

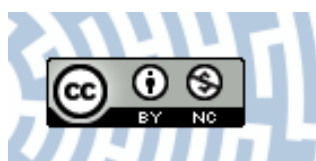


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Title: Creating a 'Positive Environment' Through Drama in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

We all learn best when we are in a state of rational and emotional balance, or what is referred to as 'flow'. We know that body and mind are linked physically, cognitively and emotionally and teachers need to recognise and support the integrated development of all the three areas within their teaching and to seek safe and positive ways of doing so.

The emotional environment improves students' self-awareness, motivation, empathy, recognition of choices and leads to strong and supportive communities. Drama provides a supportive forum for checking out that impact in a distanced way, with the teacher there to mediate the experience, often from within a role. Drama offers a stimulating and rich opportunity to discuss and understand our own emotions, attitudes and beliefs through observing, empathising with, feeling and exploring the emotions of characters both portrayed and interacted with in a role. Drama provides a safe emotional context and a sense of security for learners.

In the various fields of research into the factors influencing success in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), trends accentuating the importance of recognising the indicators of success based upon personality and psychology have been ascribed great significance. In the paper, the results of a pilot study to an ongoing research project will be presented. The main aim of the project is to establish the influence of drama on the creation of a positive educational environment, taking into consideration such variable factors as: feeling of security, feeling of identity, sense of belonging, sense of purpose, feeling of competence, and through this an improvement in language competence. The research is

a theoretical-empirical investigation of a diagnostic-explanatory-verificatory nature. Results will be presented from the perspective of both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Keywords: *positive environment, drama, Second Language Acquisition*

Introduction

There is a relative paucity of research on positive emotional and social environment in the classroom (Mill & Romano-White, 1999) and how teacher practices can facilitate the development of emotion regulation in natural settings (Campos et al., 2004), whereas it is visible that students are more likely to succeed in school when their needs for security, belonging, relatedness, competence, purpose and autonomy are met (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). It is important for a teacher to organize a holistically positive environment for a learner. We all learn best when we are in a state of rational and emotional balance, or what is commonly referred to as 'flow'. The idea of emotion playing a crucial role in learning has been vastly researched by many educational psychologists and researchers (Jensen, 2008; Nimmo 1998; Nuthall 2007). We know that body and mind are linked physically, cognitively and emotionally and teachers need to recognize and support the integrated development of all the three areas within their teaching and to seek safe and positive ways of doing so. The emotional environment improves students' self-awareness, motivation, empathy, recognition of choices and leads to strong and supportive communities

Teachers should create a positive emotional environment in classrooms, encourage positive interactions, and provide students with the sense of competence and confidence for learning to occur (cf. Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In turn, students feel safe and they are more likely to be engaged in the learning process. From the earliest years of schooling, students who have a greater emotional bond with their teacher are more engaged in learning (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001), even after controlling for academic performance (Wentzel, 1997). Students in emotionally supportive classrooms report greater interest, enjoyment, and engagement (Curby et al., 2009; Marks, 2000; Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer & Pianta, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 1998; Woolley, Kol & Bowen, 2009). The role of affect in foreign language learning has been emphasised by many researchers (Stevick, 1980; Andres, 2007; Covington 1989; Dorneyei 1998; Rubio 2007).

Affect may relate to relationships established in the classroom between learners and teachers and it can refer to the internal aspects of learners' minds such as self-esteem, self-concept and students' image and evaluation of 'self'. There is a lot of research exploring the notion of self in language learning, focusing on its different aspects and components and its correlation with success and failure in language acquisition (Pinol, 2007; Puchta 1999; Dorneyei, 2005). The concept of creating a positive emotional environment is based on the model of self-esteem developed by R. Reasoner in 1982, which includes five components: security, identity, belonging, purpose and competence. Research confirms that drama can stimulate genuine emotional engagement and foster learners' understanding and engagement (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999; Craig & Bloomfield, 2006).

Drama provides a supportive forum for checking out that impact in a distanced way, with the teacher there to mediate the experience, often from within a role. Drama offers a stimulating and rich opportunity to discuss and understand one's own emotions, attitudes and beliefs through observing, empathising with, feeling and exploring the emotions of characters both portrayed and interacted with in a role. It is a pedagogical tool which facilitates change and understanding. A number of studies indicate the emotional power of drama (Booth, 2000). Drama provides a safe emotional context and a sense of security for learners and gives a corrective experience to a child with an insecure attachment model. In the various fields of research into the factors influencing success in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), trends accentuating the importance of recognising the indicators of success based upon personality and psychology have been ascribed great significance. Drama has clear links with emotions. It can evoke certain emotions and help learners to experience a range of different feelings. Drama is based on dramatic play which is often emotionally charged, enjoyable and therefore corrective. Learners empower themselves and each other, raising their status and trying out authority roles. Drama offers many different strategies and conventions which can act as emotional corrective experience. One of them is storytelling, which is a natural way to learn. Our brains learn through stories and narratives. Stories are a very powerful tool in the creation of self-identity and self-perception. In drama we can rewrite and retell our negative self-narratives. Stories serve as powerful organizing tools for neural network integration. Storytelling requires the integration of language centres of the brain and those responsible for emotional and sensory-motor processes (Gałązka, 2018). Drama is based on relational framework and creates a positive emotional experience providing a feeling of security, feeling of identity, sense of belonging, sense of purpose, and feeling of competence, which leads to academic achievement in language education.

Theoretical assumptions and research design

On the basis of the aforementioned literature and previously conducted research, we may draw the following assumptions. First, the PEE (as the sum of its constituent parts may be referred to) is an essential factor in facilitating effective classroom-based learning. Second, the use of drama as a teaching method has been found to positively impact on a number of these constituent factors. Thus, as could be assumed, the implementation of drama would lead to an overall improvement in the learner's sense of PEE, which, from the longitudinal perspective, should lead to an overall increase in classroom achievement.

On the basis of these assumptions, the research aimed to: investigate the current state of awareness of the PEE in the classroom, especially from the point of view of teachers; compare the perspectives of teachers and students; and finally investigate the influence of drama on the sense of PEE on a selected group of classroom-based learners. The following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Teachers are aware of the importance of the PEE as an essential prerequisite of effective classroom learning;
2. Students are not fully aware of the importance of the PEE, nor of the efforts made by teachers to foster this sense;
3. Drama will have an overall positive impact on the sense of PEE amongst classroom-based learners.

With this in mind, it was decided to adopt, on the basis of Creswell (2014, pp. 224–225) an explanatory, sequential approach to the research project, in order to first determine the level of teachers' awareness of the PEE phenomena and their (perceived) efforts to foster this, then to confront the quantitative data with a corroboratory study to investigate the extent to which these efforts are perceived. Finally, on the basis of qualitative interviews, the influence of drama on three groups of learners – a child, a student and an adult – was investigated.

Research tools and methodology

To begin the mass data collection phase, a questionnaire was designed, containing a total of 24 questions. The first four questions were intended to obtain specific information regarding the respondent (gender, geographic location, the length of work experience and the type of school at which the respondent works), while the remaining twenty were divided into five groups of four forced response questions, designed specifically to determine the extent to which the respondents

were aware of, and actively encouraged, the five key constituent factors of PEE. Once this questionnaire was ready, it was launched on a data collection website, and a total of 212 responses were recorded within the timeframe allotted for primary data collection. The raw data was then subject to statistical analysis, and the results are presented below. The second stage of the project was the selection of three groups, with whom a drama workshop would be conducted, and detailed post-workshop interviews would be conducted. Given the range of schools at which the respondents were employed, it was decided to work with one group of children in a primary school, one group of students at a university and one group of adults in a private language school. Given the respondents' geographic locations, it was further decided to conduct the workshops in Subcarpathia, Silesia and Masuria. Each of the groups was first issued with a pre-workshop questionnaire with questions that mirrored the questions asked of the teachers. This was done as a point of verification of the teachers' self-reporting. Then, following the drama workshop, randomly chosen participants were interviewed in order to determine the extent to which the drama had influenced the factors constituting the PEE. It is important to note here that all the three workshops were conducted by the same instructor in order to ensure a level of uniformity, and thus reliability. The interviews were conducted by a separate individual in order to make sure that the interviewees did not feel pressure to provide sympathetic responses.

Results

As previously mentioned, a total of 212 teachers responded from all the 16 provinces in Poland, with the largest number of respondents from Subcarpathia (73 individuals), Masuria (28) and Silesia (26). The vast majority of respondents were female (182), working in primary schools (85). The length of work experience is relatively evenly spread, with 77 teachers having worked for five years or less, 44 between six and ten years, 27 from eleven to 15 years, and 64 having more than fifteen years of total teaching experience. Analysing the remaining 20 questions, we can see a number of things, most importantly, from a global perspective, that the vast majority of responses fall into the category of 'always' or 'often': of a total of 4,240 responses, 1,752 are 'always' (41%), and 1,803 (42.5%). Of questions where the individual response was greater than 50% 'always', we

can see that Q.10¹ gives 60.4%, Q.12² – 70.3%, Q.17³ – 51.4%, Q.18⁴ – 56.6%, and Q.23⁵ – 54.2%. If we make the responses parametric, and grade the responses from ‘never’ = 0 to ‘always’ = 4, then we will obtain the following results for the five main individual factors:

Table 1. The average score for each of the five key factors of PEE for teachers

		sense of security	sense of identity	sense of belonging	sense of purpose	sense of competence
N	Valid	212	212	212	212	212
	Missing Data	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.06	3.27	3.18	3.30	3.27
Median		3.25	3.33	3.20	3.25	3.25
Standard Deviation		0.63	0.62	0.56	0.58	0.55
Minimum		.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Maximum		4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

This confirms what has already been mentioned, that the vast majority of respondents responded either ‘often’ or ‘always’. The most attention was paid to fostering a sense of identity, a sense of purpose and a sense of competence, while the least attentive area is encouraging a sense of security. If we confront the data from the 20 questions, devoted to the dependent variables, with the independent variables, the following items of statistical interest come to the fore. Firstly, neither the gender nor geographical location of the respondent has any correlation with their response to individual questions. We can, however, see one or two trends for the remaining two independent variables. For Q.5,⁶ Q.7,⁷ Q.8,⁸ and Q.23, there is an increasing tendency to answer ‘always’ as work experience increases. The type of school at which the respondent works is shown to have some form of correlation

¹ “You show acceptance of students, and interest in them as individuals.”

² “You create a climate of acceptance.”

³ “You transmit positive expectations.”

⁴ “You show confidence and faith in the abilities of your students.”

⁵ “You give feedback.”

⁶ “You define procedures and routines, so your learners know what is expected of them.”

⁷ “You enforce rules in ways that support learners’ self-respect.”

⁸ “You promote individual responsibility.”

with the following questions: Q.8, Q.13,⁹ Q.19,¹⁰ Q.21,¹¹ Q.23, and Q.24.¹² In the case of Qs 8, 21 and 23, the correlation is positive, indicating that as the level of education increases, so too does the inclination of the teacher to respond in the affirmative. Conversely, for Qs 13, 19 and 24, we can observe a negative correlation, wherein the inclination of the teacher to respond affirmatively is related to lower levels of educational institution.

Table 2. The average score for each of the five key factors for the PEE for students

		sense of security	sense of identity	sense of belonging	sense of purpose	sense of competence
N	Valid	61	61	61	61	61
	Missing Data	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.64	2.71	2.24	2.50	2.10
Median		2.33	2.33	2.00	2.50	2.00
Standard Deviation		0.50	0.47	0.37	0.58	0.49
Minimum		.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Maximum		4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

When we move on to the learners' responses, the most notable difference occurs in the average score to the responses.

As can be seen in the table, the mean response is lower than that given by the teachers, with the biggest differential being in the area of providing a sense of competence, at 1.17 points. Overall, there is a much greater split between the answers: with the teachers the overwhelming majority of answers occurred in either 'always' or 'often', whereas for the students almost 50% of the responses indicated 'sometimes', with the remainder being split relatively evenly between the four remaining options.

Now we shall turn to the post-workshop interview stage of the study, which was conducted immediately after the end of the lesson.¹³ The interview consisted of

⁹ "You reduce the number of isolated students."

¹⁰ "You reinforce students' values."

¹¹ "You offer options and alternatives."

¹² "You celebrate achievements."

¹³ Because of the constraints of space, only representative answers to the questions will be provided.

six basic questions intended to investigate the extent to which the use of drama as a non-conventional methodological tool had enhanced the feeling of PEE. The general response to the first question “How did you feel while participating in the workshop?” can generally be defined as drifting from uncomfortable with the alien environment to positive about exactly the same unconventional aspect. One interviewee stated: “At the beginning of the workshop, I felt a little intimidated, as it was something completely new to me and I’ve never taken part in this kind of performance.” Another said: “I liked the idea of breaking the mould of an ordinary lesson by letting me work with my mates in a non-static way.” In answer to question two, “What did the workshop help you to find out about yourself?” three aspects came to the fore, one epitomised by the statement: “[...] it helped me to find out my strengths while working in a group.” The second aspect is connected with developing the sense of alter ego, and allowing the learner to take on a different character during the lessons: “It was like being in a different world, where I can be someone completely different, as if I didn’t have a care in the world.” The final part is somewhat connected with this as it highlights the fact that, through the use of drama, the learners felt that they could overcome their inhibitions: “I hate being the centre of attention, but [during the lesson] I didn’t really care about what other people thought about me.” Question three reads: “To what extent did you feel the spirit of collaboration?” which has already been alluded to following the second question. Unanimously, the students pointed out that, primarily, collaboration was an essential prerequisite of successful task completion, so they had no choice. Secondly, the students said that they were able to gain a great deal from working together, as their peers all had something interesting to contribute: “[...] all of the students had interesting and amusing ideas while performing their arts.” The next question refers to the role of the teacher: “To what extent did you feel that the teacher had positive expectations and showed confidence in your abilities?” Here the students tended to focus on the question of the “unobtrusiveness” of the teacher, about the fact that the teacher did not project their own ideas onto the class, thus shaping the way they were expected to perform: “She just let us do what we wanted to so everyone could do something that they are good at”, and that the teacher strived to “provide a peaceful and friendly atmosphere during the activities.” Question five moved on to the issue of what the students were allowed to show during the lessons: “To what extent did the workshop allow you to use your creative potential and language knowledge?” Here the interviewees tended to focus on the fact that the lesson methodology helped them to ignore the typical boundaries that they felt during ‘typical’ lessons, even to the extent that: “I had the impression that the situation forced me, in a good way, to come

up with ideas, so I guess that allowed me to use it [creative potential] to 100%.” The final question provided a moment to reflect on the aim of the lessons, as the interviewees were asked: “What do you think you achieved?” Three major themes within the individual responses can be identified, one being the realisation that being a part of a group is highly beneficial during the learning process: “I could share my ideas with other students and listen to theirs.” Secondly, there was a better understanding of the role of the teacher, who “tried to give positive feedback on everything that each of us wanted to say”, consequently fostering an atmosphere conducive to trying new things and feeling confident. Finally, there is the issue of the atmosphere itself, and the realisation amongst the participants in the study that they could “simply zone out, which can be really helpful [...] it brought me relief from tension and I liked that feeling a lot.”

Discussion

Returning briefly to the quantitative stage of the study, the most important thing that stands out is that teachers and students have different perspectives on efforts made to encourage a sense of PEE. On the part of the teachers, it is possible that the high frequency of the ‘always’ and ‘often’ responses is the result of reporting bias, wherein the teachers may well be reluctant to answer with complete candour when the questions allude to something which they know they really ought to be doing. On the part of the students, it is quite possible that they have a tendency to underreport the frequency of such efforts either because they fail to observe these actions, or at least recognise them for what they are, or simply this may be a sense of altered perspective, where *often* for the teacher is the equivalent of *sometimes* for the student. The fact is, however, that such a discrepancy in observation does exist, and it is the opinion of the student which matters most when it comes to feeling the sense of PEE: if the teacher’s efforts are not fully appreciated by the learners, they cannot achieve their ultimate aim, however frequently they occur. This in itself is an aspect which is worth further investigation, in order to determine what is the ultimate cause of this discrepancy. If we analyse the responses to the individual questions, it is interesting to note that in the areas where there is a correlation between work experience and affirmative answers, such as the question of feedback, it may be assumed that as teachers become more experienced they have a greater understanding of classroom management and are better able to fit in certain aspects of teaching into their very tight schedules. When it comes to the change of response depending on the type of school, it

appears to be the case that there is an assumption that as children get older, the role of the teacher changes. This would explain why university teachers are more likely to 'always' promote individual responsibility – which is, after all, a *sine qua non* of higher education – than their counterparts in primary school. Conversely, it appears to be more natural for the primary school teacher to celebrate their pupils' achievements than the university lecturer. What is interesting here is the extent to which such assumptions, widely held to be valid as they may be, actually lead to the relatively negative perceptions of the learners. The fact that a university student is older than a primary school student does not necessarily mean that they need less appreciation of their achievements. Equally, it is interesting to note that as learners get older, less effort is made to prevent them from being isolated, i.e., not being encouraged to work in a group.

When it comes to the interviews, what is most interesting is that it is impossible to differentiate between the children, adults and students in terms of their unquestionably positive response to the application of drama techniques in their classrooms. Two aspects need to be highlighted here, the most obvious being connected with the sense of belonging. This variable appears to be the most neglected, because it is the aspect that was almost universally discussed during the interviews. Not only is it important for the learners to feel that they belong to a group, but that the group atmosphere helps individuals to break down their inhibitions and also fosters their alter ego, which is assumed to be adopted by learners while speaking a foreign language (Luna, Ringberg and Peracchio, 2008, pp. 279–282). This is directly connected with identity, and the fact that the participants in the workshop regularly reported that they felt they were able to be themselves, obviously feeling a heightened sense of acceptance. As far as the sense of competence is concerned, the positive feedback provided along with the fact that the group was able to participate in individual success undoubtedly reinforced this sense. The sense of security in such a setting is provided partly by the clear setting of goals and aims at the beginning of exercises, but also by the unobtrusiveness of the teacher, who allows individual creativity to assist the learners in task completion. This demonstration of confidence on behalf of the teacher also lends itself to a strengthening of the sense of purpose, which also can be found in the fact that students are better able to discover more about themselves, thus reinforcing their internal values.

In conclusion, it must first be stated that this is a pilot study, and its very scale does not allow for drawing vast, sweeping conclusions. However, it is possible, even based on the limited scope of the above material, to make some observations and recommendations for further investigation. In response to the three main hypotheses, it is possible to state that while teachers are aware of the importance

of the various aspects of the PEE, they do not necessarily do as much as they could to ensure its successful implementation. This is reflected in the students' relative lack of appreciation for the efforts of their teachers, and the hypothetical assumption that students would not be aware of the importance of the PEE was confirmed. Finally, it was shown, albeit on a very limited scale, that the use of drama techniques in the classroom had an overall positive influence on the sense of PEE, as it directly impacted on all the five constituent factors.

It is, consequently, recommended that further research be conducted into the nature of the reported discrepancy between what teachers believe they are doing to foster the PEE and what students actually perceive. Secondly, it is certainly worth looking in greater detail at the longitudinal impact of drama, and indeed other methodological tools, on the sense of PEE, and also how this impacts on such aspects as longitudinal motivation and achievement of learning goals. Finally, given the similarity of the children's, university students' and adult learners' reactions to the workshops, it appears to be necessary to further investigate many of the assumptions that underline the varied treatment of such learners. We would like to conclude by stating that we feel that this study validates the importance of the PEE in the classroom, and remain hopeful that it will inspire more effort to make the educational environment a positive place for the learners to be.

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