

EMBODIED LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH DRAMA: A TOOL FOR REFLECTION, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND HOLISTIC LANGUAGE PRACTICE

Cet article présente une histoire dramatique qui vise à enseigner l'anglais aux débutants en école primaire. Il examine divers aspects du travail théâtral dans l'enseignement de l'anglais, entre autres, le théâtre en tant qu'outil de réflexion et le développement professionnel des futurs enseignants utilisant le théâtre dans l'éducation (DiE). Ceci est une méthodologie d'enseignement et d'apprentissage holistique qui intègre des éléments de l'art du théâtre et inclut un espace de réflexion.

● Eva Göksel | PH Zug



Eva Göksel is a research assistant at the Centre for Oral Communication (Zentrum Mündlichkeit) at the University of Teacher Education Zug (PH

Zug), Switzerland. As a doctoral researcher at the University of Zurich, she focuses on Drama in Education across the curriculum in teacher education. She is currently working on introducing drama education into the Swiss educational context.

Reflection, by its very nature, is an act that requires time. Yet, how can teachers, student teachers, and teacher trainers, find time for reflective practice in their often densely packed schedules? A possible solution is offered by working with embodied forms of teaching and learning such as Drama in Education (DiE), a holistic teaching and learning methodology pioneered in the United Kingdom as early as the 1950s¹. DiE uses theatre games and techniques to inquire into a wide range of topics, for example through the use of role-play, teacher-in-role, or hot-seating, a technique in which a character is placed on the “hot-seat” and questioned by the group, in order to better understand his/her motivations (see table 1). While Drama in Education incorporates performative work in the classroom, the goal is not to create an artistic product such as a play for an audience; the focus, rather, is on the learning process experienced by the students individually, and by the class collectively.

¹ For a more detailed overview see Göksel 2019:



Drama work is considered holistic because it involves learning with the whole body through three distinct channels: movement (body), by making an emotional connection to the subject matter (heart), and by learning cognitively (mind) in an imagined setting in which the participants actively take part: What Schewe (1993, p. 50) refers to as learning with “head, heart, hand, and foot” [“Kopf, Herz, Hand und Fuss”]. This is in-line with Piazzoli’s definition of embodiment in education, which she describes as relating “to a kind of learning experience grounded in the mind, senses, body, imagination, reflection and social sphere” (2018, p. 25). Here, Piazzoli explicitly puts the focus on reflection as an intrinsic aspect of drama work; it can also be argued that it is indeed an indispensable phase in all classroom work. Thus, working with embodied forms not only calls for reflection, but it inherently creates space for it. This does not mean that there is no need for further reflection work, for example in later lessons. And, if Varela et al. are right that “reflection is not just on experience, but reflection is a form of experience itself” (1991, p. 27), then

Drama Strategy	Explanation	Reference
Hot-Seating	“A group, working as themselves or in role, have the opportunity to question or interview role-player(s) who remain 'in character'.”	Neelands & Goode 2015: 43
Still-Image	“Groups devise an image using their own bodies to crystallise a moment, idea or theme; or an individual acts as sculptor to a group.”	Neelands & Goode 2015: 28
Thought-Tracking	A character’s private thoughts are revealed publicly by ‘tapping-in’ to their thoughts.	Neelands & Goode 2015: 138
Teacher-in-Role	The teacher or facilitator: “manages the theatrical possibilities and learning opportunities provided by the dramatic context from within the context by adopting a suitable role in order to excite interest, control the action, invite involvement, provoke tension, challenge superficial thinking, create choices and ambiguity, develop the narrative, create possibilities for the group to interact in role.”	Neelands & Goode 2015: 54

Table 1: Drama Strategies. This table first appeared on page 6 of “Playing with Possibilities: Drama and Core French in the Montessori Elementary Classroom in British Columbia, Canada: in *Scenario*.

it also follows that, as Piazzoli suggests, embodiment and performative pedagogy go hand in hand. “An important aspect of embodiment is the possibility it affords to express the ‘what if’ through the faculty of imagination” (Piazzoli, 2018, p. 26-27). While embodied teaching and learning, for example through the “what if” dimension of drama, does require time, it also allows a class to work on several learning outcomes at one time, including built-in time for reflection on the learning. This article will focus on the description of a story drama designed for young learners of English, the role of reflection in drama work, and the reflections of five student teachers who further developed the drama for their teaching practicums in the summer of 2019. The drama aims to bring English language, popular culture, and literature to life for the learners through an embodied encounter with a fairy tale. Booth defines story drama as “improvised role play stimulated by a story” (2005, p. 8, in this case the story of *The Three Little Pigs*). This particular tale was chosen because it features in

the English textbook, *Young World 1*, used for teaching first year English (grade three) in the canton of Zug. The story drama described in this article is what Schewe would define as a “small-scale form [...] of drama-based teaching and learning” (2013, p. 12), as it is a performative activity that spans a shorter teaching unit of approximately 1–5 lessons. It is currently taught within an English didactics module as a 90-minute block to student teachers at the University of Teacher Education Zug, Switzerland (PH Zug) who are in training to teach young learners of English in Swiss primary schools. Furthermore, in 2019 the lesson was additionally tested in various primary school classrooms in Zug by a group of volunteer student teachers from the PH Zug, who expanded the drama to cover up to five English language lessons. This article will outline the story drama in detail, as taught at the PH Zug, and will include a discussion of the student teachers’ impressions of the drama both for their professional development and as a tool to use in their future classrooms.

What did we
experience?
What did we learn?
What might we do
differently another
time?

What is Drama in Education (DiE)?

"The difference between theatre and classroom drama is that in theatre everything is contrived so that the audience gets the kicks. In the classroom, the participants get the kicks. However, the tools are the same: the elements of theatre craft." (Heathcote, in Wagner, 1979, p. 147).

Drama in Education is an umbrella term for various teaching techniques, which use elements of theatre such as games and acting exercises, in order to engage learners holistically in educational settings. The teaching approach has been flourishing in many parts of the English-speaking world since it emerged in the UK in the 1950s. However, it only arrived in the German-speaking world in the 1990s, through the writings of Manfred Schewe (1993), which focused primarily on drama in foreign language education, where it is still mainly applied in Germany to this day. It is interesting to note that the DiE method, although gaining popularity in other German-speaking countries, has yet to be disseminated in Switzerland (see Göksel, 2019). In his 1993 dissertation, Schewe emphasises that drama-based teaching can be applied to the three core areas of foreign language teaching: the development of language skills and explorations of both literature and culture. He adds that drama-work can serve to practice language skills such as vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as to practice listening and reading comprehension.

The aim of teaching with DiE is to harness and deepen collective knowledge using drama-based pedagogies: It is not the quality of the acting, but rather the quality of the learning that matters. This can involve experiencing life-like situations in a fictional setting, using the target language to problem-solve as a group, and reflecting on decisions made and experiences shared during the drama: What did we experience? What did we learn? What might we do differently

another time? These reflection phases can take place within the drama, as well as afterwards. They can offer a space for clarification and questions, as well as for reflecting on context, which is key when working in an additional language. The approach allows teachers and students to focus on what is experienced during the drama work, such as exploring a character, a time, or a place, and, as such, it appeals to different learning styles and provides a chance for greater learning autonomy. Work with DiE involves the whole class and encourages everyone to draw on existing knowledge, as well as past and shared experience to solve a task and to advance both the story and the learning.

Working in Phases

Neelands and Goode (2015) offer a four-phase formula for generalist teachers who are new to working with drama, beginning with a warm-up. This builds trust, team spirit, and cooperation within the group, as drama work can only take place once everybody feels safe in the space and understands the rules of play. Neelands and Goode (2015) call the next phase the pre-text. It is the starting point for the drama work and provides the context and reason for the make-believe situation: a letter, a story, a song, a picture, a text message, an object – all these and more can be used as pre-texts. The third phase encompasses the actual drama work, involving the use of drama conventions, various drama-based activities that can speed-up or slow the action, or that can guide the group in focusing on a particular aspect of the story. The conventions include activities such as still-images, (a frozen picture that shares a particular moment of a story) thought-tracking, (a technique to hear the thoughts of characters in a still-image) hot-seating, and many more. (For a comprehensive list of drama conventions see Neelands and Goode, 2015). Finally, drama work should generally end with a

In addition to practicing vocabulary and phrases from the story, the activity encourages cooperation, respect, and self-awareness.

cool-down, such as shaking off the roles: Exiting the world of make-believe and clearly discarding the roles played helps participants distance themselves from who they were in the drama. Once this is accomplished, the group can reflect on what they experienced: this can be done through discussion or via a writing task. If the group's language level is not yet good enough to reflect on the story drama in English, it can be done in the group's native language. In addition, follow-up tasks might take place in other subjects, such as art or math, linking the learning from the story drama to relevant topics. This is the approach used to teach drama at the PH Zug, however, it should be noted that there is no one "right" way to do drama.

Once Upon a Time: The Three Little Pigs

The story drama of *The Three Little Pigs* (found in Arnet-Clark et al. (2005), pp. 32-33) was designed for English methodology classes at the PH Zug, and was inspired by material from the textbook used for teaching English at the primary level (grades three – six) in the canton of Zug. The story drama aims to facilitate storytelling in an additional language for beginners (grade 3 is the first year of English instruction in Zug) by bringing characters, their actions, and their emotions to life through drama activities. In addition, it aims to practice vocabulary and phrases as presented in chapter six of the textbook *Young World 1* (Arnet-Clark et al., 2005), as well as to build speaking confidence.

A Step-by-Step Guide to the Three Little Pigs Story Drama

The lesson begins with a warm-up phase, during which various drama games and activities are introduced. This gives the group a chance to learn some basic rules of play, without being explicitly told that this is the case. One of the activities, a simple "stop and go" allows the group

to get used to following the leader's instructions immediately, including the all-important instruction "freeze" (stop), which will become important in later work with still-images. Another set of activities working in a circle serve to practice eye contact and working with new partners. These activities also introduce key vocabulary: as they cross the circle, the group imagines that they are walking across the materials that will be important in the story (e.g. straw, wood, and bricks). In addition to practicing vocabulary and phrases from the story (e.g. I am walking on straw), the activity encourages cooperation, respect, and self-awareness. It also offers the lesson's first mini "performances", as the students cross the circle. Other activities to pre-teach key vocabulary include passing emotions such as I am: "happy", "sad", "angry", and "afraid" around the circle, along with matching facial expressions and gestures. Any time the facilitator feels the group is not yet engaged enough in the drama work s/he can return to basic exercises until the group is ready. With some groups, this may be a slow process requiring weeks or even months of basic drama work before moving to a more complex drama sequence.

Drama Sequence: A Walk Through the Story

Next, the group is invited to visit a museum to meet the animals featured in the story: Half the group waits outside, while the others collectively create the animal assigned by the teacher, e.g. a wolf. The "exhibit" freezes for 1-2 minutes while the "visitors" observe the exhibit and guess the animal. The groups switch and the second group now has 2 minutes to create their animal "exhibit". Experience shows that it is important to let both groups create an exhibit – even when working with student teachers! Next, the group forms two lines, facing each other, to learn the following chant:

When working with beginners, it is advisable to have lots of language support around the classroom, such as vocabulary cards or pictures on the floor and posters on the wall.

Wolf: "Little pig, little pig, let me come in".

Pigs: "Not by the hair of my chinny, chin, chin".

Wolf: "Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in".

The chant is modelled by the teacher and repeated by the entire group. One of the lines of students is then designated as the pigs and the other as the wolf. Each group (wolf and pigs) practice chanting their lines in turn: The roles can later be switched. In addition, the characters can acquire squeaky or deep voices. Here it is important to teach the learners a few basic vocal techniques; for facilitators who are unsure of how to do this, it is best to keep the characters' voices fairly neutral and light, to avoid damaging the vocal chords.

In the next step, the "freeze" activity practiced earlier comes into play. A volunteer student creates a still-image of Mother or Father pig saying farewell to her/his children. To complete the image, three other students chose frozen poses around him/her as the three little pigs. Here the teacher may have to coach the volunteers to clearly demonstrate their emotions (as practiced in the warm-up). With younger learners it may afford a chance to reflect on how we display emotions to others: How do we stand/walk/sit when we are sad? How does our face reflect that emotion? How do we "read" emotions from other people's body language or facial expressions? This may be an especially interesting exercise if the group includes participants with varied cultural backgrounds. As an additional layer, the teacher can introduce thought-tracking, a technique by which characters and even objects in frozen pictures can voice their thoughts or feelings. When a character is picked, s/he voices a thought, which can take the form of a sentence, a single word, or even a sound, such as a sigh or a laugh. This is a simple way to practice basic vocabulary, such as "I am happy" or "I am sad", for example.

When working with beginners, it is advisable to have lots of language support around the classroom, such as vocabulary cards or pictures on the floor and posters on the wall.

The teacher then begins telling the story of the three little pigs, perhaps making use of pictures from a storybook or flash cards. As the pigs leave home and set off down the road, they begin to sing "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf". The class learns the song and practices it several times. If need be, the song can be found on YouTube. The narration of the story then continues until the first pig builds his/her home – making use of the straw s/he finds on the roadside. The class collectively builds the house of straw together: In fact, they become the straw, standing together to create walls, windows, and doors, while one student plays the pig inside. Soon afterwards, the second pig decides to build a house of wood. Again, the entire class creates a house around the second pig, complete with a door and windows. Finally, the class builds a house of bricks around the third pig, this time with a chimney. Here again is an opportunity to step out of the drama to reflect how straw differs from wood as building material: What are some of the differences in a house woven of straw and one built of wood or bricks? How can the students physically represent this with their bodies? At last, night falls and the pigs, cosy in their new houses, sing their song (whole group sings). This attracts the big bad wolf.

The teacher goes into role as the wolf and approaches the first house, saying "Little pig, little pig, let me come in". The class joins in with the wolf and helps the pig with his/her lines too. After some huffing and puffing, the wolf blows the house of straw down. The first pig joins the second pig in the house of wood, which is eventually blown down too. The pigs then join the third pig in the house of bricks, which the wolf is unable to blow

2 All names have been anonymised.

The magical part of a
drama lesson is the
change it brings into
everyday school life.

down. Delighted, the pigs sing their song. The wolf (teacher-in-role) is furious and tries to go down the chimney. The pigs light a fire and the wolf goes right back up the chimney, runs away and is never seen again. The pigs sing their song in celebration and live happily ever after. In a short cool-down sequence, the class physically shakes off their roles of pigs and wolf to exit the world of make-believe.

On the Road to Professional Development: Student-Teacher Experiences

“To be honest, I did not have much fun while we were doing this at the PH but I tried to give my best while teaching it, and the kids really appreciated it. Then I was so motivated, and you could really see the fun they had. I’d say the teacher’s motivation is the key to success”. (Daniel², second year student teacher, 2019).

Five student teachers (two men and three women, all in their second year of a three year bachelor’s programme) requested to test this lesson in their internships (Fachpraktikum) at various primary schools in the canton of Zug, Switzerland. They agreed to share their experiences for this article and were thus interviewed via email. They were asked how their lessons varied from the original design, and to reflect on the challenges and highlights of their own teaching experience, as well as sharing their observations of their students’ learning. It should be noted that the student teachers were working with classes they had only just met, for a period of only five weeks.

All five student teachers reported that they had a positive experience teaching the story drama to grade 3 students: They enjoyed teaching with drama and they received encouraging feedback from the mentors who were observing the lessons. Even Daniel – cited above – who did not particularly enjoy participating in the lesson as a student teacher, did enjoy teaching it and said he “would

do it again”. Reto, who co-taught with Daniel, felt that “the magical part of a drama lesson is the change it brings into everyday school life”. Patricia plans to try the lesson again with her future classes, and Emily stated: “I would totally teach with drama in education again! It is a wonderful method, although there is a lot I can improve and that I learnt”. A reoccurring theme that emerged in all five interviews was how challenging it is to facilitate a full-scale drama lesson. Two of the student teachers explicitly said their challenges mainly had to do with class size (one had 19 and the other had 23 students). Emily was able to work with half classes for one lesson, which she described as being a much more “harmonious” experience. Rebecca, who had the good fortune of teaching only six students, reflected that this made teaching the lessons much easier, although she felt that the students’ excitement about the drama was in itself challenging. Patricia pointed out that there was a lot to juggle, such as needing “to speak English, facilitate the drama, manage the class, remember the lesson plan, and keep an eye on the students”. However, Patricia adds that the experience required her to “jump out of my comfort zone, and that was great”. Daniel, too, felt that the fun factor was what made the lesson challenging. He states that classroom management was difficult as it was hard to calm the class enough to give them instructions. He adds: “Although there was a good vibe and the kids really liked it, I wouldn’t do it every lesson, otherwise the kids’ behaviour would get out of hand”. These thoughts reflect some of the challenges faced both by beginner teachers, as well as by teachers new to using drama-based pedagogies: A more experienced teacher might not feel that fun equates the promotion of poor behaviour in class.

The students were immersed in the story and deeply engaged in the drama work.

Using the Body to Mediate Meaning: Working with Primary Students

The student teachers also shared their observations of their students' learning. As mentioned previously, Daniel noticed that his own motivation had a direct – and positive – effect on the students' motivation. He also felt that the students responded well to singing and to the opportunity to move around during the lesson. He felt that the active lesson “really suits young learners”. Rebecca too, observed that the students were very active throughout the lesson. She states that: “even though they knew the story already they were really excited to ‘hear’ the story in a different way”. She adds that the class remained attentive throughout the lesson, and that they “learned the new vocabulary immensely fast because they used the new words in motion or in context”. This is particularly interesting, as it suggests that the group's familiarity with the story allowed for deeper learning of language chunks coupled with rhythm and movement.

In fact, the student teachers reported that the students were playing with the song and chants – speaking loudly and clearly, without worrying about making mistakes. Emily in particular reported observing the students playing with the language both during and outside of class. She says the students really wanted to express themselves in English and made good use of the language support provided on the blackboard (for example to express emotions). They responded positively to being given extra time for the thought tracking exercise, and students who had never spoken in English before were speaking up in class. She adds that the students showed their understanding through their use of body language, and by reacting with appropriate facial expressions. Emily felt that the students worked hard to pronounce the chant and the song correctly, and that they “spoke and sang loudly, without fear of making mistakes.”

In response to the question “did you feel that the learning with drama was different than in a conventional lesson?” both Emily and Patricia reported feeling that the students were learning “uncon-

sciously” and that they “forgot they were learning” because they were so engrossed in the story. Emily adds that the students “wanted to take part in the story - without caring in which language the story was told”, showing that the students were intrinsically motivated to engage with the story, even though it was in a foreign language. Reto notes that a child who was reported to be a weak learner of English by the classroom teacher “flourished while playing the story”. Emily adds that holding the lesson in a space outside the classroom for one lesson, as well as pushing back the desks in the regular classroom provided a different “setting” for the learners. Daniel felt that “because there was more movement the kids were more involved than usual”, adding that “they could come up with their own gestures for the new vocabulary – they really liked that part”. Rebecca reports having to replay key parts of the story, such as building “the three different houses several times,” so that every child had the chance to play a little pig.

I also had the opportunity to teach the lesson in a colleague's grade four class. My observations are in-line with those made by the student teachers: the students were immersed in the story and deeply engaged in the drama work. One boy was given a time out, as he was acting up a bit. When he was invited back, there was no further disruptive behaviour from him! Another boy was also a little too active, so I asked him to help me be the wolf. In a letter the class sent me afterwards, he wrote that he very much enjoyed being the wolf. I thought it was particularly telling that he was so engrossed in the role, that he forgot there was another wolf (me) present. After the lesson, a girl whose English was not very strong, was able to succinctly summarize the story in German; a wonderful example showing that “language learners use the body to mediate meaning” (Piazzoli, 2018, p. 28). The student had embodied the story, and understood it well enough to retell it in German. In the words of Varela et al. “By embodied, we mean reflection in which body and mind have been brought together” (1991, p. 27). Interestingly, the classroom teacher, who had observed my lesson, noted that an-

The learners connect
to the topic and to
elements of the
target language with
heart, body, and mind.

other student re-told the story in English using gestures to expand his vocabulary. This is a nice illustration of different learning styles at work.

In addition, another colleague, Karin, allowed me to observe her teaching the story drama to her grade three class. She adapted my original design to better suit her students, for example by having them work in smaller groups, each responsible for one house (straw, wood, brick). In an interview afterwards, she stated her amazement at how well the group took to the approach and how well they understood the story, despite not having had much previous drama experience. “The idea of embodiment ... conjures up a kind of learning that anchors tangible connections between language, emotions and the body” (Piazzoli, 2018, p. 323). Indeed, Karin later told me that her students were still quoting lines from the story – in English – several days after the lesson. “Engaging in drama-work, therefore, is not just play, it is preparing for life” (Göksel, 2019) – and that is what working with DiE is all about.

Conclusion

As Tschurtschenthaler reminds us, “learning another language is regarded as a holistic process which should involve the learners on different levels: affectively, cognitively, interactively and aesthetically” (2013, p. 38). Based on the experiences reported by the five student teachers and two classroom teachers mentioned in this article, embodying language and story through drama resulted in the students activating the target language (English) and enjoying the process. The learners connect to the topic and to elements of the target language with heart, body, and mind, displaying a recall of story details and language structures, days after the DiE lesson. Rebecca, for example, reports being asked to accompany her class in singing “who’s afraid of the big bad wolf” on a daily basis for the rest of her five week practicum. Reflection and repetition of target language structures therefore occurs naturally, driven by learner interest. Thus embodying language learning is so much more than just “acting out” a story: it truly “anchors tangible connections between language, emotions and the body” (Piazzoli, 2018, p. 323). Learners make connections between what they experience, what they feel, and what they say. This rich and multi-dimensional way of learning language is not only fun, it is also memorable and multi-sensorial, and must thus be considered a valuable educational tool in the foreign language classroom.

References

- Arnet-Clark et al. (2005): *Young World 1*. Zug: Klett & Balmer.
- Booth, D. (2005). *Story drama: Creating stories through role playing, improvising, and reading aloud*. Pembroke Publishers Limited.
- Göksel, E. (2019): Performative Professionalisation in the Context of Teacher Training: First Experiments with the Use of Drama-Based Pedagogies Across the Curriculum. *Scenario*, Volume XIII, Issue 01. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.1.6>
- Göksel, E. (2019): Playing with Possibilities: Drama and Core French in the Montessori Elementary Classroom in British Columbia, Canada. *Scenario*, Volume XIII, Issue 01. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.1.1>
- Neelands, J., & Goode, T. (2015). *Structuring drama work*. Cambridge University Press.
- Piazzoli, E. (2018). *Embodying Language in Action: The Artistry of Process Drama in Second Language Education*. Springer.
- Schewe, M. (2013). Taking stock and looking ahead: Drama pedagogy as a gateway to a performative teaching and learning culture. *Scenario: Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning and Research*, XIII (1), 5–23.
- Schewe, M. (1993). *Fremdsprache inszenieren: zur Fundierung einer dramapädagogischen Lehr- und Lernpraxis*. Zentrum für pädagogische Berufspraxis, Universität Oldenburg.
- Tschurtschenthaler, H. (2013). *Drama-based foreign language learning: Encounters between self and other*. Waxmann Verlag.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, Project MUSE.