
Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Using Drama to Bring Language to Life: Ideas, Games and Activities for Teachers of Languages and Language Arts

Sheila Robbie, Tina Ruggirello, and Bernie Warren

Captus Press, North York, ON, 2001

161 pages, ISBN: 1-55322-005-6

Choosing drama to bring life to the language-learning process simultaneously motivates and addresses many levels of language ability in classrooms. Drama has undeniable parallels to the enactment and reenactment of life. It forms an integral part of our lives today, bringing life to the learning of languages and providing opportunities for expression in a variety of settings. In addition, drama allows a liberty of expression that can rarely be achieved using any other form of exercise. Drama facilitates improvisation and on-your-feet interaction. Nuance and intonation also affect dramatic communication. Therefore, communication levels can be improved using drama activities that are both cognitively and emotionally engaging. Potentially, both student engagement and motivation to perform well are fostered in drama activities.

Using Drama to Bring Language to Life is a well-developed drama handbook full of cognitively and emotionally engaging exercises that focus on language development and usage. Robbie, Ruggirello, and Warren blend the creative and cognitive into a useful set of ideas, games, and activities suitable for both beginners and experienced teachers. Teachers of drama, ESL, languages, and language arts will find the activities applicable. The text is also suitable for ESL teachers abroad as many of the exercises are less culturally specific in comparison with those in other drama activity books. Suggestions for diverse ages, backgrounds, cultures, and levels of mobility are included.

In a description of their approach, the authors suggest using language as a "cognitive instrument." They refer to language as the instrument rather than the subject of dramatic teaching. Activities are structured to acquire and develop language using a process approach. The activities allow students to focus on specific language, but are flexible enough to allow room for improvisation outside the targeted language area. Although many drama activity books mention the development of phonetics, pronunciation, and tone through drama, these authors note that activities can also provide grammatical and syntactical results. A full range of language abilities including verbal, visual, and written are part of the drama activities. The authors caution that their method is neither a "magic wand" nor a singular curricular approach,

but that it can facilitate the production of dramatic results in language development and classroom language use by providing students with activities designed to motivate and amuse.

The structure of the book is such that one can easily find tables and activities for quick reference. Tables and directional notes show teachers how to carry on the activities and chart the cognitive and linguistic elements addressed. Tables and lists of language abilities (e.g., discussion, specialized language, writing as a follow-up to drama activities) allow teachers to examine the areas where attention is needed and could be used to create evaluation rubrics when necessary. Acronyms such as TL for target language, meaning any language the student is studying, are used throughout as short cuts. An exceptionally useful bibliography, an appendix, and a glossary outline alternative sources, strategies, and terms.

The activities are well balanced between fantasy and social issues. Teachers could expand the activities to include current issues, social mores, and changes that effect persons taking on a new language. Activities cover a broad base from simple to complex engagement using a wide range of linguistic and dramatic skills. Activities following the first set of tables require a combination of skilled language teacher and dramatic experience. These activities may be challenging for less advanced speakers because they are linguistically complex and require a broader set of vocabulary and oral and written skills. Nonetheless, I can personally attest to the flexibility of the activities because I found them easy to use with adult learners in drama classes. As well, I have used similar activities in basic French and French immersion, and I could clearly adapt the activities for students of any age.

The activities could be used at any grade level. The authors have neither specified grade levels nor level of difficulty. Instead, they divide activities into target language functions such as discussion, evoking emotion, reading, writing, and making decisions, to name but a few. A frequent criticism of drama books is the authors' designated level of difficulty. Suitably, Robbie, Ruggirello, and Warren have left out grade-leveling the difficulty of the drama activities in favor of targeting language functions and complexity. The teacher is then left to make decisions about the use of the activity based on context and suitability. For example, teachers may need a less complex activity if they or their students are not experienced in dramatic activities. On the other hand, students may require more complex activities as they become better skilled in language and drama. This may create problems for beginner teachers who are less experienced in contextual decisions; however, the authors anticipated this and suggest how beginning drama teachers should advance through the book, gradually working up to the more complex activities.

Using Drama to Bring Language to Life is a valuable resource for teachers of languages and language arts as there is a continual need for fresh, up-to-date texts in this area. This book is a much-needed resource for animators and teachers because drama engages the mind in the use of language. This book will be a welcome addition to an ESL teacher's library of resources, providing fresh ideas and a rich repertoire of choices for dramatic activities. Students of ESL, languages, and language arts will be captivated by the ideas, games, and activities. Engaging in dramatic activities will help students to be more successful and confident in their real-world use of language from the drama activities of our classrooms.

Karen E. Smith

The Reviewer

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Oxford Guide to British and American Culture for Learners of English

Jonathan Crowther, editor

Oxford University Press, Oxford UK, 1999

600 pages, ISBN 0-19-431332-8

CD-ROM ISBN 0-19-431514-2 (2000)

Oxford guides are always a treat, full of interesting information, well written, and pleasingly illustrated. This one is no exception. It purports to explain how British and American people live: the sports they play, the products they buy, and the past events that have shaped their lives. British and American remain the focus, however; few references are made to other English-speaking nations that share a similar English culture, for example, Canada and Australia. Adding Canadian and Australian culture to this guide would not have been an onerous task given the abundant similarities.

The guide offers over 10,000 encyclopedia entries and 250 longer articles on topics such as education, fashion, and Shakespeare. A 32-page color insert highlights 18 topics and includes color photographs and maps. The *Contents* itemizes the articles and lists and the *Colour Pages* articles and indicates where to find guides to abbreviations, symbols, pronunciation symbols, and the key to entries.

The key to entries is well laid out and clear. Most of the typefaces and abbreviations used in an entry are self-explanatory, so the reader does not often have to flip back and forth to the key. American or British usage is indicated, and the American pronunciation is included if different from the

British. Words are predominantly British, for example, the entry for *Volkswagen bug* is only under *beetle*, the British term, but not under *bug* or even *Volkswagen*. The entry merely refers to the American name *bug*. Searching with the CD-ROM for *bug* brings up an entry for *The Love Bug* and a See reference for *beetle*. The word *bug* cited in the *beetle* entry is not indexed. Without the Love Bug, *bug* would be lost.

Some references are difficult to find. For example, Andrew Lloyd Webber is indexed under *L* not *W*, and there is no See reference. Dr Seuss is under *Dr*, not *S*, and famous American children's author Richard Scarry is nowhere. Big Bird and Cookie Monster can be located only if you know they are part of *Sesame Street*. The CD-ROM assists with some of these: *Webber* will send you off to the correct entry, but *Cookie Monster* does nothing.

Although entries seem to be subjectively chosen, American and British seem well balanced. Navy SEALs, yard sales, flea markets, bowling, Backstreet Boys, Thornton Burgess, Omar Sharif, and Roger Moore are missing, but Kleenex, Pollyanna, Spice Girls, Beano, valley girls, WASPs, Anthony Burgess, Holden Caulfield, Mars bars, and Tecumseh are included. The result is an interesting, informative, up-to-date collection of American and British popular culture trivia. Articles and entries are well written, cover a good selection of topics, and are nicely interspersed with well-chosen pictures. Even the language is politically correct: *actresses* are referred to in the modern way as *actors*.

Oxford suggests this *Guide* is an ideal companion to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. The *Guide's* CD-ROM version can be used with that of the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* by merely dragging unknown words onto the dictionary icon on the computer desktop. The targeted group for the *Guide* is intermediate- and advanced-level students of English, but advanced students would not necessarily need to refer to the *Dictionary* because most words that the *Guide* editor considered new to the user are defined. For example, in the article on "Death and funerals," the term *terminal illnesses* is defined as "(illnesses that will cause them to die)" and *condolences* is defined as "(sympathy)."

With the CD-ROM, searching can be conducted by A-Z or by Category (general and subdivisions). There is also a separate listing, Poems, that lists 45 poets and the text of from one to four or five of the most famous works of each. This is an interesting feature of the CD-ROM that is completely absent from the book, and in fact is stand-alone, missing from the other two sections of the CD.

The advantage of the CD-ROM is the related entries, which are absent from the book. Sometimes the short articles refer the reader to other entries, but not often. If a reader were curious about the British soldier's headgear called a *busby*, he or she would find it impossible to locate information either

in the paper copy or the CD-ROM. In fact, military references are overshadowed by the emphasis on social history and popular culture. Sitting Bull, Washington, Agincourt, and the Mohicans are outnumbered by John Wayne, Demi Moore, Dirty Harry, Laurel and Hardy, and Poohsticks.

The CD-ROM is easy to install with clear instructions. The CD will run on any computer with Windows. It has several excellent features that are missing from the print version, such as related entries for almost every entry. Information can easily be copied and pasted from the CD into a word processor, a definite plus for teachers of advanced students who enjoy adapting material for their classes. Users can even make their own annotations to entries on the CD. As one would expect, the computer features of the CD-ROM make the *Guide* even easier to use, and this particular CD-ROM is easy and quick to use. There is even an audio pronunciation icon to click on that allows one to hear the word(s), although always with a British accent.

The *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture* would be particularly useful for high-intermediate and advanced exam-preparation students and their teachers in the United States or the United Kingdom. It is also useful for Canadians, because we have a blend of cultural influences from both countries. The 250 longer articles and Colour Page articles are especially interesting for English-language learners and are excellent for high-level reading practice.

A Canadian teacher of academically oriented ESL students would find the *Guide* useful as reference material for students' writing assignments or presentations. For example, students could compare the American and British information in the article "Food" with details they notice about Canadians and food. If Oxford were to include a Canadian supplement, the *Guide* would be an excellent compendium of many differences and similarities in the culture of the English-speaking world: British, American, and Canadian. Without a Canadian supplement, however, it is useful primarily to those teachers who concentrate on British or American culture or history lessons, or to those who would enjoy augmenting the British and American primary material with their own Canadian details.

Ellen Pilon

The Reviewer

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