

Invigorating Literature Teaching in Taiwan through Drama

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Abstract

English literature courses are elective and considered minor courses in the departments of Applied English in institutes of technology in Taiwan. Teachers of English literature courses face challenges in engaging students in their classes. This paper describes how educational drama pedagogy could be used to help engage students in literature classes, based on a case study in an institute of technology in Taiwan. Although many scholars of literary studies have discussed literature teaching, their approaches tend to be focused more on discussions (led by the teachers) on topics related to a text, or written assignments as discussion starters (Langer 1992:43). The approach of using educational drama to facilitate students in literature classes has not been widely researched. This presentation presents findings of this action research inquiry and considers how strategies and conventions of process drama (such as “teacher-in-role” and “mantle of the expert”) have been employed to empower students in conducting interpretations of the texts they read, deepen their literary understanding, and assist them in taking responsibilities for their studies in the literature classes.

The research project, which informs this paper employs a qualitative research design, based on an action research approach and forms the basis of a PhD thesis. The study was entirely qualitative and contextualized naturalistic in nature and aligned closely with the fundamental principles of action research: “identifying a problematic issue, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it (did it work?), and changing practice in the light of the evaluation.” (McNiff 2002:6). By employing this research method to guide this project, we hope to enhance the practice as teachers through the reflective cycles.

The paper will also highlight expected outcomes of this research. Namely, it is hoped that the study will provide teachers with practical professional knowledge in teaching English literature classes, such as how students’ perceptions or misconceptions may arise when experiencing a changed way of teaching, and how teaching strategies may help to promote and motivate students’ learning in the classroom. The research findings may also help to guide future professional development for teachers of English and Drama in EFL contexts.

Keywords: literature teaching, EFL literature instruction, action research, educational drama pedagogy, process drama conventions

I. Introduction

In the English departments of the Taiwanese universities, students are required to take *Literature* courses such as *English Literature*, *American Literature*, and *Fiction*, as part of their English education. Although elective literature courses such as *Introduction to Western Literature* and *Drama* are not absent from the academic curriculum, they are generally considered minor courses in the departments of Applied English in institutes of technology in Taiwan. Teachers of English *Literature* courses in the above-mentioned institutes thus face challenges in engaging students in their classes. This paper describes how educational drama pedagogy could be used to help engage students in *Literature* classes, based on a case study in an institute of technology in Taiwan. Although many scholars of literary studies have discussed literature teaching, their approaches tend to be focused more on discussions (led by the teachers) on topics related to a text, or written assignments as discussion starters (Langer 1992:43). The approach of using educational drama to facilitate students in literature classes has not been widely researched.

This paper forms the basis of my PhD thesis, and depicts inquiry derived from the ongoing study, I hope to further develop the preliminary research findings illustrated in the “Results and Discussion” section of this paper as I bring my thesis to completion in the coming months. In addition, pseudonyms are used when specific participants are mentioned in this paper.

II. Background

My interest in the topic of my research began when I was first employed to teach *Literature* courses at a university in Taipei, Taiwan. I was not trained or instructed in how to teach literature courses at colleges or universities in Taiwan, thus the teaching itself posed a great challenge to me, who was a student of English. Like some of the other teachers in the university, I combined lectures, text-discussion, and group in-class presentations on issues related to the literary works as my teaching approaches. In my experience, these approaches were successful for students whose English was of intermediate and advanced levels. Most of them would like to give it a try when it came to express what they thought about the literary text they were studying. However, for students who were not confident in their English abilities, or who lacked interest in cultures foreign to them, what the literary masters tried to convey in the text did not make much sense to them, they did not develop empathy for the characters in the text, and their responses were often insufficient.

How to teach Literature then? Carter and Long argue that there are three main reasons

for the teaching of literature: the cultural model, the language model, and the personal growth model. These models tend to be the “reasons or purposes” for teachers to teach literature (1991:2-3) and usefully inform this study. How, then, do teachers teach literature in the EFL context? Current methods described in a variety of studies mainly focus on the use of *Literature* to promote the developing of language skills, especially in the institutions of higher education including those in Taiwan where English is taught as a foreign language. Accordingly, a larger number of publications on experimental or practical integration of teaching methods into the teaching of certain literary genres or works (such as “How to teach novels”) in the EFL context have emerged than that on *Literature* pedagogy. Although such reports and research based on individual teacher’s frequently successful experiences serve the purpose of providing possible models for other teachers of *Literature* to follow, systematic *Literature* pedagogy is still not currently available in the EFL context (Timucin 2001).

Teaching *Literature* through Drama

The teaching of literary texts in this research is based on employing educational drama pedagogy as an instructional method. Before the existence of academic publications focused on literature teaching, linking literature with pedagogy might be unthinkable to some people who have been teachers of literature for years (Dienst 2003). However, a rich body of scholarship in the field of drama in education has shown that the integration is possible. Teachers conduct literary explorations of stories through dramatic activities (Booth 2005) or engage learners of the English language by using drama techniques (Kao & O’Neill 1998). Although scholars of literary studies refrain from explaining explicitly how to integrate drama in the teaching of literature, nevertheless, some recognize the merits of applying drama to facilitate literary understanding. For example, when talking about drama and narrative fiction, Byron (1986) argues that narrative fiction “*reports* or *describes* selectively ‘what has happened’. Drama by contrast, *demonstrates* ‘what is happening’ “(77). In other words, narrative fiction describes events which happened in the past while drama depicts a current event at present (Byron 1986:78).

The drama mode helps people to “elaborate narrative and to expand our apprehensions of the entire pattern of events, attitude, behaviors and interactions which the narrative represents selectively.” (Byron 1986:75).

Drama Strategies: Process Drama, Pre-text, Teacher-in-Role, and Mantle of the Expert

If educational drama strategies and activities could be used to enhance the literary understanding, what is *process drama* then? In the *Introduction* of the book *Drama Structures: A Practical Handbook for Teachers* (1982), drama educators Cecily O'Neill and Alan Lambert explain that process drama "like improvisation, proceeds without a written script, but includes important episodes that will be composed and rehearsed rather than improvised." (xvi). Other educators describe that "In the classroom there is no outside audience. ... 'Acting or demonstrating drama work in front of other people and being an audience are sometimes involved but the audience is often informal and the performance unscripted.'" (O'Toole & Dunn 2002:2) Simply put, process drama could be defined as "an extended classroom drama activity based on a *pre-text*." (Sinclair et al. 2009:268). And based on Sinclair et al's illustration, pre-text is "a drama term referring to the basis or subject matter for drama. A pre-text can be in many forms—for example, a picture book, a photograph, a poem, a story or a real-life incident (such as a newspaper article)".

Furthermore, in process drama, there are "conventions" which serve to indicate "time, space and presence" in the theatrical environment. They also help to put emphasis on different qualities in the exploration of the drama within the classroom. (Neelands & Goode 1990:4). Among these conventions, "Teacher in Role" (TiR) as Kao and O'Neill put it "is one of the most effective ways of beginning process drama" (1998:26). When a teacher takes on a role his/her purpose is not to demonstrate how to act, "but to invite students to enter and begin to create the fictional world." (Kao & O'Neill 1998:26). Teacher-in-role as a drama convention can thus help students engage in the text.

There are many advantages of using the conventions of "Teacher-in-Role" and "Mantle of the Expert" techniques in teaching. One benefit is that they enable and empower students to carry responsibility for their own learning. In practice, students are asked to contribute what they know about how to solve a certain problem presented by the teacher who is in role as a character in need of help or advice. Through the interaction with the teacher and each other, disbelief is suspended and the world of drama is created to explore issues presented in the text they are studying.

Then could this integration of process drama techniques be applied to the teaching of literature? The answer is positive. In her book *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a*

Learning Medium, Betty Jane Wagner (1999) describes Heathcote's ideas about possible ways of teaching literature through process drama. Wagner notes that to Heathcote, teaching students to understand what is within the literary context is like "code cracking." (1999). Through process drama conventions, the teacher could facilitate students to unlock the treasure box that contains the richness and beauty of the imaginary world of literature.

Studies on using process drama to facilitate literature instruction

Yoshida (2003), Melragon (1999) and Hakaim (1993) have conducted studies on teaching approaches which manifest close relevance to this research. Yoshida's study does not actually make use of any drama conventions in the teaching of literature. She does give examples of how she would have used several process drama conventions to structure her literature course if time permitted. (Yoshida 2003:239) In her study, Yoshida explains how her Japanese students would have been more comfortable with drama activities with scripts, how Japanese EFL students tend to be shy in class, and how she could have employed the convention of "open forum theatre" in teaching narratives like "The Tell-Tale Heart"(Yoshida 2003).

Based on her description, the activities Yoshida has led in her class such as the explanation of the texts, discussion and group in-class role-playing are more aligned to traditional ways of teaching literature that students have also experienced in Taiwan. If "time" and cultural influence could be important factors in the constraints of applying dramatic approaches to the teaching of literature (Yoshida 2003), are there other possible reasons that limit English teachers' acceptance of adopting theatre based approaches to the teaching of literature?

Melragon's study tells a different story. Like Yoshida, Melragon builds her theoretical foundation on the ideas of reader response theorists like Louise Rosenblatt, and drama educators such as Cecily O'Neill. However, process drama conventions are actually applied to her teaching of literature. Her research "describes a model for incorporating response to historical fiction, process drama and computer technology into students' classroom learning." (Melragon 1999) Her research project also leads to the production of students' own web pages on which they record their reflections and design for the page based on their response and research on the fiction they read. Process drama is employed to help them negotiate the texts, get perspectives and deepen engagement in the literary texts they read. This research demonstrates a positive example of facilitating students' engagement with literary studies through

process drama.

III. Research Questions

My primary research question is “In what ways can process drama conventions help to motivate students, deepen their understanding of English literature, and empower them to become active learners in English literature classes in Taiwan?” My experiences as an English literature teacher have also led me to ponder on research questions regarding what triggers learners’ motivation in getting engaged in literature classes and what, on the other hand, blocks their interest.

IV. Methods

This qualitative study is based on the action research approach. It investigated how educational drama pedagogy could help to invigorate *Literature* teaching in Taiwan. This study was carried out at an institute of technology¹ in the south of Taiwan. The data collection period covered approximately ten months: from September 2009 to June 2010.

Participant

The participants in this study were two classes of Taiwanese adult students (29 of 1A class in the first semester; and 20 of 2A class in the second) from the age of eighteen onward, of the Extensive Education Division in an institute of technology. They came to the semester-based *Introduction to Western Literature* classes every Saturday or Sunday afternoon, for respectively two semesters. These students mostly came back to school to major in English after years away from the academic learning environment. They took a regular entrance examination to be admitted into the two-year institute of technology program. However, they did not need any proof or certificate of any English proficiency tests to be English majors. Students’ English levels varied immensely. In addition, prior to the literature class, only few students (5-6 students in each class) had experiences reading literary texts in English in high

¹ This institute of technology in question became a university of technology in August 2010. However, in this paper, it is referred to as an “institute of technology” as the data was collected from September 2009 to June 2010.

school or previous institutes of education.

I designed and implemented similar lesson plans for both classes with improved, slightly altered drama activities and a reduction of the reading materials for the 2A class; due to the less allotted time and what I had learnt from my previous experiences with the first year students. I believe the necessary changes on the syllabus better benefited the latter students.

Reading Materials

The reading materials for the classes were organized according to my weekly topics, with a main focus on a Shakespearean tragedy: *Hamlet*. As most of the students did not take any English literature classes prior to their study at this institute, I looked at my teaching and learning process along with these students as a journey to the Danish palace of Hamlet and other adventures into the domain of the Western *Literature*.

Teaching Procedure

In order to assist students with their varied or emerging English abilities, I used mainly Mandarin Chinese in the classroom with frequent explanation of literary terms and phrases in English to enhance students' familiarity with the English language as well. The beginning of each new literary work was conducted in a more traditional way of teaching literary works: I would introduce the background of the author, with brief introduction to the time and place where the work originated and reference to distinctive features of the work. In addition to these general instructions, I also developed pre-reading and post-reading drama activities based on the process drama conventions and educational drama pedagogy to help deepen students' understanding of the literary text they studied. The following activities from my action research cycles briefly exemplify the drama activities integrated into the teaching of literary texts in my research.

Activity 1 (“Alternative *Hamlet* Treasure Hunt”)

In order to help students grasp the storyline of the later acts in the play *Hamlet*, I designed a “Treasure Hunt” activity to initiate the group discussion and activity. I made slips of paper (containing eight sentences spoken by certain characters in the play) copied from the textbook and cut into small pieces and put those eight pieces of slips into a container and asked one student from each group to do the drawing. Students then had to check and identify the speakers of those sentences with the help of the script. Through their discussion, they were required to share with the class

content of the slips and their ideas.

Activity 2 (“Press Conference at Elsinore”—Teacher-in-Role)

To help students review the Shakespearean play that they had read and to clarify some confusing points they might have about *Hamlet*, I designed this “Press Conference at Elsinore” activity. The following narrative describes the prelude and process of carrying out the activity.

After the death of the royal family of Denmark and the family of the king’s advisor, the people of Denmark were frightened and saddened by tragedy and the dismal sight at the palace.

Horatio, Prince’s Hamlet’s friend, who was told by the deceased prince to tell the world the truth of what happened, decided to give a press conference to reveal the truth about the tragedy.

Getting in role:

Before we started this activity, I asked students to discuss with their group members about what might have happened after Prince Hamlet and all the members of the royal family of Denmark died. And then I explained that we would have a press conference ten minutes later, and as caring citizens of Denmark and the press, they had the right to know what would happen to their country now. Therefore, they had to come up with a few sentences to ask Horatio, either in Chinese or English. While students were engaged in discussion, I announced that I would be the hostess to the press conference, and my job was to assist them and Horatio to sort things out and make sure that the press conference went well.

Then I asked the class of students if there was any volunteer who would like to be Horatio. Soon, “Willy,” an elder student in the class raised his hand and was very excited to be Horatio. Students’ discussion actually took more than ten minutes, and then I had to stop them and announced the beginning of the press conference at the court of Elsinore.

The following narrative from a post-lesson interview with 2A students depicts their experiences of participating in the activity.

“Jimmy”: I remember that I asked two questions. First, I asked as a reporter, then as a reporter for the paparazzi. There was one part of my question explaining why Claudius killed Hamlet’s father, and then married his sister-in-law. Was it because they were taking pictures by (*reporters*) of the tabloid about their meeting in private? Therefore I asked such a question. It meant to find out the reason why Claudius killed old Hamlet. Was it because he attempted to take over the throne or it was because of some love affair? As a result, it provoked many ideas of mine, and not just putting the focus on the narrative in the novel (*text*)....

“Sherry”: ... there was this OS [*off-screen murmuring, commonly used among Taiwanese youngsters to describe what they feel in certain situations*] going on in my mind that... maybe, I thought during the times of the Queen (Gertrude), as a fragile woman, she might be killed or there would be other sentences for her if she didn’t find a husband for herself fast! Therefore, she found herself someone she could cling to. Yes, that’s it. And when it comes to emotion, it’s really hard to judge that, it’s not necessarily true love! (*She laughs.*) Probably it’s based on benefits. And then S. [her classmate] just mentioned property! ...I didn’t thinking about anything else then, but I would like to know what they had in their minds. (29/05/10)

Students in the narrative above related how they were brought into the dramatic world of *Hamlet* and asked questions in role as reporters. This narrative seemed to indicate the function of the technique “Mantle of the Expert” which helps to deepen students’ understanding of the text here through their participation and cooperation to finish certain tasks. In this case, it was helping the public of Denmark to know the truth about the tragedy by asking questions. The narrative here highlights students’ engagement in the activity and their sound understanding of the play *Hamlet*.

In a post-lesson interview focus on the drama activity “Press Conference at Elsinore,” a student of 2A class also talked about what she thought in the narrative below.

“S”: Hamlet is a story..... In the future, if I read such a story or novel, and after my reading, I can use these techniques to my reading comprehension. Because, in the past, when I read some narration of the plot (*of a story*),

then I simply felt that, I've finished reading a story. But if like the way the teacher makes use of a press conference method, it means that you can pose your questions toward the plot yourself, or say, if there is something you don't understand, then you will ponder why it's so, then you will understand better the whole, complete connection of the plot, and you get a deeper impression (*about what you read*). (29/05/10)

In the above narrative, it appeared that drama activities help learners of Western literature. In my analysis, what the students revealed in the narrative indicates the students' attitudes towards self-directed learning. It was promising to see that students would like to apply what they learnt in the classroom to help their future learning. The third section in the above narrative also suggests that drama activities help students to get a better understanding of the literary text they study.

D. Data analysis

In this research, content analysis of qualitative data was undertaken. The data were analyzed inductively and deductively by using several strategies. The initial implications of the findings of this research were based on participants' responses, the results generated through a variety of research instruments and data collection methods such as Focus Group interviews, students' journals and assignments, and the teacher researcher's reflective journals and field notes.

In general, the analysis of the data aimed to identify the characteristics of classroom interactions, (e.g. discourse, the positioning of students in the drama activities integrated in the literature lessons, rapport between students and the instructor, students' perceptions and perspectives on the drama pedagogy), and their relevance to the teaching and learning process in the classroom through the help of drama pedagogy as a changed mode of literature instruction.

V. Results and Discussion

Throughout the participation in drama activities in the literature classes, a large number of students' responses from the questionnaires and interviews have indicated various ways in which drama activities helped learners with their learning in the *Western Literature* classroom. For the purpose of this paper, I selected two examples to illustrate students' mostly positive responses to the drama activities. They are examples of emergent findings that I hope to build on as I complete the final stages of my study. These findings include:

- Independent or student directed learning
- Development of individual textual analysis skills through group –based drama

activities

- Enhanced motivation for learning
- Development of reflective skills through engagement in drama based tasks
- Drama as a way to enhance personal relevance of Western literature in a non-Western setting

Independent or student directed learning

When asked to reflect on the activity during a post-lesson interview, a student “Ching” from 1A class revealed what she thought in the following narrative.

“Ching”: The teacher chose eight sentences spoken by the characters in the play Hamlet, and asked each group to send a representative to draw two slips containing the sentences. We were required to locate the sentences in the English script, and through our group discussion to find out who said those sentences, to whom, and why?

Individual textual analysis skills

“Ching” (contd)

Through this kind of class activities, we got into the situation quickly and understood the relationships among those characters, we understood the “Who, What, When, Why and How” in the plot. (03/01/10)

It seemed evident that the drama activity “Alternative Hamlet Treasure Hunt” helped students better grasp the basic facts of the play including the time, place, characters, and plot better, as opposed to reading through the assigned reading all by themselves. Likewise, empirical evidence from this study suggests that drama activities also help to empower students and enhance their motivation toward self-directed learning; and in this case study, western literature.

Enhanced motivation for learning

In a post-lesson interview, “Jimmy” from 2A class, shared what he thought of their learning throughout the semester in the following narrative.

“Jimmy”: Throughout my learning in the whole semester, from the beginning, like what I just said, I felt that this (*Western Literature*) is set and rigid. Therefore, at the beginning of the semester, although I did have the motivation to learn... yet, it was not like...not like later on, like “Eating the sugar cane from the back” (“*Tao Tse Kang Che*”—*This is a Chinese idiom which*

means: "The situation gets gradually better.") I felt that the more I learn, the more I am interested. The main reason lies in the fact that, the teacher used various, innovative teaching methods, especially her methods are orderly and gradual.

Drama as a way to enhance personal relevance of Western literature in a non-Western setting

"Jimmy" (contd)

Then after that, like last time, we were required to write a resume for Shakespeare, find him a job. This is something very innovative too. She (*the teacher*) took an ancient figure some hundreds of years ago and put him in a job application situation (*He laughs*), and then (*through the assignment*) she could understand how much students know Shakespeare, how many works he wrote, and what was his achievement.

Development of reflective skills through engagement in drama based tasks

"Jimmy" (contd)

And...in fact, we learnt a lot, because they (other students) would really think these things over. Then it would not be like that we finished reading (*Shakespeare's brief biography*), and that's it. And that kind of "stuffing ducks" (*T'ien ya*) way of teaching is totally inadequate. (29/05/10)

(T'ien ya—A Chinese idiom which refers to the way ducks were constantly stuffed with nutrients to make their livers bigger. Here he implies that kind of pouring knowledge into students without giving them time to digest the new knowledge or space to think about what they have learnt.)

The narrative above seemed to indicate that students were motivated to help themselves with their learning. It also implies that the activity helped them to associate the text they studied (biography of William Shakespeare) with something accessible and familiar to them in their daily lives. In this way, the literary text came alive, and students were empowered to handle the task they could deal with such as finding a job.

VI. Conclusion

This study documents a literature teacher's journey of teaching *Literature* with the

assistance of educational drama pedagogy. In light of the changing context in the EFL *Literature* classrooms in Taiwan, there is not yet a palpable formula of teaching approaches that could serve as the general guideline. The teacher's task in the *Literature* classroom thus is complex and evolving as the *Literature* pedagogy is still emerging. Additionally, the lack of intensive conversations between literary academics and educationists or adequate pedagogical preparation on helping graduate students to teach literary texts in the EFL context have necessitated the possible involvement of an alternative pedagogy, e.g. drama pedagogy, that may facilitate teachers to teach *Literature* classes.



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