Personal Reflections on the Concept of "Language Teaching as an Art," Based on a Critical Evaluation of In-class Presentations, Discussions, and Practical Exercises

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Abstract

This study describes, evaluates, and reflects upon the in-class presentations, discussions, and practical activities that took place in the course Language Teaching as an Art. This elective course was part of the Applied Linguistics Master's Degree curriculum at the University College Cork, taught by the pioneering scholar of drama in education, Prof. Manfred Schewe.

Key words: Drama, teaching methodologies/approaches, reflection, critical evaluation, education.

Introduction

Around the world, the prevailing perspective considers teaching to be a science whose optimal goal is to elevate the efficiency and productivity of learners at both the pre-university and university levels. This belief has been promulgated and perpetuated in most educational research papers which, for instance, accept the methods of the natural sciences as the standard paradigm for investigation and hypothesizing. The findings of such papers have had a two-fold effect, both on the types of curricula (i.e., textbooks) used in schools and on the kinds of teaching methodologies available for teachers in pre-service and in-service training courses. Unfortunately, the application of such methods has not yielded remarkable outcomes. Instead, their effects can be considered disastrous, as the "results of national and international tests in regard to the basic skills of reading and mathematics along with a clear deficit in pupils' scientific knowledge have made educational reform one of the most pressing issues" (Lutzker, 2007, p. 10). Some educational authorities have even suggested changing the current understanding of teaching as a science to that of an art.

The viewpoint that teaching is more of an art than a science is based on the belief that "teaching demands sensitivities and skills which are far closer to those required of artists, than

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those of scientists" (ibid, p. 12). In other words, if teachers believe in the theory of multiple intelligences, which states that students can have distinct learning abilities (for example, while some rely on visual analytical processing ability, others are dependent on phonetic analytical ability [Haley, 2004]), this implies that they will seek to design lessons that integrate multiple teaching approaches/activities such as drama which comprises "role-play, simulation, scenario, enactment, mime, song, and the writing and performing of plays or sketches" (Borge, 2007, p. 3). Thus, such teachers would focus on each of their student's strengths to reach to their ultimate goal of enabling all students to attain impressive outcomes.

The Art of Teaching

One example of an educator who supports the revised view of understanding teaching is Elliot Eisner. In his book 'The Educational Imagination' (1985), he allocated a chapter — 'The Art of Teaching'— to set forth four reasons that made him define teaching as an art:

> First, it is an art in the sense that teaching can be performed with such skill and grace that, for the student as well as for the teacher, the experience can be justifiably characterized as aesthetic…Second, teaching is an art in the sense that teachers, like painters, composers, actresses, and dancers, make judgments based largely on qualities that unfold during the course of action…Third, teaching is an art in the sense that the teacher's activity is not dominated by prescriptions or routines but is influenced by qualities and contingencies that are unpredicted…Fourth, teaching is an art in the sense that the ends it achieves are often created in process…it is in these four senses—teaching as a source of aesthetic experience, as dependent on the perception and control of qualities, as a heuristic or adventitious activity, and as seeking emergent ends—that teaching can be regarded as an art. (pp. 175-177)

Teaching foreign languages (L2s) has gradually come to be seen as an art rather than a science (i.e., drama has become accepted as a subject both to be included in the curriculum and as a method of teaching). In the 18th and much of the 19th century, *Grammar Translation* was the preferred method of foreign language teachers, who regarded language learning as a mental exercise and reading skill rather than including speaking skills (Lutzker, 2007; Morales-Jones, 2002/2007/2011). This kind of teaching approach sees no advantage to involving dramatic activities in the classroom (Lutzker, 2007). However, toward the end of

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the 19th century, teaching students to speak modern languages gained popularity as a result of the emergence of the *Direct* method (Lutzker, 2007; Morales-Jones, 2002/ 2007/2011).

For Vietor (1882, as cited in Lutzker, 2007, p. 225) L2 teachers should seek to improve of their students' language capabilities, rather than language knowledge, by making the L2 the sole medium of instruction. "This opened up new possibilities for the inclusion of dramatic elements in foreign language learning" and paved the way for other teaching approaches to follow (Lutzker, 2007, p. 225). According the latter author and Morales-Jones (2002/2007/2011), such humanistic approaches, including *Audio-lingual*, *The Silent Way*, *Suggestopedia*, *Community Language Learning*, *Natural*, and *Total Physical Response*, started in the 1970s. In spite of the differences between these methods, they share some similar underlying characteristics, one of which is a focus on naturalizing language acquisition through various types of communication activities rather than structured language learning. Even though these activities did not necessarily include dramatic elements, they were often held in natural and convenient settings to help teachers enhance learners' self-confidence and creativity.

The Role of Drama

Dramatic elements started to play an increasing role and were incorporated into communication activities when the communicative approach ascended in popularity in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, some scholars considered a number of these activities to be not "connected to the underlying principles of educational drama" but rather to "behavioristic approach [principles] to language learning" in the sense that they were constructed for ad hoc situations and required a "pre-planned use of language" (Lutzker, 2007, p. 229). Schewe (1993, p. 144, as cited in Lutzker, 2007, p. 229), who examined a large selection of dramatic exercises in textbooks for teaching German, stated that "dialogues that have no blank spaces, create no tensions and present no mysteries are un-dramatic. There are too many of this sort in our textbooks." The gradual but increasingly rapid development and popularity of the communicative approach in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, which focused on "more open forms of learning," also heightened interest in using "dramatic techniques in language teaching" (Lutzker, 2007, p. 230). Thus, Schewe and Scott (2003) maintained that from the 1990s on, drama has been recognized as an accepted "reference discipline [in the teaching of]…the modern languages" (p. 60).

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However, Makedon (1990) stressed that the transition from viewing teaching as a science to seeing it as an art is still challenging in that teachers are inclined to regard teaching as a matter of either/or rather than a combination of both. It is true that whether a teacher sees teaching as an art or a science depends on what definitions they adopt and what goals they articulate, but effective teaching combines both science and art and teachers have to know how they might work in tandem. Makedon (1990, p. 11) further explained that the art and science cannot exist in separate spheres in any creative activity—an artist must employ the curiosity and observation of the scientist to express his or her ideas and feelings, and a scientist must incorporate the imagination and passion of an artist in the pursuit of truth. An artist observes objective reality but is not so much concerned with why the world is that way it is as in transforming it through the filter of subjective intuition. Thus, artistic creation is from the inside out and is primarily egocentric. A scientist, on the other hand, works with outside facts and then adds what is learned to mankind's store of knowledge. Hence, scientific creation is from the outside in and is primarily altruistic. A teacher must partake in both method because they must be both egocentric and altruistic. For an artist, whether mankind profits from his work is largely irrelevant. What is important is that the subjective transformation of the external world is true to the artist's belief about what lies beneath the objective facts. Yet, a teacher who is only an artist would have little or no concern as to whether or not his or her students were learning. For a scientist, improvement is the main goal, but scientific methods are formalistic and exclude personal feeling—a teacher who is only a scientist would want students to learn but would be unable to motivate them or instill enthusiasm (ibid, see also Marzano, 2007).

In addition, Weisman (2012) emphasized the fact that,

> There is both an art and a science dimension to effective teaching. The science dimension is concerned with a comprehensive knowledge of the subject matter, including its historical foundations and research on the frontiers of the discipline. The art dimension, which is likely to be the more elusive of the two, is the ability to convey complex material in terms that are readily understand-able to willing and sometimes unwilling students. (p. 113)

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My Personal Experience and Dynamic Shift in Thinking

I have to admit that before taking the elective course Language Teaching as an Art with Prof. Manfred Schewe, one of the many valuable course options in the curriculum of the Master's degree program in Applied Linguistic at University College Cork, 2012, I used to hold traditional perspectives toward teaching, not knowing about the existence of any alternatives. In fact, my view of teaching as a science had been formed during my experiences as a student in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where English is the most prominent second language and is still taught using the same old structural methodologies. Similarly, as a pre-undergraduate and undergraduate student EFL teacher, I taught using such long-established approaches because they were the only ones that I had learned. While not intending to imply that learning communicative teaching methods and activities was the only benefit I gained from the course, I will reflect on the practical exercises, in-class presentations, and related discussions; the items I will analyze will necessarily be selective, due to the word count limit of this paper.

In the introductory lecture for the course, Prof. Schewe raised two general questions: first, "What are the concepts of effective teaching?" (i.e., What should we postgraduate students expect from teaching if it is applied as an art and as a science?); second, "What is a good teacher?" We then discussed in small groups, three groups with two students and one group with three students.

Discussing the questions in small groups and then supplying the teacher with our answers consumed almost 40 minutes for the first question and around 30 minutes for the second one. During the discussions, I sensed that not only was Prof. Schewe "withholding information…[to] arouse…[our] curiosity and interest," but also that he wanted to "enable [us] to refer to [our] experiences and understandings [of the world of teaching] before [he] suppl[ied his] (factual) teacher knowledge" (Schewe, 1998, pp. 206–220). That is probably why his role, to a large extent, consisted merely of writing our answers on the board. Only at the end of the class, did he offer his own answers and then read some extracts from Lutzker (2007) to elucidate the disputes that had been going on between scholars in the field for almost three decades. Because the students in the class came from different cultures and educational backgrounds, our answers varied. Yet, in general, our responses led me to later conclude that we all had suffered from old-fashioned ways of teaching L2. Had our previous instructors viewed themselves as artists, our fluency and productivity in the target language would likely have been enriched and our motivation might have been stronger.

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In the second lecture, there was a dramatic, abrupt change in the type of course material presented in class. At the postgraduate level, you would normally expect the teacher to supply book titles for further reading and to discuss the major issues—mostly the ones that remained unresolved—in the field of teaching as an art to spark students' eagerness to search for their own answers. However, Prof. Schewe began the lecture with the children's story *Fredrick* by Leo Lionni (1973). The tale is about a group of mice who work in the field gathering grain and nuts for the winter. Frederick, instead of working with the group, sits on a sunny rock and tells them one day that he is gathering the sun rays. Another day he claims to be gathering colors, and then words. When the food runs out during the winter season, it is Frederick, the dreamer and poet, who warms the hearts of his fellow mice and feeds their spirits with his endless store of creative supplies. For me as a postgraduate student, this class was unexpectedly full of joy and laughter. On the other hand, it was very hard to draw a link between the story and the subject I was studying. The teacher clarified by saying, "Let your imagination guide you."

In so doing, I discerned several similarities between the characters in the story and real-life teachers. For example, Frederick could symbolize the few teachers who see the power and effectiveness of applying artistic elements to teaching modern languages, while the other mice could symbolize the many other teachers who are still in sympathy with the old approaches. Both types of approaches have potential, but to me, the only reason the former has been underestimated is that it has not yet been successfully applied to large populations of students in different countries. Another thing that crossed my mind as I was writing this is, "What if teachers managed to combine dramatic elements with the old approaches?" My supposition is that this combination would not only improve students' language fluency but also their self-confidence.

Prof. Schewe integrated several kinds of practical, dramatic activities into his lectures. And in some of them, we all had to take part. The purpose of these activities was to show us, postgraduate students who had almost no previous experience with such methods, at least at a university level, how to apply them. In addition, they allowed us to experience the benefits of using them to teach a foreign language and its culture.

Prof. Schewe contended elsewhere (1993, as cited in Weiss, 2007, p. 24) that the perennial problem for language teachers and learners is that they work on literature, culture, and language in isolation. For me, the most effective way to integrate these components was through "Multiple Hotseating" activity, a variation of which was developed by Even (2011, p.

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1) in which one student takes the hot seat in the middle of the class and impersonates a particular character from a story, an image, or a film clip. The other students sit in a circle around him/her and ask questions. The application of multiple hotseating by Prof. Schewe was very dynamic in the sense that six students participated and there was a short story included in the activity. Three female students were in the hot seats in front of the class first, two Irish and one Chinese. The scenario proposed by the teacher, from which the rest of the students had to form their questions, was that of a famous football player who had recently broken up with his girlfriend. Thus, the three women had to imagine themselves as athletic men. To me, the most interesting question was one that I asked, "How many girlfriends do you have?"

The response of the Chinese participant was very typical of what a woman, especially a Chinese one, might answer, "Oh, what kind of a question is that…not right, not appropriate, Talal!" Surely, it was not the answer of a man since men in general have different, innovative ways for handling such questions. Having said that, I think the inappropriateness she saw in my question was driven by the fact that she had trouble seeing herself as a Western man, perhaps due to her cultural background. Moreover, there is the fact that the most prominent reasons for the break-up of relationships in Western society are either betrayal, losing physical attractiveness, or doubts about faithfulness, which she did not seem to be aware of.

Next, the teacher asked three male students: one Irish and two Saudis—I was one of them—to imagine themselves as the broken-hearted girlfriend. What was amazing about this procedure was that my Saudi male friend, who was mostly silent in class, provided the most effective answers. Also, because he and I came from the same cultural background, one distinct from that of our Irish colleague and one in which such impersonation would be regarded as unethical and unacceptable, we relied on our Irish friend to initiate the answers. Our role consisted of adding information that we thought would be culturally relevant and suitable. I think the overall benefit for me was that, for the first time in my whole process of learning the English language, I witnessed how inevitable it is that the target language is linked to its culture and that this needs to be taken into consideration when teaching.

With respect to the in-class presentations, each student was requested to take one single article from the Scenario Journal for analysis. The analyses were to discuss and identify the major points and the problems, if any, in the articles. With the weekly presentations and discussions, I noticed that my theoretical and practical knowledge was increasing tremendously.

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I gained three main benefits from the theoretical part of the course. First, I have become familiar with dramatic concepts such as "playback theater dramaturgy" (Feldhendler, 2007, p. 49) and gained knowledge about using theater in language learning (i.e., its model, developments, and objectives [Aita, 2009]). Second, I have realized how flexible drama is in its potential application for teachers to shape it to suit their lessons' objectives. For example, Giebert (2011) described a project at Reutling University for teaching business English to university students whose majors were either in business or in modern languages. This was done by means of producing a play or "several short[s]." This drama project was flexible in that it was voluntary and the scripts of its play(s) (e.g., Macbeth) were adapted "to include business-related situations and vocabulary" (p. 1). Although there was no formal evaluation of the participants' performances, the informally feedback gathered (e.g., the conversations of some students, a guideline-based group interview of four students, and a short online evaluation questionnaire distributed to 16 students), proved a number of the researcher's inductive inferences, such as the improvement of students' linguistic, personal, and work-related skills (e.g., improving their English and presentation skills, gaining confidence, and learning how to work in teams).

Third, I have become aware of what might hinder the success of drama in teaching modern languages. For instance, Dunn and Stinson (2011) described two studies that were conducted with high school students in Singapore in 2004 (Drama and Oral Language) and in 2005 (Speaking Out). The studies shared some similarities in the sense that both of them used English as the target language in drama classes and the students had had no prior experience with such classes. The studies differed in that the students were in different grades in high school and the procedures used to collect the data were different. Still, the first study was successful while the second was a failure. The researchers explained that the reason for the former's success was that the classes were conducted by trained drama experts "who are aware of the nuance of both language learning and drama learning" (p. 360). Likewise, the failure of the latter was because the teachers were not experienced in the sense that they lacked creativity, eschewed risk-taking, were unable to effectively combine language and drama, and exhibited a reluctance to let go of familiar teaching methods.

For the practical part of this course, I chose Weiss' (2007) article "And who says it doesn't make sense? Drama in third-level language classrooms," which described how to design and implement drama in real classrooms. The article explained the theoretical features of drama in education (DiE), "DiE in language teaching…structuring and internal

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coherence…and leading a group in DiE" (pp. 25–26). It also discussed techniques such as the fun factor; using a short story at the university level; using non-dramatic elements (e.g., drawing a house plan); the conventions (e.g., "'role on the wall' and 'tableau'" [p. 27]); students' structured improvisations, and teaching culture, literature, and language as a unified unit, some of which have been underestimated or criticized by other teachers. However, the researcher used all of the above-mentioned techniques when designing her three 50-minute drama classes for "fourth year German language students, including Erasmus students, who graduated at the end of the academic year 2005/2006" (p. 28). The results showed that although the drama classes did not significantly increase students' motivation to learn writing and speaking skills, their interpretations and understanding of the characteristics of German short stories improved, as did their writing and speaking skills in the German language.

My only criticism of the in-class presentations is that neither my colleagues nor myself had the opportunity to apply what we had learned in our presentations. While the purpose of the presentations was to enhance our theoretical understanding of the subject, it would have been a good idea if the teacher demanded that we be creative in implementing dramatic elements within our presentations. Those elements could have been taken from the articles themselves or from other sources.

Conclusion

Upon reflection, it is my belief that dramatic elements have a lot of potential, not only to decrease language learners' anxiety and increase their proficiency, engagement, and motivation but also to make their learning journeys full of long-lasting joy and amusement. I would further claim that dramatic methods could be effective in all aspects of language teaching if they were appropriately adopted (cf. Weiss, 2007).

Nonetheless, like in other Arab countries, the teaching of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) can be described as "dominated by a traditional top-down, text-oriented, teacher-led methodology" (Al-Hazmi, 2006, p. 38) that primarily adopts the grammar translation and audio-lingual methods (Seghayer, 2014a, 2015; Alharbi, 2015; Alresheed, 2008). What is worse is that these methods are often executed with ineffective teaching techniques, including translation, explanations and copying of vocabulary words, texts, and grammar; making corrections and comments; structural analysis; chorus work; repetition, memorization; and reading passages (Al-Seghayer, 2014a, 2015). Therefore, as a consequence of recruiting ill-equipped EFL teachers, Saudi EFL pre-university learners' outcomes remain

unsatisfactory. To substantiate this, Al-Seghayer (2011) cited a study conducted by the Ministry of Education in KSA that proved that Saudi EFL teachers at the intermediate and secondary school levels were "neither competent in English nor in the affair of teaching it" (p. 23). The research linked such weaknesses to the lack of proper training courses when those EFL teachers were English major undergraduates. Khan (2011) and Al-Seghayer (2014a) also emphasized that other variables, such as learners' experiences, perceptions, and psychology toward learning the language; aspects of the curricula, pedagogy, and language policies; and administrative processes, approaches, assessments, and strategies, led to weak language attainment for the students. These factors would be resolved if the teachers were more proficient in English and better trained. As such, following an in-depth examination of pre-service and in-service preparation programs for future and current EFL teachers, Al-Hazami (2003) and Al-Seghayer (2014b) both called for the updating, refinement, and reform of such courses. Some of their recommendations were that these programs should educate EFL teachers on how to adopt new teaching methodologies and technologies, use assessment and time management for each language skill they teach, and effectively design lesson plans and activities.

However, the above-mentioned suggestions are insufficient. Training courses need to be made more effective by incorporating relatively new teaching methods (e.g., drama in education) that link the target language with its culture; that intensify the learning of vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects of the language; and that motivate students to practice both inside and outside classrooms. Otherwise, education authorities will continue to observe the undesirable result of producing Saudi EFL learners whose knowledge of words and syntactic rules remain in their "heads and not in [their] arms, mouths, eyes or feet," that is, "[who are] able to read newspapers, [and] understand writers—but [are not] able to order a sandwich once abroad" (Jensen & Hermer, 1998, p. 178). In conclusion, if the educational authorities in KSA and in similar countries want to promote success for all students in learning foreign languages, they have to conceptualize teaching as both a science and an art.

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