

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH DRAMA IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The article aims to examine the usage of drama in teaching by the Romanian teachers of English. Since prior research has not examined this topic in a systematic way, the purpose of the paper aims to answer the questions regarding to what extent teachers of English use drama and which are the factors that determine this behaviour. A survey on a convenience sample (N= 276) of Romanian teachers of English in primary, secondary and high schools was conducted in May and June 2020, therefore during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings show that teachers use drama to a small extent if compared to other methods and approaches in teaching English. The respondents' opinions that drama is efficient in teaching vocabulary and students are delighted when teachers use this method have the highest impact on the usage of drama in teaching English in Romania. The findings can be taken into consideration for the educational policies regarding teaching English (and other foreign languages).

Keywords: Drama, Romanian education, teaching English, curriculum

1. Introduction

According to our knowledge, in Romania, there is not enough research on this topic – teaching English through drama has not been explored enough. As far as we know, Herăscu (2006) is the only teacher of English who has written a book that contains school plays in English for school celebrations or fêtes, interactive activities based on skits and role-plays. The book is also appealing to the teachers of English since it makes mention of British cultural and historical symbols. Yet in the Romanian academic field there is a higher interest in drama in education. Exempli gratia, Rotaru (2016, 2017), Apostol (2018), and Darie *et al.* (2016) composed books with drama games for elementary and secondary school students within the project entitled UNATC Junior, initiated and implemented by the UNATC's MA Teaching Drama team, and funded by the Ministry of National Education of Romania. The project aimed to promote the educational value of theatre and, as a natural consequence, to introduce it, as a subject, in the pre-academic curriculum. Their echoes did not go unheard, moreover, the desideratum to implement drama in the education system as an optional subject became a reality. In 2020 the Romanian Ministry of Education approved that the students in the 3rd and 4th grades study the discipline *I and the stage*, in the 6th and 7th grades the discipline *Theatre and us*, whereas those in the 10th grades and the 11th the discipline of *The Theatre Laboratory*.

In 2011-2013, two extracurricular activities implementation programmes were carried out (including drama workshops), programmes that showed the benefits of these types of activities to the students and the school as a whole (Măntăluță et al., 2013, p. 11).

Apart from the programmes or projects of some non-government organizations or cultural institutions, the Ministry of Education supports the

organization of artistic activities (Mihăilescu & Iacob, 2016, p. 36). The most popular artistic activities in which students participated are found in the field of performing arts (drama and dance), followed by visual arts and music (Mihăilescu & Iacob, 2016, p. 55).

Moreover, the school curriculum for the English discipline recommends the use of drama within English lessons such as giving short answers through non-verbal reactions, role-plays or themed role-play, and dramatization of a reading/ a watched movie/ a skit for a celebration (Ministry of Romanian Education, 2017).

Within a project funded by the Austrian Embassy, Rotter and Nițșor (2017) also advocate for drama in education in general, but they do not do rigorous research, with a clearly defined methodology. Therefore, it is imperative to explore theoretical and applied issues of introducing playfulness into English classroom settings and to consult the teachers, for the reason that the teachers who feel the pulse of the class and who interact directly with the students must be consulted, as they see the real problems facing education and their students' levels of English.

Against these considerations, the paper answers to two research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do the Romanian teachers of English use drama in teaching?

RQ2. What are the factors that determine the teachers of English to use drama in teaching?

Regarding the first research question, the usage of drama is compared to the usage of the best-known methods and approaches in teaching English. To answer the second research question, some sociodemographic variables were considered, as well.

2. Theoretical background

Drama, which derives from the Greek word *dran*, meaning ‘to make or do’ (Nicholson, 2015, p. 4), is both a subject and a method for exploring subjects and issues across the curriculum, but it is also the generic term denoting a dramatic artwork (Lewis & Rainer, 2005, p. 8). To some practitioners, experts in the field, drama is pedagogy and art at the same time. Drama is recognized as a pedagogy (O’Toole et al., 2009, p. 158) due to the multitude of facets it manifests variously. For example, it is a pedagogical tool (Nicholson, 2000, p. 8), a teaching and learning strategy (Hill & Manna, n.d., p. 161), educational curriculum (O’Toole et al., 2009, p. 29, Daniels & Downes, 2018, p. 154), a mode of learning (Bolton, 1997, p. 367), or an aid to teaching (Brian Way as cited in Wooster, 2007, p. 10). Being a radical and positive educational force (Kempe, 2011, p. 171), it should be at the very heart of classroom inquiry (Madeleine Grumet as cited in O’Toole et al., 2009, p. Viii). Though, some consider that drama is an art form (Nicholson, 2000, p. 2; 62; Prendiville & Toye, 2007, p. 26), a multi-modal art form (Nicholson, 2000, p. 3), or a social art form (Wooland as cited in Wooster, 2007, p. 7; Baldwin, 2009, p. 18; Martin-Smith, 2011, p. 195). Some go much further: drama is an art, not a tool for making learning easy (Winifred Ward as cited in O’Toole et al., 2009, p. 100). Similarly, Queensland Senior drama syllabus recognizes drama as one of the oldest art forms (O’Toole et al., 2009, p. 128), nevertheless its potential is to help integrate learning through playful activities. That is why some come to consider drama as a hybrid art form (Nicholson, 2000, p. 7; Watson, 2017, p. 18), to have it both ways, as an integrative medium in education. But, most important, drama is a part of English and a language-based art form (Baldwin, 2009, p. 18) in which children communicate, create and perform while developing communicative and social skills (Hill & Manna, n.d., p. 161).

Henry Caldwell Cook, Alice-Minnie Herts and Harriet Finlay-Johnson are the pioneers of drama and the ones who opened the history of drama in education through their famous books *The Children's Educational Theater* (Herts, 1911), *The Dramatic Method of Teaching* (Finlay-Johnson, 1912) and *The Play Way, an Essay in Educational Method* (Cook, 1917), which can be considered, without exaggeration, true English language learning manuals through drama.

Not until 1921 in the Newbolt Report *The Teaching of English in England* (1921) is it stated for the first time the importance of studying English through drama in school. The study of drama focused on three essential characteristics of the dramatic text: a text that can be written, a text that can be read, a text that can be performed / played. Therefore, we can notice the active role of the student within the classes. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, since the 1960s' we can discuss implementing theatre courses in school programmes.

The methods of education through theatrical techniques presented by Alice-Minnie Hertz, Caldwell Cook and Harriet-Finlay Johnson generated two debatable perspectives among the theorists: *DIE* (drama in education) and *TIE* (theatre in education).

TIE is a performance programme in schools or theatres, in which students and actor-teachers are involved in theatrical activities (Nicholson, 2015, p. 4) that allow students to explore important issues and ideas in active and creative ways. It is also used as a method of work by companies which aim at getting a certain subject matter or ideas in society (Bolton, 1993, p. 44). Many of TIE projects express political messages to the audience, especially with strong left-wing political ideologies (Pérez Valverde, 2003).

Coining the terms 'drama in education' and 'educational drama' are due to Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton (as cited in Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. ix), who contributed to its growth of popularity as a pedagogical method and subject

in the curriculum in the late 1950s and early 1960s from the English tradition. Later, in the '90s, in the USA and Australia, a new term appeared: 'process drama', which refers to long-term activities that go beyond exercises in class. However, little is known about this approach as the literature does not offer enough information (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. x).

The British and the Americans have comparable views on drama and employ similar approaches. The purpose of employing drama in the British system is for the child's entire development, whereas the goal of using drama in the American system is for the development of linguistic abilities (Stern, 1981). Unlike many other traditional practices, drama has many benefits on learners and the learning process. Dramatic activities encourage students' participation and enthusiasm to learn the target language in a fun environment (Bahram & Reza, 2012; Greenfader & Brouillette, 2013). Teachers generally believe that drama activities provide a positive learning atmosphere, student participation, and enthusiasm to learn the target language. (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 80; Maley & Duff, 2005, p. 1; Gao & Dowdy, 2014; Cannon, 2017)

Drama enhances communication skills. Susan Stern (1981) studied how the theatrical approach affects L2 learners from a psycholinguistic point of view. Her research was based on the assumption that drama improves communication skills. We have rigorously identified factors that have a positive impact on communication skills, such as increased self-esteem, motivation, spontaneity, increased empathy, and reduced sensitivity to rejection. Similar factors that improve communication were recently mentioned in an article by Sarah L. Dodson (2000).

Drama also provides an enjoyable learning experience and develops decoding skills, fluency, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, discourse knowledge,

metacognitive thinking (Rieg & Paquette, 2009) and critical thinking (M. Pressley & K. R. Harris as cited in Lendvay, 2016).

Drama brings changes in the classroom climate as the distance between the real world and the classroom is shortened to the benefit of learning (Kao & O'Neill, 1998, p. 79) and consequently the relationship between a student and a teacher is improved in terms of a natural communication.

Because educational systems are generally conservative, drama changes teacher-student relationships, questions the role of teachers, ignores classroom design, and most importantly, it involves movement. Therefore, it can be seen as a threat to a particular value or norm, especially when the evaluation can also be an issue (Baldwin, 2009, p. 56). One potential drawback is teachers' lack of preparation in this area (Dodson, 2000; O'Toole 2011). Another potential drawback may be the teachers' perception that this method is not intended to be taken seriously. In addition, drama activities are difficult to monitor, making them unsuitable for very crowded classrooms (Wan Yee, 1990).

Another drawback is that students are shy and reluctant to express themselves (Miccoli, 2003), and their background and skepticism can be sources of nonperformance (Dodson, 2000). But the main drawback of drama is that it allows students to create and practise non-grammatical or inappropriate forms, and it is also difficult to provide feedback and not very productive (Richards, 1985). Therefore, it encourages the wrong form of speech unless the teacher is advised to correct the mistake immediately so as not to discourage the student. Nevertheless, teachers can find some solutions to these problems. This is evident when teachers believe in effective use of drama in English lessons when encouraging students to explore new ways of learning a language with careful thinking and planning.

3. Method and sample

To answer the research questions, a survey was conducted in May and June 2020 on a convenience sample (N=276) of Romanian teachers of English. The questionnaire was administrated online using Qualtrics, respecting the anonymity and the possibility of not answering any question. The majority of the respondents are female (83,7%) (Table 1). The sample is heterogeneous concerning the localities size and the levels of education of the schools where the teachers teach. The usage of drama and other 13 methods and approaches, which are the most used in teaching English (Richards & Rodgers, 1986) (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), is measured on a 5-point Likert type scale, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a large extent). Similarly, the opinions regarding the drama efficiency in teaching vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, and the fact that students are delighted when teachers use drama in teaching are measured on a 5-point Likert type scale, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a large extent).

	Frequency	(%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	13	4,7
Female	231	83,7
Non responses	32	11,6
<i>School residence</i>		
Village	42	15,2
Small town (less than 20000 inhabitants)	36	13,0
Medium town (20000-100000 inhabitants)	44	15,9
Big town (more than 100000 inhabitants)	42	15,2
Bucharest	83	30,1
Non responses	29	10,5
<i>Where respondents teach^a</i>		
Primary school	97	35,1
Secondary school	130	47,1

High school	99	35,9
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Table 1. Background variables

Note: "Frequency totals are bigger than 276 or 100% because respondents can teach in more than one level of education.

4. Findings

The findings show that drama is the least used method in teaching English in Romania – this method has the lowest average score (Mean=2.72) with the highest heterogeneity of the answers (SD=1.284) (Table 2). We can observe that the most frequently used methods are the communicative approach (4.54), the task-based language learning (4.11) and the oral-situational approach (4.04). The survey indicated that respondents use mostly methods that develop communication skills and vocabulary.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
The Grammar-Translation Method	267	2.95	1.162	0.190	-0.786
The Direct Approach	265	3.75	1.059	-0.560	-0.378
The Reading Approach	267	4.01	0.880	-0.448	-0.698
The Audio-Lingual Method	267	3.76	1.170	-0.624	-0.532
The Oral-Situational Approach	269	4.04	1.030	-0.907	0.179
Drama	276	2.72	1.284	0.285	-1.014
The Cognitive Approach	266	3.58	1.014	-0.314	-0.315
The Affective-humanistic Approach	268	3.56	1.155	-0.463	-0.580
The Communicative Approach	269	4.54	0.720	-1.408	1.080
The Natural Approach	262	3.48	1.140	-0.314	-0.704
Behaviourism	270	2.93	1.151	-0.016	-0.808
Task-based Language Learning	267	4.11	0.897	-0.657	-0.368
Post-Communicative Language Teaching: Eclecticism, Project-based	267	3.67	1.050	-0.527	-0.334

Learning, Differentiated Instruction					
The Lexical Approach	265	3.71	0.967	-0.353	-0.277

Table. 2. To what extent do you use the following methods and approaches in teaching English?

We can consider that the communicative approach is used to the highest extent, though it presupposes the interaction that is also specific to drama, but it does not go further, due to some presupposed benefits: the students are free of language control, a natural context is developed from the students' experiences with the language that is personalised and relevant to them, the language explored arises from the students' needs, it is a strong teaching approach where students spend a lot of time communicating (Brown, 2001, pp. 42–43).

To answer the second research question, the linear regression was employed with using drama in teaching English as a dependent variable. The findings show that the opinions that drama is efficient in teaching vocabulary and pronunciation and that students are delighted when teachers use drama in teaching have a significant and positive impact on using drama in teaching English (Table 3). The opinion that drama is efficient in teaching grammar does not influence the usage of drama in teaching English. The standardized regression coefficients are the highest for the independent variables: `drama is efficient in teaching vocabulary` and `students are delighted when you use drama in teaching`. Some socio-demographical variables were considered as control variables, namely: gender, age, the size of the locality where the school is located and the level of education where the respondents teach. Only teachers' age has a significant impact on the dependent variable. The higher the teachers' age, the higher the extent that teachers use drama.

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-0.117	0.591		-0.198	0.843
Drama is efficient in teaching vocabulary	0.412	0.087	0.349	4.708	0.000
Drama is efficient in teaching grammar	-0.007	0.082	-0.006	-0.085	0.932
Drama is efficient in teaching pronunciation	-0.193	0.097	-0.138	-1.981	0.049
Students are delighted when you use drama in teaching	0.388	0.085	0.331	4.547	0.000
Gender	-0.176	0.324	-0.036	-0.542	0.588
Age	0.021	0.009	0.154	2.348	0.020
Residence	-0.151	0.207	-0.049	-0.727	0.468
Primary school	-0.075	0.198	-0.034	-0.382	0.703
Secondary school	0.075	0.188	0.034	0.397	0.692
High school	0.057	0.158	0.026	0.357	0.721

Table 3. Linear regression with using drama in teaching English as a dependent variable

Note. Gender: Male=1, Female=0. Residence: Rural =1, Urban=0. Primary school: Yes=1, Not=0. Secondary school: Yes=1, Not=0. High school: Yes=1, Not=0. R2=0.32.

5. Conclusions

The findings suggest that drama is the least commonly used method of teaching English in Romania – this method has a lower average score with a high level of heterogeneity in the responses. We can observe that the most frequently used methods are the communicative approach, the task-based language learning and the oral-situational approach. The survey showed that the most commonly used methods are those that help learners develop communication skills and vocabulary.

The teachers of English who use drama in their lessons to a higher extent consider that drama is effective in teaching vocabulary and pronunciation, and students

love it when teachers use it in class. Moreover, the opinion that drama is efficient in teaching pronunciation increases the usage of this method in English lessons. Teaching English through drama is unaffected by the opinion that it is effective in teaching grammar. These findings are in line with the theoretical studies that affirm that drama develops oral skills (Stern, 1981; Dodson, 2000)

The results of the research can be used by language teachers in general and teachers of English in particular, teachers who want to use other attractive teaching methods for students. Based on the findings of the paper, we can recommend that pedagogical programmes, especially that are compulsory to be attended by people that intend to become teachers in Romania, to offer information and to develop skills to use drama in teaching English (and other foreign languages). Moreover, we can recommend to principals, school inspectors and members of the schools' councils to encourage and support usage drama in teaching foreign languages.

The limitations of the research are given by the convenience sample (beyond its heterogeneity) and by the fact that the research was conducted during the pandemic, when instruction was online. Even though, some experts consider that drama activities can be taught online (Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy, 2020), teaching English through drama implies corporality, gestures, non-verbal reactions, eye contact, use of all senses, a common space, as essential elements of communication. Therefore, future study should be realised in a non-pandemic context and in a different cultural environment. Moreover, more variables can be taken into consideration to explain the drama usage, such as teachers' personality traits and school facilities.

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