

Joe Winston

Performative Language Teaching in Early Education:

Language Learning through Drama and the Arts for Children 3– 7

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Drama as Story

Historically, drama has played a vital role in children's need for story, especially when most people could not read or write; for past and present, children have invested much energy and effort in performing their own narratives with their own bodies. In ELT, the shifting emphasis from individual students' cognition to meaningful social interaction as key to language learning has led to a renewed interest in embodied learning. Drama can provide both context-embedded language learning and participation that is fully embodied, combining physical and mental focus with language play, language learning and thoughtful feelings – feelings that co-exist with thoughts and involve cognition (Ratner, 2000).

As in all teaching methodology, the quality of teaching very much counts in addition to the chosen approach; concentration and focus must be balanced with flexibility and creativity for a performative approach to be truly useful. Teacher education has an important role to play here; student teachers need to learn about strengthening learners' motivation, confidence and engagement. The insightful book reviewed here is designed to be highly supportive of teachers of very young learners as well as student teachers, as many teachers often feel underconfident when using drama methods despite being aware of the many advantages of performative language teaching.

A Chapter-by-Chapter Walkthrough

Performative Language Teaching in Early Education consists of an introduction, six chapters and an afterword. There is no doubt that in the area of subject pedagogy it is hugely advantageous (many would say indispensable) that teacher educators themselves have teaching experience of

precisely the age group of students that their trainee teachers will be teaching, or in-service teachers teach. It is therefore very reassuring to read in the Introduction to this compact book that author Joe Winston has spent a number of years devising a new curriculum for drama that is designed to support the teaching of English, as well as teaching on the course himself. As Winston explains, this experience took place in a well-resourced Chinese immersion context with very young language learners, whose school day was held in English 50 per cent of the time. Winston states his choice of the term 'performative language teaching' is due to its embracing 'a range of strategies that include the dramatic but also make use of music, art, movement, games, storytelling' (p. 5) and other playful but structured early years practices.

Chapter One, 'Young children learning English as a Foreign language', may be most interesting for readers of this journal who come from the research area of children's literature but are less conversant with the field of English language teaching (ELT). However, as the author offers a concise and up-to-date overview of the research in the area of teaching English to young learners (TEYL), the chapter will also be highly interesting for student teachers, in particular trainees for primary and pre-primary. Winston outlines how key characteristics of English with very young children are already distinctive as an embodied approach to learning, including, for example, Total Physical Response activities, stories, puppets, chants and songs. The emphasis is on context-embedded language learning, pattern texts, whole-body learning and children's positive feelings, and Janice Bland's work on primary and Sandie Mourão's explorations of pre-primary language learning are particularly discussed in this regard (unfortunately the name Mourão is misspelled).

Chapter Two describes a theoretical explanation for performative language teaching, including the fuller use of the body to communicate 'in ways that add depth and emotional resonance to the words and hence make them more memorable' (p. 39). Moreover, Winston explains how and why 'teachers of EYL should consider their pedagogy in aesthetic as well as instrumental terms' (p. 41). Games framed within a fictional context are concisely introduced, as allowing dramatic tension to deepen children's imaginative engagement, and good stories (mostly classic picturebooks) are briefly presented as respecting children's imaginative capabilities.

Chapter Three is more practical and devoted to action songs, nursery rhymes, games and drama strategies like imaging a scene, taking part in a whoosh, hot-seating story characters and hot-seating the teacher in role. It begins by reminding the reader that teachers, indeed everybody,

can sing, singing being an important pedagogic skill for TEYLs. The action songs can be found on YouTube, as not all melodies may be well known. This chapter really reminds me of a time when I taught primary and pre-primary children, and we also had intense pleasure adapting and varying the words in the songs and games as this chapter suggests. I appreciate the valuable focus on different kinds of puppets (pp. 90-92), which, as Winston points out, can wonderfully release children from language anxieties.

Chapters Four and Five exemplify specific schemes of learning around picturebooks and stories that appreciate the importance of 'musicality, rhythmic energy, choric repetition, additive pattern and implied variety of pace' (p. 120). The chosen exemplars for three- to five-year-olds are the picturebooks *Max the Brave* (2015) and *Max at Night* (2016), both by Ed Vere, *We're going on a Bear Hunt* (2003) by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury, the fable *The Little Red Hen* and the fairy tale *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The schemes of learning are explained with great clarity to make sure the performative language and embodied learning resources suggested are neither too challenging nor too simple or the children 'will quickly lose interest' (p. 95).

The schemes of learning for five- to seven-year-olds, again chosen for 'their capacity to inspire enjoyable, performative teaching and learning' (p. 133), similarly integrate drama, music and art, but now with a slightly more ambitious focus on the lexical chunks, and with some reading and writing activities. The schemes of learning are for several lessons for each story to deepen the children's experience, help them learn new language and enjoy the expressive potential of the various art forms. For this age group, Winston presents performative language learning with the picturebooks *The Opposite* (2006) by Tom MacRae and Elena Odriozola, *The Shopping Basket* (1992) by John Burningham, and the classic stories *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter and *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Andersen.

Chapter Six turns to assessment of performative language teaching, with the aim to boost learning processes. Knowledge as a story, with ways of knowing that are embodied, is contrasted to the common idea of 'mapping children's progress', which seems to refer to plotting progress on a map rather than the exploratory journey itself. The emphasis is on 'expressive language objectives' (p. 182), with a focus on the assessment of English language, but illustrated through creative use of some of the schemes of learning around stories previously introduced, so that the story adventure becomes the learning journey.

The Afterword points to the faulty thinking that sees the demands of cognitive learning in opposition to story, play and the well-being of children. Instead, such divisive thinking must be refuted 'through teaching approaches that bring together physical and mental activity, aesthetic enjoyment and cognitive challenge, language play and language learning' (p. 192). All in all, at first glance this seems a slight book, but on closer inspection the breadth and depth of the activities presented are wide-ranging, and these include clear descriptions that are always seamlessly coupled with research-informed explanations of how young children love to learn.

Reference

Ratner, C. (2000). A cultural-psychological analysis of emotions. *Culture & Psychology*, 6(1), 5-39.

Janice Bland is Professor of English Education, Nord University, Norway. She focuses on English language and literature pedagogy and her research interests are concerned with creativity in ELT with elementary and secondary school children: creative writing, children's literature from picturebooks to young adult fiction, visual and critical literacy, global issues, interculturality and drama methodology.