

# GFL

*German as a foreign language*

## **Drama and Intercultural Education**

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The following paper was given as a key note speech at an International Conference at National University of Ireland, University College Cork: Drama and Theatre in the Teaching and Learning of Language, Literature and Culture. An overview is provided of the different ways in which drama can support intercultural education, in particular in the way it helps people to examine their own practices and assumptions that are often taken for granted. The concept of interculturalism can be widened to include all sorts of human encounters, not just those across national boundaries; there is a sense in which any encounter with an 'other', 'stranger' or new social group may be seen as a form of interculturalism. In order to give language its proper respect we need to examine it in rich, meaningful contexts to explore its nuances, ambiguities and complexities. Drama as an art form works paradoxically; it highlights complexity in situations and reveals their cultural dimensions through a process of selection and simplification. Drama has a particular role to play because it engages feelings but also helps participants to decentre and view human encounters in a fresh way. In a dramatic representation human motivation and intention can be simplified and examined more explicitly.

### **1. Introduction**

I work in the School of Education at the University in Durham, a beautiful city in the North of England where I have lived for over thirty years. I was born in London. My wife is from New York. My father was from Dublin and my mother was from Kerry. I mention those facts not only to introduce myself but also as a way of introducing the theme of interculturalism. Thinking about interculturalism most often takes place in the context of encounters across national boundaries, across cultures in which a different language is spoken. In my own case, my intercultural or transcultural experience has largely taken place across cultures where the same language is spoken. I think it is legitimate to widen the concept of interculturalism in that way. Modern phenomena such as globalisation, internationalisation, integration and migration means that societies are becoming increasingly multicultural - and often 'second generation' multicultural.

We can widen the concept of interculturalism even further to apply to all sorts of human encounters, not just those across national boundaries. In this sense we could argue that any encounter with an 'other', 'stranger' or new social group may be seen as a form of

interculturalism (Alred, Byram & Fleming 2003: 3). Examples might include having to acquire knowledge about the culture of schools as a new teacher, or coming to terms with the culture of an individual school as an experienced teacher when moving from one to another.

We can then think about intercultural experiences in the context of situations in which: different languages are spoken (Byram 1997: 7); the 'same' language is spoken; 'otherness' is encountered in social contexts. I do not want to suggest that we place undue emphasis on the second and third cases of interculturalism because a major theme of this conference is focused on the teaching of foreign languages. We need to recognise that to extend a concept too far may be to run the risk of rendering it vacuous and unhelpful. I want to suggest, however, that looking at broader concepts of interculturalism can throw light on its narrower uses.

In John Walsh's book *The Falling Angels* the author gives an account of his experiences being brought up in London in an Irish family. He describes the feeling of being enriched and sometimes disorientated, caught as he was between two cultures - like a falling angel suspended between heaven and hell. One of the functions literature serves as an art form is to help us to make concrete and specific what we were only intuitively or tacitly aware of - to reflect on and illuminate experiences that we may have previously taken for granted or have only grasped at a lower level of consciousness. This, for me, is the effect of Walsh's book.

He teases out in a warm and humorous way the influences from England and Ireland which were woven into his personal history. He also identifies some of the tensions involved. On one of his summer visits to Cork he makes friends with a local boy called Taig. In order to compete with him and make the friendship more secure he begins to talk like him.

I started to say 'eejit' and 'fecker' and 'Is that right?' - not so obviously that it seemed like a parody, I just fed them into the conversation...I went back to saying 'can't' rather than carn't. Taig didn't seem to notice. At any rate he made no comment, but I detected a chill in the air between us...The holiday came to an end...I went up the road to Taig's house to say goodbye. Half way there, he appeared with half a dozen teenagers, his gang of buddies.

'Howya,' I said to him 'D'ja think there'll be any dacent fishin' to be had off the pier'.

There was an awful silence. One of the teenagers sniggered.

‘You still here?’ Taig said coldly. ‘I thought you’d be gone by now’.

‘Me dad is after-’ I faltered, ‘is after packin up the car.’ Disastrously my new accent failed me at the last moment. I said ‘caaahr’ to rhyme with ‘Tsar’. The sniggering boy burst out laughing. Clearly Taig had told them about the English boy who was trying to talk like a Mick.’ (Walsh 2000: 126)

The boys start to throw stones at him and tell him to go home, which he duly does, upset that he has been run out of town for being ‘insufficiently convincing’.

The book is largely a celebration of what we might be justified in describing the writer’s ‘biculturalism’, but the extract also captures the tension and difficulties sometimes experienced in trying to negotiate two cultures. The extract shows the value of widening the notion of interculturalism because here national and social groupings overlap. To what degree is the extract about national identity or is it more about social group identity (Tajfel 1981)? The young Walsh wants to be part of the ‘in-group’. He and the other boys show a tacit awareness of the importance of language in relation to identity, the way people use language to identify themselves as part of a social group. Does Walsh display cultural insensitivity in imitating the speech of his friends? Do they display even more cultural insensitivity in attributing the wrong sort of intention to him? It is a simple example, but not without subtlety because it shows how national identity becomes tied up with group identity. We perhaps need to recognise when we are thinking about intercultural education that in the modern world teenagers may have more in common across cultures than they do with other social groups within their own nationality.

Literature, art and drama work at the level of the particular (this is not just ‘a London Irish boy visiting Cork’ but a specific individual at this moment in time with these particular personal characteristics having a specific encounter) and that partially explains their value when addressing interculturalism, because when we look at particulars through the lens of artistic form we often see more complexity in situations. Literature and drama deal in particulars but also with general or universal resonances. Of course as soon as we start dealing in generalities in matters of culture we run the risk of stereotyping. It is something of a conundrum. We have to deal in generalities in order to communicate – but the border between what is an appropriate generality and a stereotype is sometimes hard to demarcate.

In another part of the book when Walsh (2000: 72) is writing about late night parties at his parents' London Irish home he comments: "You had to sing...not to sing was to be English".

It could be argued that we have two national stereotypes together here in one short sentence. However the style and context within the book, the warmth and wit, stop this being in any way offensive. In the case of art, form as well as content comes into play – we react not just to the ideas but to the artistic form in which they are embodied. There is also an ambiguity which attaches to the sentence – is it his view, his parents' views, his assumptions about their view which may be mistaken? The ambiguity softens the content. Through literature and drama we can confront intercultural themes in a subtle way because we deal in particulars embedded in contexts in which form is as important as content.

As a young adult visiting New York in the 1970s my understanding of the social context in which I found myself was enhanced by Arthur Miller's plays, particularly *All My Sons*. Through his work I was able to understand more clearly that what I first perceived as a highly negative American outlook on the world was, in fact, more complex. What seemed to me to be an excessive materialism, a drive to make money at all costs, was motivated not simply by negative, individual, selfish intentions but often by a deep loyalty and commitment to family. The mistake made by the central character in Miller's play is to place commitment to family above commitment to humanity, even to the extent of causing others' deaths. The play stops us making simplistic judgements and reaches towards understanding rather than simple condemnation.

There is a body of opinion which says that to use literature to explore moral and social values (and by implication intercultural themes) is to deny the aesthetic element of art, to emphasise content at the expense of form or to separate content from form unduly (Gingell 2000:74; Gribble 1983: 16). That is only true if we use drama and novels in an overly didactic way. True art is rarely didactic. Again, art and literature stop us making overly simplistic judgements. We are invariably forced to confront complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty. One of the reasons drama has such strong educational potential is that it deals in concrete particulars with universal resonances. It is arguably the most concrete of the art forms because it deals in action.

We have to be aware of the risks of claiming too much for drama. Through drama, according to Slade (1954:106) “love and hate can be worked off...resourcefulness is developed...memory is aided...good manners are discovered...grace and virility are nurtured”. Drama, it has been claimed, develops confidence, improves language, is a method for teaching all other subjects, is a way of teaching pupils to think and to feel – the list could go on. But often such general claims do not do justice to the specific nature of drama as an art form. I want to look at five (overlapping) ways in which drama can contribute to intercultural education:

- Use of drama in the modern language classroom
- Making theatre in a foreign language
- Exploring cultures through theatre traditions
- Exploring other cultures through ‘process’ drama
- Looking at one’s own culture through drama

## **2. Use of drama in the modern language classroom**

I am not a modern language teacher but I have taken an interest in the use of drama in the modern language classroom. I have also learned to be careful. When I first ran drama workshops for our postgraduate modern language students who were training to be teachers several years ago they were very quick to point out to me that some of my suggestions were overestimating the language competence of the pupils. In the 1970s and 1980s many drama practitioners became wedded to the use of spontaneous improvisation and marginalized other approaches. Improvisation requires a particular level of language competence. Drama techniques such as tableaux (in which groups create a still image, to which can be added dialogue or thoughts), questioning in role (in which a fictitious character is questioned by the class to explore motivation), teacher in role (in which it is the teacher who adopts the fictitious role, perhaps using the target language), use of small text extracts of two or three lines of speech, are more common now in drama and do not necessarily demand the same fluency in language.

The value of drama in the modern foreign language classroom was often thought to be in its capacity to create contexts for practice in communication through simulation of real-life experiences. It is quite natural to see drama activities in the modern language classroom as being in some sense an imitation of real life. Activities such as visiting an airport, sitting with a family around the breakfast table or buying a loaf of bread in a shop could be replicated through drama in the classroom as a substitute for the actual experience. Exercises, simulations and role plays have their place in bringing variety, motivation, interest and enlivening drill. However developments in the 1980s and 1990s recognise the potential for drama beyond functional role play to use more of the art form – whether this be in opening up literature through drama approaches or creating richer contexts for exploring meaning. This coincided with the increasing recognition that teaching language is more than just teaching a linguistic code. Art is not just about imitation or representation – it is about understanding through transformative expression. Rather than seeing drama simply as a way of replicating real life, we can see drama as a way of exploring experiences in ways which are not possible in real life, e.g. freezing a moment in time, exploring sub-texts of dialogue, voicing characters' inner thoughts and intentions (Fleming 1997: 57). The family around the breakfast table may actually be nervous about having a foreign visitor in their midst and the action can be frozen so that they can voice their thoughts.

A drama teacher might explore the simple situation of character A buying a loaf of bread from character B by asking pupils to create different contexts by using the exact same words but injecting extra layers of meaning. (Fleming 2003: 97). A has run away from home and is scared of being caught, this is B's first time in the job and s/he is very nervous, B is always rude to customers, A is a parent with a family to feed who can barely afford the purchase, A is an escaped prisoner who must not give away the fact that s/he is from a foreign country. The language demands remain the same but the different contexts require a different tone and interpretation.

There is an important difference then between using drama/theatre activities and the more common role play exercises. A simple distinction here is that between 'role' (the participants are defined simply by their actions e.g. buying an item in a store, asking directions, arriving at an airport) and 'character' including attitude (e.g. 'I am buying this

item in a store even though my family cannot really afford it'). The latter approach has more potential to explore sub-texts and underlying cultural dimensions.

When we use drama as art to explore language we are driven towards taking account of cultural contexts.

### **3. Making theatre in a foreign language**

The categories overlap – we could say that making theatre in a foreign language is what is happening when drama is used in the modern foreign language classroom. I place it as a separate category to refer to more ambitious examples of making theatre. Several examples of this way of working will be addressed at this conference. One such project run by Schmidt (1998) involves the devising and producing of a play in English and other languages in the suburbs of Paris. It is coordinated by a professional theatre director, a French teacher of English and French students of different ethnic backgrounds. The fact that the participants themselves devise the play is a key aspect of the intercultural dimension because the participants have to transpose the action into a foreign culture. Schmidt (1998: 198) comments as follows:

Whilst improvising on *As you Like It* I asked my group of young people to explore and then express feelings of both love and rejection, and it was clear that uttering such sensitive emotions through a foreign language helped them find a degree of sincerity that would probably have been impossible in their native language. It was a means of overcoming embarrassment. With a few simple words charged with emotion they were able to convey love and rejection. They felt as if it is not quite them but at the same time it is them, just as the mask reveals some deep truth in the personality of the person wearing it, even though the actor may have the feeling of being concealed behind it. Acting in a foreign language is a journey into the unknown which precludes self indulgence as one is deprived of one's landmarks, and yet it provides one with the freedom of daring to be oneself.

The idea of the foreign language potentially protecting participants rather than the more normal assumption that it exposes them is an interesting one.

### **4. Exploring cultures through theatre traditions**

In the UK in drama in the 1970s and 1980s the split between product and process was very strong. They were exciting times as we discovered the liberating effect of spontaneous



improvisation. The emphasis was on *creating* drama with less attention paid to *responding* to drama. With more of a balance now between process and product, making and responding, there are more examples of exploring theatre traditions which are different from one's own or looking at intercultural theatre.

Once again this is not straightforward. Despite good intentions, there is a danger of fostering the notion that other theatrical traditions are simply bizarre. But that challenge exists even with different drama traditions within one culture. In the drama classroom it is often a challenge to move pupils beyond a very narrow conception of drama as simple representation, drawn from their experience of television. The result of introducing them to other theatrical traditions might be to reinforce their conception of these as being simply weird. However keeping process as well as product in mind means we can use workshops in combination with performance to enrich participants' experiences. A number of theoretical perspectives draw attention to the active as opposed to passive process involved in perception (reader response literary theory, constructivism in learning theory, Kantian philosophy) – all of these point to the fact that the teacher has a responsibility in guiding pupils' responses to performance without, of course, circumventing or pre-determining them.

## **5. Exploring other cultures through drama**

If looking at other theatre traditions is in danger of promoting notions of the exotic - exploring other cultures through drama runs the risk of promoting stereotypes. If I ask someone to act as if they are of a different nationality it is not unreasonable for them to reach for stereotypes to support their acting. It is, however, possible to work in more oblique ways. Dorothy Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach (Heathcote and Bolton 1994) is one in which the group become experts within the drama in a particular field. For example, they could be a group of advisors planning an induction course for visitors to a foreign country. By being 'framed' in the drama as advisors they have the motivation to research and experiment with ideas. Here the drama is less theatrically orientated and becomes closer to ethnography, but the element of make-believe allows a greater freedom in taking risks and experimenting.

A few years ago I was working with a group of 13 year old pupils on the theme of exchange visits abroad using drama in a workshop context. After a number of introductory tableaux, interviewing and role play activities, the central task required the pupils to act out situations in which a foreign visitor to their home was *unwittingly* made to feel uncomfortable (Fleming 1998: 152). The challenge and the learning both centred on the use of the word 'unwittingly'. Without that word the drama might have been crude and unrestrained. Each prepared improvisation began with the foreign visitor (played by a pupil) articulating in a brief monologue their version of what had happened, followed by the events as they actually happened. The drama showed difficulties arising not because of neglect or malice but more insensitivity on the part of the receiving family – all was well-intentioned. The actual content of the drama focused on everyday situations: meal-times, watching television, going out for the evening. As well as giving consideration to the culture of the foreign visitor they were reflecting on their own everyday practices in a different way, which leads to the next category.

## **6. Looking at one's own culture through drama**

People born and socialised into specific groups tend to assume that the conventions and values by which they live within their groups are inevitable and natural. A key element in developing intercultural communicative competence is to help people to decentre.

The 'good learner' is aware of their own identities and cultures, and of how they are perceived by others, and... also has an understanding of the identities and cultures of those with whom they are interacting. This 'intercultural speaker' (Byram and Zarate 1994) is able to establish a relationship between their own and other cultures, to mediate and explain differences and to see the common humanity beneath it. (Byram and Fleming 1998:8).

There are written tests available which can be used to determine an individual's intercultural competence. These consist of a series of social situations with questions designed to see whether the person knows how to behave in the particular country. For example, if you are going to a friend's for dinner is it more appropriate to take chocolates, flowers or a bottle of some kind? These tests seem to take little account of the fact that the other party in this situation also has an 'intercultural duty'. They need to make some allowances for the fact that their visitor is foreign and are hardly likely to be devastated if

they have to make do with chocolates rather than flowers. I would suggest that decentering is a key implicit element in all drama because we are invited to look at familiar situations in new light. Take the case of two pupils who are asked to enact a simple exchange between a teenager who has arrived home late and a parent who is angry. The act of constructing the drama means that the pupils are likely to consider the exchange in a more self-conscious way than if they were engaged in it for real. (The term 'spontaneous' when attached to drama of this kind can be misleading). That does not mean that the dramatic enactment will automatically bring insight – it may take the input of a teacher to help them consider, for example, that behaviour which manifests itself as anger may be caused by worry. However it is due to the fact that the drama is by definition not real that the decentering occurs.

That does not mean that participants engage in drama with some sort of cold detachment. That would be to misunderstand the concepts of decentering or defamiliarisation. The appeal of drama (whether as audience or participant) is that it engages feelings, often with great intensity. But the fictional context is central. If a teacher begins a drama lesson by pretending to be angry with the pupils (such 'tricks' were not uncommon in the 1970s) then this is not in the realm of drama or art. It may be a lively way to begin a lesson and the pupils may enjoy the relief that this was a brief make-believe. However it only counts as drama if all the participants agree to suspend disbelief. Similarly, when watching a play the audience may engage at a high level of feeling but always within a make-believe context.

Decentering can also be pursued as an explicit objective in drama projects. Again it might be helpful to provide a particular example. We recently had an intercultural symposium at Durham on the theme of international citizenship, attended by delegates from a wide range of countries. We thought the visitors might like to spend some time in a local school and we used a drama workshop as a vehicle for working with 12 year old pupils. The pupils during three sessions prior to the visit invented a fictitious planet inhabited by an intelligent and civilised people. In the first part of the workshop session they presented their reports based on observations of life on planet earth with tableaux (freeze-frame) and commentaries looking at aspects of life on earth such as war, domestic, violence, graffiti etc from the perspective of people trying to understand what was going on. They bracketed their actual knowledge to see things from a fresh perspective. In the second part of the workshop they remained in role as people from another planet but this time interviewed the

visitors from different countries in order to learn about the different countries and cultures on earth represented there. The dramatic element in this workshop was fairly minimal because the work needed to be fairly safe and low risk for both pupils and visitors but the make-believe framing or ‘the unreal’ gave a liberating context for asking questions and reflecting on custom and practice in their own and other countries.

An ‘intercultural attitude’ (*savoir etre*) has been defined as follows: “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” (Byram 1997: 50). This means a willingness to relativize one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours. Drama seems to me to be particularly appropriate for pursuing those goals.

## 7. Drama as an art form

The concept of the ‘unreal’ provides a key insight into the way the central concepts being addressed at this conference are related and it is this point to which I now turn. We may begin with the fundamental question: how does language have meaning? The great insight from Wittgenstein is that language has meaning not by reference to objects and events in the real world, nor by reference to thoughts in someone’s head, but through negotiation in particular contexts. In this he was rejecting an earlier ‘calculus’ view of language which was cut and dried, where the relationship between language and that to which it was referring was clear and logical. Peters and Marshall (1999:28) describe Wittgenstein’s quest in his early writing as one which sought for a form of ‘logical purity’. They quote from Eagleton’s novel *Saints and Scholars* which captures in literary, symbolic form the moment of insight that motivated Wittgenstein to change his thinking:

One day a friend took his photograph on the steps of the Senate House and Wittgenstein asked him where to stand. “Oh roughly there,” the friend replied, casually indicating a spot. Wittgenstein went back to his room, lay on the floor and writhed in excitement. *Roughly there*. The phrase had opened a world to him. Not ‘two inches to the left of that stone, but ‘roughly there’. Human life was a matter of roughness, not of precise measurement. Why had he not understood this? He had tried to purge language of its ambiguities...Looseness and ambiguity were not imperfections, they were what made things work. (Eagleton 1987:42).

Let us think about the consequences of the insight here: “Looseness and ambiguity were not imperfections, they were what made things work”. How do these insights into language and meaning relate to interculturalism? It is not just that language has different meanings in different cultural contexts (which is the case) but language *only* can have meaning in contexts of shared judgments and shared practices. In order to give language its proper respect we need to examine it in rich, meaningful contexts to explore its nuances, ambiguities and complexities – and that, I believe, is where art, literature and drama come in. As I said earlier, drama deals in concrete, particular situations and allows the exploration of subtlety.

But that is not the end of the story – drama works through a series of paradoxes – these have been implicit in some of the examples, but I now want to make them explicit.

Drama actually simplifies situations in order to explore their complex depths.

Drama ‘brackets off’ extraneous details which clutter our experience of normal life. In effect, the participants create a ‘closed culture’ or ‘form of life’ which allows an exploration of complexity because it is a simplification. They have no prior history other than that given to them within the drama. In our normal everyday life our use of language is ‘saturated’; it is full of resonance and subtleties which derive from the form of life in which the language is embedded. The creation of a fictional context, however, strips away some of that complexity – a drama is bound by certain limitations by virtue of the fact that it is not real. In a dramatic representation human motivation and intention can be simplified and examined more explicitly. On the surface, the dramatic representation seems to replicate reality, particularly if it is using naturalistic conventions; however the characters who exist in the drama occupy the narrower, more confined fictional world which is created.

Drama allows us to be emotionally engaged yet distant.

A participant who takes a part in a play, whether scripted or improvised, becomes another person. It is not a purely cerebral activity but involves the whole self – physical and emotional. Yet we never lose the perspective that this is a fiction, that this make-believe. If we do, I would argue that it ceases to be art. In the case of the types of emotional involvement and distance involved in drama we have different emphases from Stanislavski and Brecht but these are matters of degree rather than kind. An essential defining feature of

art is that it is not real. That distinguishes the concept of art from the wider concept of the aesthetic.

Participation in drama is serious yet free from responsibility.

The pupils as participants in the drama have to face up to the consequences of their actions, but the fictitious context frees them from any responsibility for what they have done.

Drama allows people to be participant as well as observer.

Traditionally, roles in drama have been distinguished between those who participate as actors and those who observe as audience. More recently, there has been recognition that the educational value of drama in part derives from the fact that one can actively engage in drama, while at the same time keep one's actions under review. The process of decentering is central.

Drama makes us open to the new while rooted in the familiar.

Participants bring to the fictitious context their real life experiences. When engaging in drama pupils draw on their knowledge of social conventions and behaviour. But the quest to create a dramatic plot takes them to the creation of new meanings captured within the symbolic action of the drama.

I would like to return to the three uses of the term interculturalism I introduced earlier. One narrow view would be to see language learning and interculturalism as a valuable optional extra, as something of luxury item as opposed to the fundamental basics in education. But fostering values of openness, tolerance of others, the ability to decentre has to place interculturalism not at the margins but right at the centre of what is important in education.

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## **Biodata**

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