

# DRAMATIZING VOCABULARY TEACHING IN CLASSES OF YOUNG LEARNERS

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## ABSTRACT

*Learning and memorizing vocabulary is very important in language learning, especially for young learners. There are a lot of methods that help learners to approach and get acquainted with effectively. One of the feasible methods is to dramatize vocabulary teaching in classes of young learners. This method not only helps learners to practice and memorize vocabulary longer because of their creativity through the use of language while performing drama, but it also gives them an interest in learning as they have the opportunity to interact directly in the natural role play.*

**Key words:** role play, vocabulary teaching.

## TÓM TẮT

### Sử dụng kỹ thuật diễn kịch trong dạy từ vựng cho trẻ em

*Trong việc học ngôn ngữ, học và ghi nhớ từ vựng là một việc rất quan trọng, đặc biệt là đối với trẻ em. Có nhiều phương pháp giúp cho người học tiếp cận và làm quen một cách có hiệu quả. Một trong những phương pháp khả thi đó là sử dụng kỹ thuật diễn kịch trong dạy từ vựng cho trẻ em. Phương pháp này không chỉ giúp cho người học luyện tập và ghi nhớ từ vựng lâu hơn nhờ sự sáng tạo trong việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ khi diễn kịch mà nó còn tạo cho các em một sự hứng thú với môn học vì các em có cơ hội tương tác trực tiếp thông qua việc đóng vai các nhân vật một cách tự nhiên.*

**Từ khóa:** sử dụng kịch, dạy từ vựng.

## 1. Introduction

The interests in teaching vocabulary have aroused as vocabulary is the building block of meanings. Among the methods applied, the use of creative drama techniques proves effective (Bolton, 1985; Wagner, 1998 and O'Neil, 1995) as it is under the umbrella of language acquisition which most young learners prefer (Krashen, 1981 and Gass and Selinder, 2008).

Phillips (2003) believes the use of “drama is a learner-centered approach” which allows learners to actively acquire and learn language elements. In addition, it can assist learners in improving language skills through drama-engaged activities.

Creative drama is an improvisational, non-exhibition, process-centered form of drama which guides learners to imagine, reflect and act on a plot transmitted from the teacher. During the role play, learners

can produce language through interaction instead of memorizing lines (Coney and Kanel, 1997).

Drama techniques may be best applied to teaching language to young learners as they generally prefer language acquisition to learning (Krashen, 1981 and Gass and Selinder, 2008). The teaching of vocabulary via drama may facilitate young learners' acquisition of vocabulary items intended and used in the drama.

There are a number of hypotheses of applying drama to teaching vocabulary to young language learners (Albalawai, 2014; Brno, 2011; Demircioglu, 2010; and Moghaddas and Ghafariniae, 2012).

1) It develops learners' vocabulary from direct learning.

2) It interests learners by unconscious obtaining of vocabulary.

3) Learners are interested in learning via drama as they have opportunities to interact in the role play.

4) It aims at language fluency rather than accuracy.

5) It develops learners' creativity through their use of language in the role play.

This current paper is thought to provide readers with an option of teaching vocabulary to young language learners. It sheds light on how to apply the techniques as well as what to be concerned about by the teachers when applying these techniques. Finally, the paper makes recommendations for this area.

## 2. Theoretical background

Drama applied in the classroom should differ from the one watched at the theater in which participants do not need to learn all the scripts by heart, but improvise

utterances in contexts (Davis and Behm, 1978). Therefore, participants do not need to spend lots of time preparing for the play. In addition, learners play the role of actors; they act after observing the teacher's performance during which learners have opportunities to listen and obtain the vocabulary used by the teacher before they really act (Maley and Duff, 1982).

The teacher needs to prepare things related to his class performance; however, this does not take him a considerable amount of time as he is not in need of props and costumes. Also, the teacher's main objective is not the perfection of performance, but how to help learners attain the plot and set an environment for learners to use language naturally (Coney and Kanel, 1997).

On the one hand, the use of drama techniques may bring several advantages. The first benefit would be that it is for language acquisition. Accordingly, learners can access language in use instead of language usage. This may accommodate language acquisition, especially in children (Krashen, 1981). Children may implicitly or explicitly refuse to learn or engage in any learning activity if they identify that they have to learn or they are forced to learn (Gass and Selinder, 2008).

Secondly, teachers do not need to use lots of materials, such as textbooks or clips, in teaching. The improvisation can help them teach creatively; that is, they only need to retain the main plot, but do not have to memorize lines before the official classroom performance (Miller and Li, 2008).

Also, drama activities motivate and interest teachers and learners in teaching

and learning as it lets learners communicate via role play, but they do not feel that they are learning, but playing. As a result, they may feel considerably confident in the use of language in everyday life (Carkin, 2008).

Understanding of vocabulary used in discourse is another advantage of the use of drama in which one of the best ways of teaching vocabulary is to help learners make sense of vocabulary in its use. In other words, learners' understanding of the meanings of words is facilitated and reinforced when they are used in an appropriate context (Harmer, 2007 and Duffelmeyer and Duffelmeyer, 1979).

The problem in mixed-level and large classes is reduced. Different participants play different roles, depending on their competencies. In contexts like Vietnam, it may be relatively effective as learners do not have many opportunities to communicate in the target language outside the classroom and large-size classes are common (Schejbal, 2006).

On the other hand, the teacher should be careful when applying drama to teaching language. What the teacher should first bear in mind is the teacher should set objectives explicitly before the application. The main goal is language proficiency, not drama performance skills (Coney and Kanel, 1997). This guidance from the teacher may help students know what they should do and what they should focus on in their role play.

In addition, the teacher needs to ensure that learners really engage in the teacher's directions and learning of the target words before they act as they will need these words in their roles. Any

misunderstanding of the target words will lead to their misuse and the missing of the plot and roles in the play may not contribute to the success at all (Duffelmeyer and Duffelmeyer, 1979).

Another thing to be concerned would be the compatibility of dramatization with the language elements. The words which can be taught by teachers through the use of drama must be illustratable as children have to physically act them out in sequential order after observing a similar performance (Stewing and Buege, 1994).

A vast number of recent studies illustrate that it is possible to apply arts in education, especially in teaching young learners as drama can benefit all learning styles (Moore, 2004) as learners have opportunities to access the intended lesson audibly, visually, and kinesthetically. Regarding cognitive engagement, the brain experiences an electrochemical process in which information can transfer from neuron to neuron, from which the stimuli may develop neuron links. As a consequence, the potential of the brain to learn is created (Alghafri and Ismaili, 2011). In terms of psychology, learners absorb the target items emotionally and socially. They undergo hands-on learning in which they interact with other learners, expressing their emotions via utterances and remember vocabulary and expressions spontaneously, without memorizing the scripts. Dickinson (2002) believes educators have associated learning and psychology in that emotions can positively influence how people learn.

Concerning the aspects of language teaching, vocabulary has some areas of concern, such as spelling, sounds,

collocations, and meaning. Also, research in language teaching has demonstrated language use rather than language usage should be employed in the classroom so that learners have opportunities to use what they have learned. Drama is a way to do this.

### **3. How to dramatize vocabulary teaching in classes of young learners**

In order to figure out how to apply drama techniques to teaching vocabulary to young learners, it is crucial to examine the related studies conducted around the world. Albalawai (2014) conducted an empirical study on how effectively the use of drama developed students' creative thinking. The experimental research involved one intermediate-level class of 24 students as a control group and one class of 23 students at the same level as an experimental group. After a two-week study, SPSS was used to analyze the collected data. The findings showed a significant difference in the mean scores of the experimental group between the pre-test and post-test. That proves teaching English via drama is effective in developing freshmen's creative thinking.

Demircioglu (2010) conducted an empirical study on teaching vocabulary to young learners through drama. This study included 9-10 year-olds divided into two classes of 25 students each. After teaching participants 32 new vocabulary items for three regular lessons, the collected data was analyzed by the Independent Samples T-test and mean scores. The findings proved a significant difference between the control and experimental groups' post-test scores. In particular, the experimental

group illustrated its excess in acquiring the vocabulary taught as the p-value in two T-test scores is higher than 0.05. That provided implications that drama activities were efficient in teaching vocabulary to young learners. In addition, the experimental group under the treatment of applying drama showed their improved confidence in language use after the study.

Early and Young (2009) did an exploratory case study on the use of drama in second language learning. The study was conducted on French-speaking children learning English as a second language in Canada. Positive outcomes illustrated an improvement learners' knowledge of the target English vocabulary.

Moore (2004) did a case study in using drama as a method to teach elementary students. His conclusion is that drama is an effective method in teaching the elementary curriculum as it can easily be adapted and integrated to teach all subject areas. Also, drama can provide educators opportunities to make children love learning the target subject and avoid unnecessary stress.

### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

It is clear that drama can be used in language teaching, especially teaching vocabulary to young learners. It can facilitate learning in various ways. In fact, learners can engage in the lesson cognitively, emotionally and socially. The engagements may assist learning to a considerable extent. Thornbury (2002) believes that teaching activities fail to succeed when they cannot engage learners.

Drama is probably a teaching method which can prevent unnecessary stress during

the class performance and therefore can create a love for learning. Learners can love and be eager to long for the next class.

It is also significant to do more research on using drama in language teaching to prove how effective it is. In

particular, there should be additional studies on if it works in teaching other types of language items, such as grammar and writing. In addition, whether this can be applied in Vietnamese contexts should be carefully considered.

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