

# Drama as an extra-curricular activity for teaching English as a foreign language

Peter Mountford

## Abstract

This is a brief report of an informal once-weekly extra-curricular English learning activity involving drama. The participants were student volunteers, and a simplified version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was the script used for the activities. Baz Luhrmann's movie adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was also used as a critical reference.

key words: English as a foreign language, drama, personal development

## Introduction and Outline

Drama is always present in the English learning classroom, even if it is not recognised as such. For example, simple role plays, e.g. shopkeeper and customer, are often used to practise or revise patterns of English speech in practical situations. This year I had the opportunity to work with student volunteers in extra-curricular English learning activities. Because these students were also studying Shakespeare as part of their formal course work, drama seemed a natural extension of their curricular activities. Initially, we used short comic sketches that could be read and discussed within an hour. However, following the guest lectures given at our university by Dr J.W. Sterret in May 2014, I was encouraged to use a simplified script of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>1)</sup> for our activities. As a reference for our dramatic interpretation, we viewed Baz Luhrmann's movie adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>2)</sup> in installments at the end of each session of studying the script. This paper is a brief report of my experience using drama as an extra-curricular English learning

activity.

## Discussion

As noted in the introduction above, simple role plays are often used in the classroom to drill English learners in English speech patterns. Moreover, when these small dramas are performed without a script, the need for memorisation adds value to the educational experience. In the classroom these vignettes are often used to recreate situations that a tourist or business traveller might experience, but seldom go beyond these simple circumstances. Dramatic narratives in which the characters develop and reveal themselves through their actions are not currently in favour with English-language textbook publishers. This is puzzling, especially in light of the popularity of comics, animated cartoons, and computer/console-based role-playing games among both adult and younger learners. Despite this backdrop, when presented with the opportunity to work with student volunteers, I decided to explore the possibilities of drama as a once-weekly extra-

curricular activity that would complement students' English curriculum activities.

Initially, we began the extra-curricular activity by reading and studying short humorous sketches, that could be completed within the space of a typical class period. Limitations of this approach which soon became apparent are that the supply of material is soon exhausted, and learning is restricted to English words and colloquialisms. A further problem with humour is that other than slapstick, much humour is situational or cultural, which can be difficult to explain to students without experience of another culture.

In May 2014, Dr J.W. Sterret of Aarhus University, Denmark, gave guest lectures at our university which focused on Shakespeare's works. One of these lectures featured *Romeo and Juliet*, and posed the question: Is *Romeo and Juliet* a love story, or a story of conflict? This encouraged me to use a simplified script of *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>1)</sup> for the extra-curricular activity. As a benchmark reference, we also viewed Baz Luhrmann's movie adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>2)</sup> The students decided that we should watch the part of the movie corresponding to a particular week's dramatic reading of the script after the activity; the students also dictated the pace of the activity. I provided the traditional teaching role of explaining unknown words and providing additional background information. The first advantage of following this approach to become apparent was that at the beginning of each new session there was no discussion of "What would you like to do or talk about this week". Everyone knew the position in the script. Indeed, there was even some excitement and anticipation about where the story might take us.

Viewing the movie after performing a dramatic reading of the script was an inspired choice of the students. It allowed them to work with the script first, which in my opinion provided them with a far greater stimulus and motivation for their understanding and interpretation of the story, than would have occurred, had we viewed the movie first. While screening the movie first might have led to a quicker understanding, it might have interfered with some of the creative and imaginative processes which have to be used when interpreting a drama from a script.

One development that I had not anticipated was that the students began discussing the script among themselves without being prompted. These discussions generally took the form of how they as individuals would have acted were they real people in the dramatic roles. The most memorable remark from these unprompted discussions came at the conclusion of the play: Even if they had lived, I don't think *Romeo* would've stayed with *Juliet* for long!

There are several articles available online concerning the use of drama in the teaching of English as a foreign language.<sup>3-7)</sup> All note the beneficial effects on students' motivation of using drama to teach English. Of particular interest, Stefanie Giebert gives a succinct and useful description of the various drama education methods.<sup>3)</sup> Chris Boudreault notes that "Drama Brings Literature to Life,"<sup>4)</sup> and in this context, encouraging students to project themselves into the roles they are asked to take, as well as enhancing their understanding of the text, contributes to their emotional and personal development. This is an aspect of using literature and/or drama in language education that is often neglected, as it cannot easily be evaluated by test performance.

Using drama experimentally, as an extra-curricular activity for teaching English has provided me with insights and the practical experience to use drama as a complement to traditional English language teaching. In the extra-curricular activity, we are currently reading and dramatically interpreting an abridged and simplified version of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.<sup>8)</sup> On its completion we aim to produce a script and perform a drama of it in English.

Martina Vachova,  
Bachelor Thesis, Department of English  
Language and Literature, Masaryk University  
Brno, 2012

- 8) *A Tale of Two Cities* Charles Dickens  
Retold by Ralph Mowat  
Oxford Bookworms  
ISBN 978-0-19-479187-8

## References

- 1) *Romeo and Juliet*  
William Shakespeare  
Retold by Alistair McCallum  
Oxford Bookworms  
ISBN 978-0-19-423521-1
- 2) *Romeo and Juliet*  
William Shakespeare  
1996 movie adaptation directed by Baz Luhrmann
- 3) *Drama and theatre in teaching foreign languages  
for professional purposes*  
Stefanie Giebert  
*Cahiers de l'APLIUT*: Vol. XXXIII N° 1 2014 p.138-  
150
- 4) *The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL  
Classroom*  
Chris Boudreault  
*The Internet TESL Journal*  
2010 January
- 5) *Dramatic Performance in Teaching Drama in EFL  
Contexts*  
Bahman Gorjian, Seyyed Rahim Moosavinia,  
Azadeh Jabripour  
*The Electronic Journal for English as a Second  
Language*  
March 2010 – Volume 13, Number 4
- 6) *Learn and Unlearn: Drama as an Effective Tool in  
Teaching English Language and Communication*  
Dr Shibani Banerjee  
*International Journal of English Language &  
Translation Studies*  
Vol. 2, Issue 1, p79-91
- 8) *The Use of Drama Techniques in Teaching Adult  
EFL Learners*