk about themselves, their daily activities and their interests. Students are naturally interested in themselves and in each other, so this activity holds their attention. Give students an outline of the topics they are to cover in their monologue. Have them practice their monologue orally outside of class. Divide the class into circles of five to eight students. Each person in the circle says his monologue while the others take notes. During the monologues the teacher has a chance to listen and make notes on errors which can then be discussed at the end of the class period. For the next class each student writes a short paragraph about each person in his group based

on the information gleaned from the monologues. Students can also be asked to record their monologues to give the teacher an opportunity to listen to them more carefully and assign a grade. Activities which combine speaking and writing are effective because the oral component gives the student freedom to try saying things and the writing either before or after the oral activity helps the student to develop more accurate control of the language. In addition to monologues about themselves, students can also present dramatic monologues in which they take the role of a well-known person from the second-language culture while the rest of the class listens and tries to identify the person. Dramatic monologues of this type could also represent characters from a story the class has read.

After doing monologues the students can progress to conversing in pairs with one student interviewing another. The interviewer takes notes and writes a report on his or her partner. To prepare for the interview, students can be given questions in the second language, questions in English which they translate to the second language, or they can make up their own questions with some help from the teacher. To make interviewing more imaginative and dramatic, students can assume different identities. These identities can be based on real people, fictional characters, people in pictures and even inanimate objects. For example, give each student the name of a well-known interviewer (Barbara Walters) or a famous person (François Mitterand). Students must invent questions and answers in the style of these characters. Well-known campus personalities could also be used. An interview could consist of a conversation between two characters from a story students have read. Pictures can also provide the basis for interview personalities. Students select a picture of an interesting-looking person and answer the interview questions as they think this person would respond. For maximum creativity, have students invent conversations between inanimate objects: the pencil interviewing the pencil sharpener, for example (Macdonald and Rogers-Gordon 69).

When students are comfortable speaking with one other person in the interview format, they are ready to progress to scenes where they must interact with several people. First select a situation such as ordering a meal, buying clothes, or getting a room at a hotel. Give students a "menu" of lines to use in the scene. For example, in a restaurant scene, give them a list of lines that the customer could use and another list of lines for the waiter. Practice pronouncing the lines together and practice using the vocabulary with a game or by giving definitions in the second language. Assign intensive vocabulary study. During the following class period begin working on the scene by writing an outline of the action on the board in the second language, discussing it with the students as you write it, allowing them to make suggestions for what happens next. Select several of your best students to play the characters in the scene. Let them improvise their lines, following the action outlined on the board. If they want to say something that goes beyond their vocabulary list, have them say it in English. The

teacher, acting as "side coach" quickly feeds them the line in the second language, they repeat it and continue (Smith 25). After two or three repetitions of this type, divide the class into groups of three or four (the number of parts in the scene) and let them practice improvising at their seats with all groups working simultaneously. Ask students to practice improvising the scene as homework; the following day they present their scenes in front of the class for a grade.

Holden describes a process for improvising scenes which can be used at the intermediate level. Her process includes five steps: 1) presentation of the theme or problem by the teacher, 2) discussion in groups of how to act out the scene, 3) experimenting in groups with different interpretations of the scene, 4) presentation of the scene by one or two groups, and 5) discussion of the scene with the whole class (14). Holden points out that the discussion stages require a more advanced use of language than the actual presentation of the scenes, so that, depending on the abilities of the class, it might be necessary to do the discussions in the students' native language (28). She also reminds teachers not to spend too much time at once on dramatic activities or they might lose their effectiveness. She suggests that scenes can be worked on during several lessons and developed further each time (29). She also describes two "extended improvisations," which involve six or eight students and might take several weeks to prepare and present (37-41). Holden stresses the importance of setting the scene clearly for an improvised scene and discusses the use of pictures, sound effects, and written cues as ways of providing a context for a scene (42-57).

At the advanced level drama techniques can promote a freer use of the second language and further develop the students' ability to improvise. Monologues and speeches can help the students acquire poise and confidence in using the second language while role playing and improvisation can give them practice in reacting to everyday situations with spontaneity, expressiveness, and a sense of appropriate social register.

Smith's "quick speeches" technique challenges advanced students to organize and present ideas in the second language working within a time limit. At the beginning of the class the teacher announces the activity and passes out a list of topics. Students have five to ten minutes to select a topic and make notes for their presentations which are limited to five minutes. The teacher takes notes and gives suggestions for improvement at the end of each presentation. To produce a more polished monologue, Smith advocates having students practice editing each other's oral presentations. Students write and practice their speeches outside of class. Each speaker presents his or her speech twice in class. After the first presentation, class members offer constructive criticism. Students rework their speeches and give them a second time, again receiving comments from the group about how well they have incorporated suggestions received after the first presentation (99-100). Although this would be a time-consuming activity

which might not be possible with a large class, involving class members in listening critically to each speech would provide much listening practice in the second language, make students aware of problems with pronunciation or grammar which impede understanding, and help them improve their own performances.

Role-playing activities based on open-ended scenarios leave advanced students free to experiment and invent on their own but still give them a framework within which to work. Smith describes an activity in which the same scenario can be used to create several different scenes simply by changing the character types each time. For example, the scenario states that one character asks the other to do something and explains why it must be done. The second character understands why it must be done, but he will not do it and he explains why. The first character then reacts to what the second character has said. The first time around, the two characters might be a boss and an employee. The second time, they might be a student and a teacher (97). Using the same scenario while changing the characters each time has the advantage of providing a stable framework for the activity but also of allowing freedom for the students to create something different with each version.

Another challenging role-play technique involves creating a series of short, related scenes. Choose several students to play the first scene. Give them a simple scene and let them develop it as they choose. For example, a group of friends discussing what to do on the weekend. After they have developed the scene for a few minutes, cut the action. Choose different students to play the same characters in scene two. They must continue the action where the first scene left off using all information presented. Since different students are chosen to play the same characters who continue in interrelated scenes, the class members must watch and listen carefully because they might be selected next to play one of the roles. After several scenes have been improvised, the teacher can use the experience to discuss any problems of expression in the second language or of culturally inappropriate behavior (Smith 90-91).

Carol Sanders describes a technique for improvising scenes which challenge students to react by including an element of the unknown. At the beginning of the class the teacher gives each student a card which says what scene he or she will be in and which part he or she will play. The card provides only as much information about the scene as is necessary for each character to play his role. However, none of the characters knows exactly how the others have been instructed to behave. After one scene has been acted and commented upon, the teachers calls the characters to play the next scene. (These scenes are not related as in the previously described activity.) Adding the unknown element makes the situations more like real life and gives the students practice in responding spontaneously, expressively, and immediately (281-82).

French methodologist Jean-Marc Caré criticizes the use of role cards to

guide the improvisation, stating that this approach produces scenes that are too stereotyped and ordinary. He advocates a type of role playing that is based on the psychodrama of J. L. Moreno. According to Caré, the situations selected for role play must include a "rupture." There must be some kind of obstacle to be overcome by the participants because language is only interesting when the social transaction seems blocked for the moment. Caré's method for role playing requires the students to create from scratch their own fictive identities, the relationships between the characters, and their habitual behavior. Once the characters have been created, the students must also propose and agree on a situation. Caré emphasizes that the role play should not be performed in front of the class, but instead should take place in a "neuter space" inside the circle formed by the chairs of those not taking part. Caré's objective is to deemphasize the performance aspect of the scene and emphasize the proximity of others in a more realistic way. While Caré's method gives students maximum freedom to create roles and situations and to improvise appropriate language, he warns that there is a danger inherent in this very freedom. Because the characters and situation have come totally from the students' imaginations, teachers should be aware that some psychological truth might surface which could subvert the pedagogical purpose of the role play and turn it into psychodrama (39-41). This risk does not seem too great, however, considering that using the second language provides a kind of emotional distancing from the content of speech. Caré's approach to role playing does present some practical problems. For example, the preparation of the characters and the situation by the students would be time consuming and might result in a scene which would not work because the students might not have realized the limits of their own linguistic competence and because they have not been "primed" for necessary vocabulary before beginning the scene. Another French scholar, Bernard Dufeu, describes some techniques for role playing which help to overcome these difficulties and promote true improvisation.

Dufeu advocates using warm-up activities before beginning the role-play scene. These exercises include physical, vocal, and verbal warm-ups which lead into the scene to be acted out. For example, if the scene is to take place at a train station, the physical warm-up could be for the participants to pantomime the action with the teacher calling out changes in the rhythm such as travellers in a hurry, tired travellers, travellers having a long wait, etc. If the improvisation is on the theme of a teacher and a student, the group can prepare by miming typical attitudes of a teacher or of a student and then adding appropriate verbal expressions to go with each attitude, thus calling up some vocabulary which will be useful for the scene. Instead of developing the scene from characters and situation which have been created before the role play as in Caré's method, Dufeu lets the characters and situation develop spontaneously by beginning from what he calls "de-clencheurs." These "triggers" set off imaginative reactions which help the students to improvise more on their own. For example, the action and

characters for a scene could be suggested by a place: four chairs placed two by two facing each other could represent a cafe, a train compartment, a waiting room, or many other things. Once the group has decided what place the four chairs represent, they discuss possible plots in this place.

In order to help the actors "enter" their characters, the teacher can interview them before the scene begins to find out their age, their character type, and their attitudes towards the situation to be acted. When they are ready to begin the improvisation, Dufeu suggests playing several scenes simultaneously in different areas of the classroom so that more students can participate and so that they feel less exposed. Dufeu sometimes alternates verbal playing of the scene with non-verbal acting of the same scene in order to emphasize the non-verbal aspects of communication. He also allows students to "double" each other to help with expression in the second language. If an actor in a scene cannot think of anything to say or cannot find an appropriate expression, anyone can come up, stand behind him, and feed him a line to use. Other triggers for improvised scenes used by Dufeu include objects, collages or photographs, an intention, an attitude, a repeated question or sentence, an ambiguous situation, the same situation but with different characters each time or the same character but in different situations each time. Beginning with one of these triggers rather than with a scenario allows students more freedom for creativity of action and of language. The technique of doubling used by Dufeu and the playing of scenes simultaneously would help prevent students from becoming embarrassed by performing before others or by not being able to express themselves (69-72).

Another technique for improvising uses "guided fantasy" to provide a context and a stimulus for speaking, but leaves students completely free to respond as they wish. The classroom chairs are arranged to resemble the seats on an airplane. The teacher gives each student an index card with an identity and a profession written on it. Students board the plane. During the imaginary flight the teacher takes the role of the pilot, describing the sights below and talking about the place where they will make their first stopover and the people they will meet. For example, "We are about to land in Paris, the home of many famous chefs. People here are very interested in good food. Ask everyone you meet about his or her favorite dish. Find out as much as you can about the best restaurants." Students get off the plane, introduce themselves to each other and converse on the suggested topic. (Or perhaps better, another group of students could be there to play the roles of the Parisians.) Students then get back on the plane and fly to another destination while the pilot gives out more information to prepare them for the next stop and the next conversation topic. After the fantasy activity, students can write paragraphs about the place they enjoyed most and the interesting people they met (Macdonald and Rogers-Gordon, 74-75).

Just as actors must develop empathy for the characters they portray, so

language students need to have empathy for the people and culture of the second language they are learning. Empathy is the basis for all true communication and it helps us see others as individuals. As Smith states: "empathetic communication minimizes our tendency to respond to people as cultural stereotypes" (15). According to Stern, empathy is dependent on the ability to temporarily give up one's separate identity. This type of flexibility may also be necessary for developing a nativelike pronunciation in the second language (210–11). Like actors playing a role, language students must be able to leave behind their native language and cultural identity and take on a new persona when speaking the second language.

Drama techniques seem to foster empathy by inducing flexibility and by lowering students' inhibitions (Stern 211). There has been much discussion in the last few years about how to integrate the teaching of language with the teaching of culture. Crawford-Lange and Lange observe that "Students are taught *about* culture; they are not taught how to interact with culture" (145). Drama techniques can provide a way of integrating language and culture by involving students in non-verbal as well as verbal communication and by simulating cross-cultural interaction.

Perhaps the greatest problem in teaching the culture of the second language is the fact that if the students have never experienced it, it will probably be difficult for them to understand what the teacher is describing, much less be able to empathize with it. How can teachers present culture so that American students will develop a "feel" for appropriate language and behavior?

Lawrence Wylie has pioneered in this field in his course at Harvard called "Communicating with the French" in which he takes a dramatic approach to teaching language holistically. Wylie believes that communication is not only an exchange of information or knowledge, but also involves sympathy and bonding together. Culture and language come together naturally when language teaching emphasizes communication with the whole body and not just the production of speech patterns. This approach to language in the context of total communication requires more holistic methods of language teaching. Many of Wylie's techniques for teaching communication resemble actor's warm-up exercises. He begins class with physical exercises to "break down the American-ness of the body's muscular 'set'." For example, to help American students to feel the rhythm of French, he has them march to a metronome set at one second intervals while chanting French sentences. To make students aware of the difference in the use of the facial muscles in French, Wylie has them make faces in a mirror. After studying filmed segments of French people interacting, Wylie's students act out the same scenes, closely imitating the mannerisms, pauses, and speech patterns of the originals (778–85).

Cultural assimilators or mini-dramas are commonly used for illustrating cross-cultural differences. Acting out a scene set in the foreign culture has the advantage of involving students in a situation which might realistically

take place, but also the disadvantage of placing them in an imaginary environment that they do not really understand and for which they may have little empathy. To bridge this culture gap and to make students aware of their own cultural assumptions, after acting out the mini-drama set in the foreign culture and discussing appropriate behavior, do a cultural reversal. Divide the class into groups of three or four and have them write new conversations using the same characters and situation as in the original dialogue, but changing the setting to their own town in the United States. What would surprise the foreign characters? What would they not understand? What errors might they make based on their own cultural assumptions? Give students about ten minutes to put the new dialogue together, then have them perform for the class. Comment on language or cultural problems after each presentation. Reversing the situation expands the scope of the students' simulated cultural experience and helps them to empathize with people from the second-language culture. They are more likely to be able to imagine speakers of the second language interacting in their culture than to imagine themselves in the foreign culture. Experiencing the situation from two different cultural view points helps students see the contrast and understand the potential problems. As Carolyn A. Durham states, "students must be put into simulated situations where they are forced to operate within a foreign view of reality; and they must also attempt to express an experience particular to their own culture in the language of another culture" (224).

If our goal in teaching languages is to produce students who can not only use the language in everyday situations but also behave appropriately in the foreign culture, it is clear that our approach must include teaching behavior as well as language. Second-language students must become actors who can both play their roles and speak their lines convincingly if they are to communicate effectively. Drama puts the emphasis on doing and speaking, providing students with a more holistic experience in using the second language for communication. Drama techniques have the potential to teach students to communicate with the whole body, to draw on their own imaginations, experiences and personalities, to promote the development of language proficiency by giving students opportunities to improvise speech on their own, and to integrate language and culture by helping students develop empathy for speakers of the second language.

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