Drama Sketch As A Second Language Acquisition Strategy

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Abstract

Even when speech is not fully established, children engage in role-playing as mummy, daddy, nurse, teacher and the like. This activity allows them to express 'self' in relation to others and the world around them in a naturally dramatic manner. This dramatic awareness could be consolidated in the form of a drama sketch: an activity that provides an enabling environment for expressive second language acquisition as demonstrated in this paper.

1.0   Introduction

Language is not hereditary. A child acquires the language spoken around him/her and uses it to define social relationships as well as learn about the world. It is a complex process yet the acquisition of a first language [L_1] for a normal child evolves without consciou effort and "One finds that at the age of five, most children have internalized the grammatical structure of the language they are exposed to" (Unoh 1987: 48).

Thus, the child could be seen as a linguistic adult in the first language. The acquisition of a second language [L_2] involves some variables which generally make it more complex than in the L_1 situation. This could be attributed to the fact that the home language may not be English and that although the child is an L_1 adult, he/she is not competent in the L_2 in which he/she is expected to display the mastery of receptive and expressive language. There is therefore a need for language practitioners to come up with different strategies designed to enhance the mastery of the L_2. A natural phenomenon that precedes language acquisition is role-playing and this, we believe, could be transported into a structured language acquisition strategy in the form of the drama sketch.

1.1   Definition of Key Terms

Role-Playing: This is the pretend or 'make believe' play in which children assume different characters, statuses and roles. It occurs in all cultures and cuts across social and economic classes.

Drama Sketch: This is a drama piece outline written for children to perform. It enables children to learn about the world and entertain 'self' and others. It is not usually written by professionals, and in fact allows for children participation beyond what theatre practitioners may accommodate.

2.0   Application Of Role-Playing To Language Acquisition

A role play is a symbolic activity by children and involves: "imagination which allows action to be translated, developed or interpreted in ways different from the immediate and obvious" (Male 1973: 18). s Thus it enables the child to mirror role (social) relationship and attempt to 'act' these out in a dramatic manner. The child could act Mummy, Teacher, Nurse etc. through

pantomimes, mimicry, speech, song and dance, and by creating make-believe situations capture familiar domestic experiences. Indeed the "growing child's first conscious self-directed, artistic endeavour of considerable magnitude is the re-enactment of experience usually referred to as role play" (Ukala 1992: 97).

The obvious enjoyment that the child derives, the concentration and commitment that the role play evokes are obvious gains of this activity. Other advantages of role playing include the interaction that children enjoy in group-play and the opportunities open, thereby, for language development, use and practice. Evidence from language acquisition studies confirm that role-playing begins at about age two when neither motor skills nor language skills are well developed (Cottrell 1975). It is an engaging activity and, according to McLellan (in Cottrell 1975: 2):

> If you watch a very small child completely absorbed in his play, he is showing all the signs of the very hard worker. He is displaying patience with his material, he is using skill with his hands, giving evidence of reasoning and moving from one conclusion to another. In fact, he is showing the sort of spirit which motivates the most intense kind of work in the adult world.

This has obvious pedagogical implications for language teachers and indeed teachers in general, since it integrates cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains of curriculum, as could be deduced from the quotation above.

To sum up the characteristics of role-playing we turn to Male (1973: 19) and find that

(i)   It involves the imagination
(ii)   Usually some element of impersonation is present
(iii)   Feelings and emotions are engaged
(iv)   It is an activity consciously embarked upon and relinquished
(v)   It is a means by which we can extend our experience and examine our relationships with the environment and other people, 'coming to terms with the world'.

A major constraint of role-play however is that it may be easily dominated by a **big** child who simply orders other children around. Also, the fact that it excludes adults means that various aspects of language learning in which the children are weak may not receive adequate focus. It has been noted that children use a lot of imperatives and questions that assert authority in their speech especially when engaged in role-playing. So there is need to help them acquire other speech patterns. Another criticism of role playing is that whenever it is imported into the class, the introverted child may not have much opportunity for expressive language use. Also, role familiarity or unfamiliarity could mar the gains of this otherwise dramatic and enjoyable activity (Weir 1990).

Role-playing, however, "adjusts emotional tensions, develops resourcefulness and initiative, helps to build patterns of behaviour, stimulates body flexibility and oral communication" (Nwanno 1984: 41).

Given these advantages of role-playing in terms of the overall development of the child and of L2 language acquisition, Ukala (1992) wants the gains to be perpetuated but this can only happen when the dynamism of role play filters into and is concretized in other language use situations such as the drama sketch.

This is because the "conscious efforts of adults are indispensable to foster to floresence <sic> the child's dramatic talents".

3.0 Drama Sketch and Language Acquisition

The drama sketch is the harbinger of professional drama. It is an outline for enriching language and other socio-cultural experiences for children and therefore is not concerned so much with theatre skills as enacting sometimes imagined experiences. Its attraction is that since it is oftentimes written by the teacher/adult, the theme is usually focused on issues that are of immediate relevance to the children. The Brownie Pack of the University of Calabar, for instance, has over the years employed the drama sketch to express the ideals of lending a hand, being prepared, sharing etc. Similarly, no Vacation Reading Programme of the Reading Association of Nigeria, Calabar Branch is complete without a drama sketch that usually summarizes in a vivid way, the relevance of literacy to the Nigerian child. Such an effort at the 2001 vacation programme focused on Drug Abuse and was the spring board to the writing of stories by children, for publication, on the same theme. The drama sketch is therefore necessary for enhanced proficiency in the language arts.

The sketch is not usually lengthy ('A Touch of the Rosary' is just twelve pages long), and characters are created for particular levels of participants. The drama sketch that we shall analyse in the subsequent section was written for primary school children in a church.

The drama sketch could be applied beyond the language class. Its relevance to the bible class, literacy programme and junior guiders has been demonstrated above. And many of us know that it is a regular feature at most end-of-year performances in schools. But it could also be used within the health education class where a sketch on the effects of poor hygiene on health, for instance, could be easily presented. Presenting sketches on historical figures in science and the arts could definitely create vivid and lasting pictures. Thus, the drama sketch enhances memorability and learning. Indeed the uses of the drama sketch are immense, but irrespective of the theme of the sketch, language is used interactively. This opens up a number of possibilities for the language teacher especially

4.0 Analysis of a Drama Sketch
4.1 Background Profile of Participants

"A Touch of the Rosary" was written in 1996 on request to commemorate the third anniversary celebrations of the Block Rosary Group in Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Tere-Ama, Port-Harcourt.

Tere-Ama comprises three villages in a suburb of Port Harcourt and most of the residents who are also members of the church, provide auxiliary services at the various oil related companies at the Abuloma wharf and the Trans-Amadi Industrial Layout. Thus among the men you find company drivers, cooks, stewards, security officers, gardeners and the women are mainly petty traders and food vendors.

Given the large number of children per family and the limited economic wealth of this category of residents, their children, when they attend school, get enrolled at the public primary and secondary schools, none of which is located in the three villages. So children travel daily to either Amadi or Abuloma to benefit from the government's free education.

To be noted too is that Port-Harcourt is a melting pot for all ethnic groups in

Nigeria. The children who participated in the first acting of the sketch were drawn from Igbo, Ijaw, Kalabari, Ibibio/Efik, Edo, Yoruba, Ogoja and Tiv language groups. The lingua franca for the children was therefore Nigerian Pidgin.

It was observed during Block Rosary Meetings that many of the children could not read the bible and other materials, rather they engaged in rote learning. Of the twenty-eight children who participated in the production, only six could read independently. Also their level of English usage was highly limited since many only operated in Nigerian Pidgin. Yet we know that English is th language of education in Nigeria. The researchers were therefore convinced that some intervention was necessary, one that was devoid of the formality of school environment. One of the strategies introduced was the drama sketch.

4.2 A Summary of the Play: "A Touch of the Rosary (Atr)

The play centres on a hyper-active bully called John. John's unruly behaviour is quite disruptive at home and in school. However, his encounter with Solomon introduces him to an alternative WAY (The Block Rosary Group) of having fun. His transformation positively affects his school work and home life and will hopefully become a source of motivation for other difficult children to turn over a new leaf.

4.3 Vocabulary Analysis

The vocabulary of a language means all the words available in it. A user of the language draws or selects words, as if from a bank or central pool, and uses them to express his thoughts, feelings and perception. Therefore there is variation in individual lexical stock. The English language, for instance, has more than 500,000 words while an average native speaker who is also a university student in England may boast of about 60,000 words in his vocabulary (Williams 1990). It can be deduced that children for whom English is a first language will be able to access fewer words than can the undergraduate, while for any user of English as a second language the number of words will drop even further. For the children who acted in the sketch, their English language usage was less than sufficient, so obviously their vocabulary must have equally been drastically low.

Vocabulary skills could however be developed. This may be achieved by direct teaching or it could be acquired indirectly.

4.3.1 Direct Teaching of Vocabulary

Direct teaching occurs usually in a classroom situation where the teacher draws up a plan on vocabulary development. Williams (1990:110) states that for teaching purposes the definition of vocabulary should cover:

1. Dictionary headwords; i.e. words which are written at the beginning of descriptions of their meanings in dictionaries.
2. Idioms: phrases which mean something different from the meanings of their separate words (e.g. "to come it a bit strong" (sic) = "to go beyond the truth of something"/"to say or do more than is necessary").
3. Collocations: arrangements of words which sound natural, or are characteristic of a language (e.g. "heavy drinker", not "weighty drinker"; "strong coffee", not "mighty coffee")

Vocabulary development necessarily then must focus on lexical items or the lexis of a language. But obviously to attempt to teach 500,000 words is impossible. Therefore vocabulary skills which will enable learners/language users extend their vocabulary by building on their existing stock is the objective of any such exercise or programme. Another pertinent point that needs to be made is that whatever skills are taught, both the receptive and productive vocabulary will benefit. Receptive vocabulary or latent vocabulary refers to those words which we know because we understand what they mean when we listen to them or read them, though we may not be able to define them in isolation, while active or productive vocabulary comprises words that we use for speaking and writing.

Three basic categories of vocabulary skills are usually covered in class. These are training that focus on understanding context clues, a knowledge of word elements and thirdly using dictionary efficiently.

Context Clues: Some context-based strategies could be used to arrive at the meanings of words. These, according to Williams (1990) include definition of words in sentences, establishing word contrasts and inference. Context also includes situational contexts or registers which are discipline specific.

A knowledge of word elements implies the need to understand prefixes, suffixes and other derivational patterns that exist in the language. Finally, dictionary skills enable students to look up words in the dictionary, learn their history, how to spell and pronounce them. Dictionary training also fosters independent work.

Vocabulary development permeates all aspects of language teaching. A focus on word structure will provide evidence for morphemic roots combination and possibilities; phonology will impact on the teaching of pronunciation; phrase and sentence analysis will introduce the meanings of phrasal verbs, collocations and other syntagmatic possibilities.

4.3.2 Indirect Teaching of Vocabulary

Vocabulary improves as learners' experiences expand. This occurs mainly through extensive reading whereby a reader in Nigeria is transported on the printed page to snow clad mountains and technologically advanced places. Things that could be read include e.g. novels, dailies, magazines; and also through listening and participating in different interactional settings e.g. listening to music, news, witnessing a wedding etc. The vocabulary related to these unique experiences could comprise both common core and specialized items. The common core items are familiar words which generally retain the same meaning in all contexts whereas specialized vocabulary could be discipline specific, i.e. registers.

"A Touch of the Rosary" was specifically written for a church function, therefore the choice of vocabulary items did not mirror the structured exercises that are found in school. Also the fact that it is a drama sketch for children with low proficiency in English meant that there was the need to concentrate on common core items. This was also informed by the need to use the drama presentation as an inducement to attract other children to the association.

The common core items in the text include *eat, banana, friend, troublesome, wicked, truck,* etc. The specialized words are found to be accessible to the children because the items typify religious register. In this group are *coronation, testimony, mystery, choruses, rosary* and *association.* Some words were new to the children. Words for which some instruction was called

for in the text included *unruly, sissy, pensive, bunch* (John's) *spineless*, run an *errand, exploits* and *nomination*. The attempt at explaining the meanings of some of the words required the use of a dictionary. Meanings were written on a board for the children to copy into their block Rosary exercise books.

WORDS	MEANINGS
Spineless	without backbone, effeminate
Errand	delivering or getting something for someone
Pensive	thoughtful with sadness; wistful
Exploits	brilliant feat, deed
Nomination	selection
Sissy	a man who behaves like a woman; effeminate

Unruly and *bunch* were explained and created some humour. One of the children wondered whether unruly was meant to be *unruler*, that is not ruled. Another wanted to know why Isaac needed banana to take part in the tug-of-war. He was surprised to learn that bunch could be of banana or a group of people; friends, gang. In addition, the meaning of errand made the children aware of how much they helped at home, so many willingly gave oral essays on "How I run errands at home".

Some words evoked thoughtful contributions in terms of synonyms. *Crazy bull* gave the children mad, angry, difficult, bad tempered and ugly. And once they understood what *sissy* meant it became a playful regular taunt for all the boys! The vocabulary of the play therefore created awareness of how words could enrich knowledge even in a play situation. Indeed by the end of the play, the number of children who registered in the children's library increased appreciably.

.4 Formal Versus Informal Language

The English language recognises different varieties of usage and classifies words as either standard or non-standard. The standard category is usually what the educated speak and write. Within the standard usage, it is possible to identify different degrees of dignity and distance among communicators. These are captioned informal and formal English.

Informal English is colloquial. It is everyday language of domestic conversation that shows closeness or cordial relationship among communicators. It is the language of letters written from a son/daughter to the parents or siblings or family; of conversations in the home or among friends.

Formal English is the mark of officialdom, of conversation between a subordinate and a superior. It shows distance and unfamiliarity between communicators. It focuses on roles determined by the office, not interpersonal relationship. Therefore a letter from a student to a principal will be in formal English.

The vocabulary of formal English tends to be specialized as we find in "A Touch of the Rosary". In the letter of complaint from the school, the opening is typical of a formal letter format. The lexical choices further reiterate the formal tone that such a letter carries. Words such as *disrupted, unruly, request* are marked for formality. Similarly, the teacher's conversation with John's parents is formal. The politeness that marks the opening sets the tone and the teacher's choice of words further reflects the formal interaction. Thus, we have *contrary, nomination* and *best behaved* as distance indicators. John addresses his father as *Sir* to show good breeding within the sociolinguistic canvass of Nigeria and this confirms that language is: "the way in which the individual is introduced

to the order of the physical and social environment" (Nanda 1984: 115).

We however easily picture the domestic disarray where John has destroyed furniture, and indeed our sense of "I have seen that before" is heightened by the vocabulary choices that attend the playgroup interaction as in: "Oh, you too want to fight. Come on, I say come on"

And scene III where Solo's score is: He had 10/10. That boy is a brain. (ATR p. 3)

The children are not discussing human anatomy, but are simply appreciating Solo's intelligence in Nigerian English.

4.5   Fluency and Pronunciation

Every child is disfluent but fluency improves as the child gets older. Many children are pressured to out pace themselves on this fluency route. Sometimes this leads to stuttering and the reluctance to speak. The drama sketch is a pleasurable activity that *pulls* the child out of *self* and helps in overcoming speech inhibitions. The chorusing of responses, singing and dancing that are integral to the drama sketch not only stimulate improved articulation but increases self confidence. This was the experience of some of the children who participated in the play.

Another area where the drama sketch brought gains to the children was in the pronunciation of certain words. The words which were problematic usually had one sound mispronounced:

worth; thank	-	$\theta \rightarrow t$
ashamed	-	$\int \rightarrow t\int$
they	-	$\eth \rightarrow d$
bath	-	$\theta \rightarrow f$
chieftaincy, children; cheer	-	$t\int \rightarrow \int$
church	-	$t\int \rightarrow \int/\int$
how	-	$h \rightarrow au$
hey	-	$hei \rightarrow ei$
ironed	-	$ai \rightarrow hai$

Most of the problems could be traced to interference of L_1 in L_2, e.g. /t$\int$/ to /$\int$/; /hau/ to /au/, and /hei/ to /ei/; /ai/ $\rightarrow$ /hai/. The word 'sissy (1st syllable stressed) /sisi/ was pronounced `si`si (the two syllables stressed) which is a pidgin equivalent meaning a girl. The problem with the dental fricatives cuts across all linguistics groups in Nigeria and the children had to have drills in which the sounds were presented in the three word positions e.g.

Target	-	Initial	Medial	Final
/θ/	-	think	method	bath
/t$\int$/	-	church	teacher	patch
/$\int$/	-	shared	passion	parish

Afterwards they were again presented in minimal pair drills e.g.

path   pat; pan etc.

In the case of the omission of /h/ in how and hey, a mirror was brought to rehearsals and the children were trained to breathe out onto it as they pronounced /h/. This was done daily and soon

the [h] problem was eliminated. English teachers know that Nigerians find the realization of English vowels problematic. But because of the short duration for rehearsals, the researchers agreed to tackle these at another opportunity. Intonation was however touched on in relation to questions. When John's father said Block Rosary? (ATR p. 6). The intonation pattern expected was a rising tune. The children had read it as if it were a statement, i.e., used a falling tune. A similar error was made when the teacher visited John's home and Papa querried.

Is he in trouble again? (ATR p. 6)

The expected low-rise was realized with a falling tune.

Intonation, stress and rhythm are the suprasegmentals and they constitute the areas of greatest divergence between L1 English and L2 English. Interference, the fact that Nigerian languages are syllable timed whereas English is stress timed, and the fact that every syllable carries stress in Nigerian languages unlike L1 English, means that English suprasegmentals are likely to be problematic for L2 speakers. With adequate exposure and training, many Nigerians speak in a way that is internationally intelligible. This, however, was not a sustained area of this research.

4.6   Conversational Skills

Participation in a drama sketch affords children opportunities for group interaction and the acquisition of conversational norms. The art of floor management in terms of how one knows who is supposed to speak, whether there is a transition relevance place (TRP), whether the next speaker self selects or is other nominated are necessary basis for negotiational abilities.

In the sketch when Papa got back from work he nominated his wife Mama as the next speaker by saying

Mama John, I'm back. (ATR p. 1)
The overlap between Mama and Papa threatened Mama's face.

Mama: Papa John, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to annoy you. I was only trying …

Papa: Enough. Since you won't let me have peace, I better go to my friends.
                                                            (ATR p. 2)

and shows unequal interaction. This captures the Nigerian norm of the man as the infallible head of the family! The overlap involving John and Solo portrayed John to be bad tempered and foul-mouthed – what we expect of a bully. It also allowed the expression of peer disapproval.

Most of the adjacency pairs in Scenes III, IV, V consisted of preferred options. In Scene VI Papa's response to the teacher's question was another question, a dispreferred option. This was to show that Papa is skeptical or doubts the depth of John's transformation.

The use of gestures brought in elliptical coupling to enhance the effectiveness of discourse. When Papa grunted; when the children welcomed him home (Papa Oyoyo); Mama's facial expression; the children's playground and prayer sessions exhuberance, all provide a visual dimension to the drama sketch, and

> Dialogues therefore afford children opportunities not only to play a variety of roles in a variety of situations but also to experiment with the verbal interactions those situations could produce. (Heinig & Stillwell 1981: 13)

4.7   Critical Evaluation

A dividend of the drama sketch goes beyond the language gains to character modification. Generally, children resist being corrected by adults but in the drama sketch sessions children cajoled, reprimanded and insisted that their friends perform at their best. It was usual, especially at the onset of rehearsals, to hear "Don't walk like that", "Listen to me, and repeat it exactly as I say it" - admonitions that spurred the actors to greater heights. Papa, for instance, had tutorials on how to *grunt and* clear his throat the grown-up way; Mama had to learn the gait of mothers; the playground scene and the prayer meeting had too many games, songs, dances and even prayers to sort through. It was a period for negotiational skills to be tested. Beyond that, the didacticism which parents get accused of was readily accepted in the drama-sketch. Some moral statements which the children suggested when asked what they had learnt from the play included:

(1)   It teaches us not to nag and use bad language on our husband/wife

(2)   We should not be quarrelsome

(3)   We should forgive others and help them

(4)   We should share good news with others - invite them to join us in nice activities

The drama sketch also allows for cultural integration. The nuances of address terms and politeness markers have been mentioned. Other cultural features were the dance steps and drumming from which some of the children had been denied involvement. Parents were more willing to allow their children *dance* under the watchful eyes of the play directors.

There is no passive role in a drama sketch. The child who puts the props on stage has full participatory rights during the readings and rehearsals. Participatory rights results in modifications of the play, some extensions and the like. In "A Touch of the Rosary" Papa ate *food* not *soup*; the *rendered* of *new songs rendered* was deleted; the number of choruses and games that featured were what the children considered adequate; prayer sessions were scaled down to give more acting time. The children insisted that the song at the end of the play should not be expunged as it would allow the audience appreciate and see those who had sweated to bring them *priceless entertainment*. No where in all of this were the play directors mentioned!

Another area of creativity was the provision of props and costumes for the play. Mama's outfit was volunteered by a child who piped that "my mummy has many wrappers". The football, plates and food; Papa's cap and walking stick came from the children. Every child was a stage hand; the children were that eager to serve and assist. Getting the characters into their costumes was hilarious. Creativity did permeate the whole production.

5.0   Conclusion

Drama draws on a variety of sources. It is a participatory activity through which one expresses some inner feeling, desire or mood.

For drama to flourish in any society there is need for the formalisation and disciplining of the natural resources that children avail themselves of during role-playing. (cf section on role-playing)

The formalization starts in the drama sketch group where children are encouraged to express *self* in relation to others and the society. It is here that the child becomes aware of how words in the rich context provided become memorable. It offers mostly a created world of a story, play.

novel, "yet it offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted" (Collie & Stephen 1987: 4).

and in which fundamental human issues could be tackled creatively from a child's perspective. The drama sketch provides an avenue for second language acquisition by incorporating vocabulary development skills, conversational norms, pronunciation, oral discourse skills as integral components of the readings and production of the play. At the same time it maintains its relevance to the socio-cultural demands of English in a second language situation.

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