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# Drama Activities to Support Oral Communication and Interaction in English Language Learning in French Higher Education: Still a long way to go...

Virginie Privas-Bréauté

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Stefanie Giebert / Eva Göksel (Eds.)

# Dramapädagogik- Tage 2019 Drama in Education Days 2019

Conference Proceedings  
of the 5th Annual Conference  
on Performative Language Teaching and Learning

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# Dramapädagogik- Tage 2019

## Drama in Education Days 2019

Conference Proceedings of the 5th Annual Conference on  
Performative Language Teaching and Learning

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# Inhaltsverzeichnis

I.	Vorwort.....	5
I.	Foreword.....	8
II.	Keynotes .....	11
1	<b>Patrice Baldwin</b> Drama for Learning – Why it works and is wonderful.....	12
2	<b>Jonathan Neelands &amp; Eva Göksel</b> Popular Theatre in Populist Times: A Dialogue with Jonathan Neelands .....	19
III.	Aktionsforschung: Lehrende erforschen ihren Unterricht	
	Action Research: Teachers Examine their Teaching Practice.....	31
3	<b>Serena Cecco</b> Interpret-AZIONE: Improvisation Theatre to Improve Interpreters’ Skills .....	32
4	<b>Alexandra Hensel</b> Was kann performativ-ästhetischer Fremdsprachenunterricht?.....	42
5	<b>Virginie Privas-Bréauté</b> Drama Activities to Support Oral Communication and Interaction in English Language Learning in French Higher Education: Still a long way to go... ..	53
IV.	Wirkungsforschung	
	Researching Effects of/on Drama in Education Practices.....	68
6	<b>Eva Göksel</b> Mit Herz und Hand unterrichten: Das Potenzial von Drama in Education in der Schweizer Lehrer- und Lehrerinnenbildung .....	69
7	<b>Jenna Nilson</b> Outcomes of Using Drama-Based Pedagogy in Foreign and Second Language Classes in Schools and Universities: A Meta-Study.....	78



8	<b>Andreas Wirag</b> Schüler/-innen mit hoher und niedriger Theateraktivität durch Dramapädagogik differenziert fördern.....	88
V.	Reflektierte Praxis: Workshops Reflected Practice: Workshops.....	113
9	<b>Stefanie Giebert</b> Overcoming Challenges in Teaching Languages with Drama.....	114
10	<b>Anke Stöver-Blahak</b> Notizen zur Diskussionsrunde zum Thema «Performative Lehr-, Lern- und Forschungskultur» an den Dramapädagogik-Tagen 2019 in Zug, Schweiz.....	130
11	<b>Franziska Trischler &amp; Tanya Wittal-Düerkop</b> Selbsterlebtes in Szene setzen.....	143
12	<b>Corina Venzin</b> Motivations-Booster Körper .....	166
VI.	Über die Autor/-innen About the Authors.....	182



## 5 Drama Activities to Support Oral Communication and Interaction in English Language Learning in French Higher Education: Still a long way to go...

*The didactic value of drama in language teaching has been evident to teachers for a long time, first in primary schools, then in secondary schools and now in higher education. Research in neuroscience has provided a scientific framework for such pedagogical experiments. The paradigm of enaction (Varela, 1993, 1996), which falls within the theories of embodied cognition, has lent strong credibility to language learning through drama (Aden, 2012, 2017). As an English teacher at a French university, I offer my students opportunities to practice their oral communication and interaction skills through drama activities and I have collected their understanding of the didactic value of drama in language classes for improving their linguistic oral abilities in English. In this article, which is based on my talk at the Drama in Education Days 2019, I will examine the results of post-graduate English students' questionnaires to demonstrate that drama activities need to be implemented far earlier than is currently the case in higher education in the French schooling system.*

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## 1. Introduction

I have been an English teacher since 1999 and a theatre practitioner for about as long. After defending my PhD in English studies (in which I explored the religious dimension of the Northern Irish conflict in contemporary plays) in 2007, I started introducing drama activities and techniques in English classes (in French primary schools, secondary schools and higher education for undergraduates) so as to verify the didactic value of drama for learning English. A few years later, after obtaining positive and interesting results analyzed according to the neuroscientific enactive paradigm (Varela, 1993, 1996; Aden, 2017) (see section 2), I started working with student teachers. I have become interested in how the didactic value of drama is perceived in higher education by post-graduates when drama is introduced to learn and/or consolidate language competences. Thus, I introduced drama activities in an English language course with Masters' students with different curricula (student teachers, research students and translation students) gathered in the same English class and aiming to strengthen their oral skills. My research hypotheses were threefold:

1. Depending on the degree programme, the students' expectations of the course would be different so they would have different perceptions of a drama-based teaching approach,
2. Most of the students would appreciate a drama-based approach when it comes to consolidating oral skills because it is fun to play roles and it invites them to speak more,
3. Student teachers would be more concerned by educational drama than research and translation students since at their university, many teachers are aware of drama activities and teach them that drama falls within an action-oriented approach of language learning/teaching by promoting communication and interaction.

In light of the research context (a university language course) and my theoretical framework (the enaction paradigm), I chose to work with questionnaires. After having the students do drama activities before the final project, which consisted in playing scenes from a Northern Irish play, I used questionnaires to collect their impressions on the



course. I also took pictures, videos and field notes of the final performances, which were not graded. I was particularly interested in pointing out the students' language skills and their use of body language. In this article, I will give a brief overview of my theoretical framework before listing the details of the experimental course. A discussion will then follow the presentation of my results and the analysis of the data collected in the questionnaires during the semester.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In *Drama Techniques in Language Learning, a Resource Book of Communication Activities for Language Teachers*, Maley and Duff write that learning a language is not only a matter for the brain, it also involves the body and emotions:

Language is not purely an intellectual matter. Our minds are attached to our bodies, and our bodies to our minds. The intellect rarely functions without an element of emotion, yet it is so often just this element that is lacking in teaching material. Drama attempts to put back some of this forgotten emotional content into language – and to put the body back too. (Maley & Duff, 1993:7)

Indeed, many language teachers have felt that role-plays and drama activities are powerful educational measures in language teaching and learning (Baldwin, 2009; Schewe & Shaw, 1993).

Recent research in neuroscience shows that languages cannot be developed cognitively without the help of bodies and emotions, a theory that has come to be known as “embodied cognition” (Lawrence et Shapin, 1998). In *Introduction aux sciences cognitives*, Varela (1993, 1996) focuses on how human beings acquire knowledge and studies how they learn a language. His scientific research in cognitive neuroscience led him to develop the paradigm of “enaction” which falls within the theory of “embodied cognition”.

According to Varela, sheer reasoning does not exist: separating reason and emotion is a mistake (Varela in Trocmé-Fabre, 1994). Reasoning is always affected by emotions. For Varela (1996), emotions are thus part and parcel of the learning process. Thought is not separated from the body and emotions (Colombetti, 2010), thought and speech are incorporated, they are incarnated, and cognition is enacted.

After examining research in cognitive sciences and language acquisition, linguists Lakoff and Johnson have equally come to the conclusion that “reason is not disembodied, as





tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies and bodily experience” and that “reason is not dispassionate but emotionally engaged” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 4). Thus, if human beings learn from bodily experiences, then students can learn languages through bodily experiences as well; and drama offers them this chance.

In light of Varela’s research, Aden (2012, 2017) experimented with the use of drama in language classes and examined the cognitive development of language learners through drama in light of the paradigm of “enaction”. She has demonstrated that, through drama, students interact among themselves and with their environment, thus developing their linguistic abilities and expressing their emotions verbally or non-verbally. They are more cognitively engaged in their learning process. It is in this context that my scientific research has emerged.

### **3. Drama as a pedagogical tool**

#### ***Presentation of the course***

The course based on drama that I examined in my study was conducted from September to December 2017. It consisted of six two-hour lessons. The participants, 45 Masters’ degree students, were enrolled in a variety of diploma degrees at the University of Lorraine in Nancy (France). One fourth of the students wanted to work in translation, half were more interested in research in English studies and the last fourth were student teachers of English. This course aimed at strengthening oral skills in English, and, to do so, I offered the participants the possibility to stage a short contemporary Northern Irish play in two acts (*Ourselves Alone* by Anne Devlin). Thus, the students were taught about Northern Ireland, Northern Irish history, drama and Northern Irish drama. They also had to carry out tasks based on drama activities and games inspired by process drama and improv warmups and exercises.

My unit aimed at the progressive development and consolidation of knowledge (on drama and Northern Irish history) and linguistic skills (phonological, lexical) enabling the performance of the chosen play. Since I had noticed in my previous experiments that furniture could be a hindrance to theatrical performance (Privas-Bréauté, 2016), the course was held in the performing arts rehearsal hall of the university where there is scarcely any furniture. During the first lesson, the students were thus able to discover this unusual classroom, the overall project as well as the pedagogical objectives and the steps



to reach it. The second part of this lesson was devoted to discovering the history of Ireland and Northern Ireland based on the students' knowledge and a slide show designed by the teacher. This first lesson was thus an opportunity to address points of history, culture and geography, useful for research or/and translation students, and enriching the general culture them all.

The second lesson was devoted to the gradual introduction of drama techniques to prepare bodies and voices for performances. A first work on breath was carried out in order to make the learners aware of the impact that breathing can have on voice. Then body awareness exercises inspired by theatrical improvisation techniques allowed students to become aware of their bodies in space and warm up their vocal cords. These included directions such as “in circle, close your eyes. Now, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.” (see appendix 1 for other directions).

Then, to create team cohesion, I asked them to make a circle (again), present themselves to the group, starting with “Hello, I am”, adding an adjective about themselves, a gesture and a tone. Everybody had to repeat the person’s “hello”, their name, their adjective and their gesture with the same intonation and intention. Another activity was to think about an object. Then they had to imagine they were holding it have it and had to pass it on to the person on their right. This object could change forms, weights, sizes and so on.

To finish, students had to repeat tongue twisters faster and faster. These could include: “I have got a date at a quarter to eight; I’ll see you at the gate, so don’t be late”, “nine nice night nurses nursing nicely”, “red lorry, yellow lorry”.

These exercises were meant to become the vocal and body warm-up that opened each of our lessons. It was from this lesson that a ‘class ritual’ including breath and breathing control activities, vocal warm-ups and body awakening was created as the preparation phase of the theatrical work. The English phonetics were then reviewed through the pronunciation of English vowels, more tongue twisters, and a contemporary Northern Irish song, “Zombie” by the Cranberries, with a music video. In this work, students had to analyze the prosody, lexical fields and syntax of the lyrics to better understand “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland.

The introduction of drama techniques continued with the following lesson and was accompanied by activities based on process drama:



a) dynamizing games to stimulate speech in a foreign language and create a playful atmosphere. For example, a learner had to cover his eyes and move in the room only thanks to the directions of his partner. All the other students were obstacles along the way. The guide could only say the following words: right, left, in front of you, behind you, stop.

b) discovery games to foster verbal exchanges from non-verbal prompts, without embodying any particular character. For instance, in pairs, student A mimed who he/she was to student B choosing 5 elements but only 1 characteristic based on "I like"/ "I hate". Student B said what he/she understood from the mime. Then it was student B's turn,

c) verbal (as well as non-verbal) scenes to express oneself / speak when embodying a character. For example, in groups, they had to prepare a particular situation which would be included in a performed TV news bulletin. Each student had to talk for at least 2 minutes and could use props / accessories if he/she wanted. The groups were assigned the following themes:

- group 1: (only two persons) TV presentation (anchormen/-women)
- group 2: riots in London
- group 3: migration in France
- group 4: strong winds in Ireland
- group 5: cultural report
- group 6: the weather forecast

The groups then performed the news bulletin in front of the rest of the class.

These exercises and activities were all based on Payet's book *Activités Théâtrales en classe de langue* (2010). Students' bodies, minds and voices could thus get progressively prepared for the play. These lessons were accompanied by individualized feedback from the teacher on the linguistic quality of each of the students who performed in front of the class.

I then asked the students if they knew why I had decided to implement drama activities to help them improve their speaking and listening skills. Many students understood the importance of these techniques in the context of language learning but few students could



explain it. Therefore, I justified my pedagogical choice by explaining the paradigm of enaction and the advantages of artistic practices in the language classroom.

The students discovered the aesthetic dimension of theatre in lesson 4 in a lecture I gave. I provided them with the theoretical apparatus and methodology for studying a contemporary play, and then I gave them information about the theatre environment in Northern Ireland and the author of the play that would be studied and performed in lessons 5 and 6. I wanted them to learn about drama as a genre to then understand the play, the intentions, the characters, to understand all the stakes of that play before their performance. The students were asked to work in groups on a specific theme related to the play (e.g. time, place, didactics, dialogues, monologues, gestures, etc.) and then provide an oral presentation of their theme, showing the meaning, symbolism and message behind the playwright's work. I, again, gave individual feedback on the linguistic and oral quality of each student's English so that they could improve it.

The last two lessons were devoted to group study of each scene from Act 1 (lesson 5) and Act 2 (lesson 6) for which every student was assigned a role. The staging and acting were free, without directions from the teacher. The scenes were presented in a chronological order respectful of the play. As students were playing in front of the class again, this allowed me to provide individualized feedback on the quality of the students' oral language and analyze body language.

This plan respects the three phases that I have come up with after experiencing many drama activities (Privas-Bréauté, 2019) and that teachers can follow when introducing drama in a language lesson. The first phase is called "the preparation phase" and comprises a) warm-up activities to waken all the senses of the students, b) cohesion games to stimulate students to speak and create a playful atmosphere and interaction among students, c) discovery activities defined as any activity that promotes verbal exchange without interpreting a role, a character, and d) preparatory tasks to prepare the performance phase. Teachers need to devote much time to these activities to help students get ready to play. The preparation phase is crucial in that respect: it enables learners to become aware of their bodies and their emotions, and to get to know each other from perspectives others than scholarly ones. Moreover, carefully following these activities one week after another helps create some kind of ritual with which students



become progressively familiar and confident. This leads to establishing a positive and familiar atmosphere.

The second phase is known as “the performance phase” and consists in playing roles, embodying characters and being immersed in communication situations in groups in front of the rest of the class. The long preparation phase may enable students to act more freely, to be more confident, to trust the others and be free and creative when they play during this performance phase. One of the goals is also to deter fear of judgement by making every student take part in the process drama activities so that they were all in the same situation.

The last phase is “the exploitation phase”: students and teacher go back to the skits they have seen and tell the performers what they liked and what they did not like, as well as justifying their comments. This step is important if students want to improve their competences. This is always done in a benevolent atmosphere, the goal being to be constructive and not to judge the others or laugh at them. This step aims at transforming feedback (what students receive) into feedforward (raising awareness of how students can improve) (Duncan, 2017).

After the six lessons, the students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire to express their impressions of drama as a pedagogical tool for enabling the improvement of oral skills in English.



Enquête de satisfaction Cours de langue orale qualité linguistique M2	
<b>1. A propos de vous</b>	- Avez-vous le sentiment que votre anglais oral a progressé ? oui / non Pourquoi?
Homme Femme	- Ce cours vous a permis (classer par ordre décroissant) :
Age	- De mieux prononcer
Master 2 ?	- De travailler votre respiration
Etudiant(e) à l'université de Lorraine depuis	- De mieux articuler
Parcours universitaire de la L3 au M2 (année/	- De revoir votre intonation
diplôme/ intitulé)	- De revoir votre accentuation
	- De prendre confiance en vous
<b>2. A propos du cours de langue orale / qualité linguistique</b>	- D'être plus à l'aise devant un public
	- D'occuper tout l'espace
- Qu'attendiez-vous de ce cours?	- Autre :
	<b>3. Vos impressions</b>
-Avez-vous atteint vos objectifs? oui / non Pourquoi?	Avez-vous été satisfait de ce cours ? oui / non Pourquoi ?
-Avez-vous été surpris par le dispositif d'apprentissage que votre professeur vous a proposé ? oui / non	Décrivez votre expérience de ce cours en quelques mots/ lignes
- Ce cours vous a-t-il motivé ? oui / non Pourquoi?	Est-ce un dispositif à conserver en M2? oui / non
	Proposez des pistes d'amélioration

*Table 1 - Questionnaire*

#### 4. Collection of data

The data I collected were composed of a) photos and films I took during the preparation and performance phases, b) the online questionnaire (Table 1) and c) field notes. This research methodology has enabled me to get qualitative as well as quantitative results. For this article, I will only focus on the quantitative results brought by the questionnaires.

#### 5. Data analysis

30 students out of 45 responded, which accounts for 66.6%. For this article, I will analyse the most relevant results starting with a presentation of the general results before breaking them down according to students' academic profiles.

#### **Gender**

This class was composed of 30% men and 70% women. Therefore, when reading the results, we might bear in mind that we may get a more feminine approach to drama used in an English class than a masculine one.



### ***Degree Programmes Represented***

Students involved in research represent about half of the respondents (48.28%), the other half being composed of 13.79% translation students, and 37.93% student teachers.

### ***Expectations***

When asked about their expectations about this course, a large majority of students (about 60%) said they wanted to improve their oral skills in terms of phonology (pronunciation, stress, intonation) and prosody. And indeed, a brief course description available to the students had announced the course to be on phonological consolidation. Others wanted the course to be the opportunity to improve their fluency. After the course, 46% of the students reported that the course had met their expectations. However, more than half of them did not reach their objectives (51%) or did not know if they had reached them (3%). Students' different degree programmes did not seem to have an effect on their perception of reaching their objectives.

### ***Being surprised by drama as an educational measure***

Since drama is rarely used as a pedagogical tool in French schools, I wanted to know if students were surprised by its use in this course at the Master's degree level. 76.6% said they were. Student teachers were the least surprised (63.64%) while research students were the most surprised (85.71%). Three fourths of translation students were surprised but one fourth was not. I think that the reason for this is that student teachers are used to being told about the didactic and pedagogical values of drama in English / language classes by many teachers at my university whereas research students and translation students often work on written texts and are trained to take a stance in very precise topics during debates. They are not used to standing up in class, using their bodies, or playing roles.

### ***Motivation***

The students seemed to come to class willingly even though they never knew what I would ask them to do, to play, to perform. The result of the motivational degree of their participation confirms this. 100% of translation students and 81.82% of student teachers were motivated, a result which comes as a stark contrast against research students: more than half of them were not motivated by the use of drama (53.85%).



The students were asked to explain the reasons why they liked the course or not. The explanations were varied. Some students explained they were motivated because they felt they were gaining self-confidence speaking in public, some said they liked the fact the activities were unexpected, others responded that the room was so unusual that they liked it, they appreciated moving around the room freely. In contrast to that, some students reported they disliked the course because they were not interested in Northern Ireland and/or drama, others were not at ease, even stressed out, the activities were not appropriate. They did not seem to be learning and working, so they said.

### ***Finding some satisfaction***

The following question confirms the preceding results. Less than half of the students were not satisfied by the course (46.6%). If translation students were the most satisfied (75%), followed by student teachers (72.73%), research students were the least satisfied (21.43%). They explained they would have preferred pronunciation exercises or debates on topical subjects for instance.

Results show that research students do not feel they are working when they practice drama. When asked why, they would answer many times that this was a “childish”, “playful” activity and they did not get “real language improvement”.

### ***Improving oral skills***

Even if they liked this drama-based approach and were mainly satisfied, most of the students, from every degree programme, did not feel they improved their oral skills. The reasons they gave had first to do with the numbers of students in the class. They would advise keeping the approach (process drama was the most interesting for them) but adapting it to fewer students so that they could practice English individually more and more effectively. They felt they had spent too much time using their bodies and not their voices (especially during the warm-up exercises based on improv warm up games). Learning how to breathe was also an activity they did not appreciate, and thought it was too long. Some were rather optimistic and said that even if the language was not improved, they felt other competences were developed. This last type of answer invites me to see that some students could see the link between introducing drama and drama techniques and their university training, but did not know how to voice it. Most of them remained stuck on efficiency in practicing English and were somehow frustrated or





disappointed. None were able to clearly relate drama activities and pre-professional training.

## **6. Discussion**

The analysis of the data has helped me classify the strengths and weaknesses of the approach in a context of language learning and in light of the enaction paradigm.

### ***Strengths***

My data show that drama indeed promoted more interaction among students and between students and their environment. Oral language practice was encouraged, and the use of the body came to support verbal expression, be it to illustrate what students were saying or to compensate for their lack of words. Following an action-oriented approach to language learning, drama activities invited students to work autonomously, either individually or in groups, and facilitated creativity and personal interpretation. These are competences that do not only pertain to language learning since they are transferable to other realms, including vocational training, such as gaining self-confidence, speaking confidently in public, making decisions for the whole group, leading, organizing ideas and so forth. Other competences linked to the management of time and space (pertaining to skills linked to corporality, emotions, kinesthesia) are also included. Finally, the thread of the whole course, drama in Northern Ireland, gave cultural substance to the lessons, week after week.

### ***Weaknesses***

Obviously, drama (improv warm-ups, process drama and playing) was not appreciated by the students who did not like having too much autonomy and lacked some creativity. This type of student generally prefers to get strong guidance from teachers and has a different idea of work. They are reassured when they work sitting at a desk. Due to these aspects, drama was too unusual for them to be at ease during the lessons.

### ***Answers to the three hypotheses***

The results I got after the course helped me test the three above-mentioned hypotheses. The first hypothesis - "Depending on the diploma and curricula of students, there will be different perceptions"- has been confirmed. It seems that translation students were curious about the approach, student teachers were also interested while research



students did not fully appreciate it. The second hypothesis - “Most of the students would appreciate the approach when it comes to consolidating oral skills” - is not correct since a large majority of the students did not feel they improved their oral skills. Finally, the idea that student teachers would be more sensitive and interested in the tool is correct but not as clearly expressed as I would have thought.

## 7. Conclusions

For four decades now, it has been demonstrated that drama activities, falling within an enactive paradigm, facilitate language learning and develop communicative competences. They enable many other competences to emerge such as self-confidence, time and space management, leadership etc. As my previous research with other English language students before shows, drama activities are also pre-professionalising in so far as they enable participants to co-construct professional competences within a group (Privas-Bréauté, 2013, 2016, 2017). Yet, the very few hours of courses I had for this experimentation and the large number of participants did not permit me to fully verify all this. It was indeed too difficult for most students to engage in the activities. Moreover, it seems that introducing drama in its aesthetic dimension was not meaningful for many Master’s research students and some translation students. Therefore, if I can make some recommendations to teachers willing to implement drama games and drama activities to foster linguistic skills and introduce it in vocational training situations, in light of the results I have had so far, I would say: 1. devote more time to your lessons (drama requires time), 2. keep the number of participants down (no more than 30), 3. depending on the objectives of your students, introduce role plays and not drama in its aesthetic dimension (i.e. staging a play), or do not impose it but propose it (in workshops for example). In France more particularly, and in other countries with similar educational policies, it would also be a good idea to introduce drama very early and nurture it through secondary education instead of abandoning it. This will help learners get used to using bodies, voices and emotions in school contexts first and later in professional situations.

## Appendix 1

Other directions for this preparatory phase included:

- say yes with your head/ say no with your head and keep your eyes open so as to greet your classmates. Look at everyone



- draw circles with your hips (right and left)
- draw circles with your knees
- warm up your feet and ankles
- massage your body from head to toe
- clean the inside of your mouth with your tongue
- imagine you're holding a candle in front of you (students had to put their right arms and thumbs in front of them) and you want to blow it out. Make it flicker and blow as long as you can
- neutral walk. Occupy all the space. At my signal, walk faster. At my signal, slow down. Then, walk backwards. Now, walk on tip toe, walk on the inside of your feet, walk on the outside of your feet.
- keep walking. I'm going to say a number and a body part and you must gather and touch the body parts of the members of your group (5 knees - 4 elbows- 2 hands - 8 feet).

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