

LANGUAGE LEARNING STAGES: PLAYING IT BY HEART.

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Drama and the performing arts in general offer a peculiar combination of benefits to language learning.

Role playing has long been standard practice in language teaching and the author traces some satisfactory examples back in his past experience in the Italian Middle School, before moving to consider some methodological reasons recommending drama for language learning at university level.

Acting on a stage is a good way of practicing with the spoken language, but, most important of all, it offers an authentic purpose, otherwise difficult to attain with the ordinary simulations in class.

Rehearsing can inject meaning and emotion into repetition avoiding rote.

Playing together on a stage can be considered a perfect example of cooperative action, with an inbuilt set of roles for the learning actors.

Recent results of research in neurosciences and brain imaging show the focal role of mirror neurons in the relationship among perception, motion and cognition, connecting movement, language and interpretation and sharing of emotions: a major reason supporting a creative use of the performing arts in learning and pointedly in language learning.

Drama and the performing arts can be a perfect “Total Physical Response method for adults”.

This article is based on the paper presented at the Vercelli conference *Jouer les langues. Théâtre et performance dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères / Acting out. Theatre and performance in foreign language learning* (June 7th -8th, 2011).

1 Learning by playing

Playing on a stage, improvising or enacting a script, “rewriting” or faithfully performing a piece of literary drama, daring to tread the wanly lit fringe boards or keeping to the limelight of centre stage, can be the lifelong career of a professional actor or actress or the adrenaline bursting experience of an amateur. Many teachers and students see it as a promising opportunity to boost language learning, to feed stamina to grammar paled and drill exhausted classes.

Just another fake grail of the “learning by having fun” sect? On the contrary, “learning by playing” is a perfectly fitting definition for the peculiar combination of benefits that drama and the performing arts in general do offer to (modern) language learning.

1.2 The rewound tapes

We will be discussing language learning mainly at university level¹, but let me refer back to my former experience as a teacher of English in the Italian *Scuola Media*, lower secondary middle school, grade 6 to 8, with 11-12 to 14 years old pupils, during the last quarter of the past century.

During my last leg in that kind of teaching position – spent at a *Scuola Media Statale*, an old school (older than the United Italian Kingdom) in the centre of Torino² –some videotapes were recorded as part of my classes. It was March of 1992:³ at the time few of those students had started the study of a foreign language in primary school, so most of them were absolute beginners with English. Some of the videotape recordings show first year pupils (grade 6) playing short scenes, usually taken from textbook dialogues or reading passages.

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[Capra4Scenario_video1.mp4](#) [Capra4Scenario_video2.mp4](#) [Capra4Scenario_video3.mp4](#)
[Capra4Scenario_video4.mp4](#) [Capra4Scenario_video5.mp4](#) [Capra4Scenario_video6.mp4](#)

Learning by heart (textbook) dialogues and short oral exchanges and “playing” them in front of the class and/or for the teacher to evaluate has been and is a widely practised activity in the language classroom. Yet playing the dialogue for a real or expected audience (in this case for the camera) causes a complete shift of perspective:

- the need for accuracy gains authenticity of purpose and communicative efficacy becomes an overtly necessary aim;

¹ In reference to our students who have been involved in the seven editions of TiLLiT (Teatro in Lingua, Lingua in Teatro) at the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia in Vercelli, Università del Piemonte Orientale “A. Avogadro”.

² The name of the school is not mentioned here to protect the identity (and their ‘right to oblivion’) of the (former) students playing in the following video recordings (© U. Capra 1992; 2011).

³ There was no digital video then: DV was defined in 1995; Sony’s Digital8 was launched in 1999. It is from a methodological point of view, though, that those tapes record a pioneering attitude: in one of them, a second year class (grade 7) is portrayed doing group work to learn geography on a British Key Stage2 textbook and David Marsh and Anne Maljers are credited for the definition and foundation of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning, EMILE – *Enseignement de matières par intégration d’une langue étrangère* in French) in 1994, two years later.

- fluency does not spell as a synonym for speed but takes its full meaning as a natural flow of comprehensible and meaningful interactive expressions;
- the teacher is no longer the strict, almighty and all-knowing judge, but steps into the more comfortable shoes of the *metteur* or *metteuse en scène*.

In the second video excerpt, for example, there is a very traditional sequence («*What's your name?*», «*What's her name?*», «*What's his name?*») which could seem to be directly extracted from a grammar table. Yet it is the different intonation and stress in «*What's his name?*» which explains the disillusionment of the speaker and gives meaning to the little sketch. Not a simple task to perform for a pupil who has been studying English for six months, but wearing the hat of the actor rather than that of the student can turn an abstract rule into a feasible performance.

1.3 Learning the spoken language: from automated response to authenticity

Speaking, especially in its 'conversational' flavour, had been the focus of language teaching ever since the Direct Method of the 1920s. After WWII, the Skinnerian approach of the Audio-Lingual Method stressed the importance of oral language (it was an Aural-Oral method!), but it aimed at an automated response to stimuli, through its repetitive drills of out-of-context patterns.

It was the Audio-visual Method, born at the CREDIF (*Centre de Recherche et d'Études pour la Diffusion du Français*) in Saint-Cloud, which focused on contextualization of dialogues. The Communicative Approach then based itself on Speech Act theory and a Notional-Functional view of language to take contextualization further than the mere 'situation' (often identified by a place-mark: "At the restaurant", "At the Post Office", etc.) of audio-visual model dialogues.

Authenticity also became a keyword of the Communicative Approach: the material used has to be authentic (originated for authentic – i.e. 'real' – use by and for authentic – i.e. 'real' – speakers of the language, not created for illustrative purposes for language learning and language learners)⁴; the same is true for the language used. Most important of all, and most

⁴«[...]authentic language materials. By this is meant materials which have not been specially written or recorded for the foreign learner, but which were originally directed at a native-speaking audience. Such materials need not even be edited, in the sense that linguistically difficult sections would not be deleted, although the linguistic content of such texts could well be exploited in various ways». Wilkins (1976:79)

difficult to attain, is *authenticity of purpose*, i.e. having an *authentic communicative goal*. It is the most difficult authenticity to attain in a classroom, because I may have my students master the proper authentic language exponents for a given function in an authentic situation, but then if they repeat it for me just to show me they have learnt their lesson, we are back to quite an unauthentic motivation.

Information gap activities – problem solving tasks where students must cooperate exchanging different pieces of information they have separately been given access to – are used exactly to offer authentic purposes to the communicative interaction: they are powerful (and often a lot of fun), but limited in possible numbers, variety and scope.

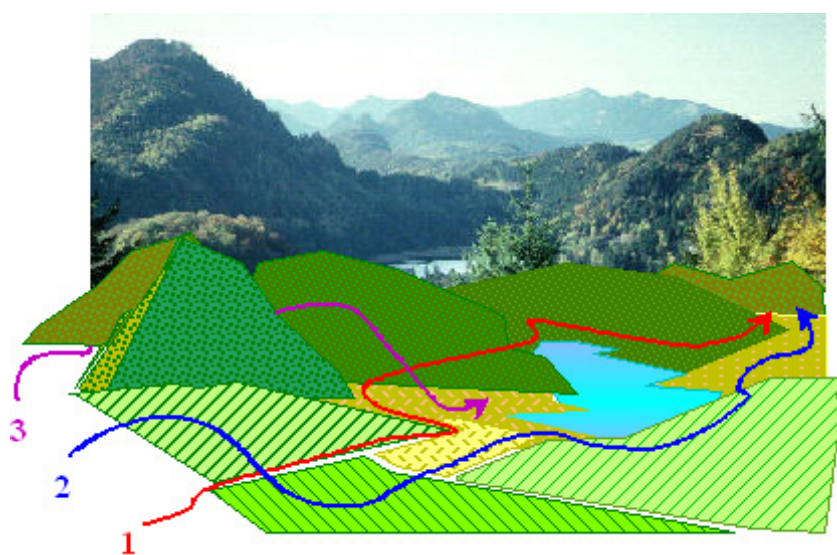


Figura 1

Another possible workaround is giving an authentic, realistic purpose – so to say – to the repetition of a given script. Figure 1 shows an attempt to depict an iconic metaphor of an ideal language learning situation (Capra 2005: 176). It has to do mainly with the ‘learning as an exploration’ metaphor and with different individual learning styles. Learning is seen as travelling, as an exploration of an unknown territory (unknown to the traveller, not necessarily unexplored wilderness). Different individuals will interact with the landscape in different ways: one will cross it with geometric determination, one will get close to a pond to observe all the natural life thriving in and around it; another will climb to the top of a hill to get a comprehensive overview of the whole scenery, and so on. Each individual, if given the freedom to do so, will chose a different, personal experience and exactly because so personal, all those different experiences will be unique and memorable to each of them. Of course the good traveller will make good use of maps, Baedekers and advice from experienced travellers: it is where the metaphor calls for one of the main roles for teachers,

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showing good maps and guides, teaching how to read and make good use of them, and sharing their “travelling” experience without expecting an obedient identity of options. An important part of the meaning of this pictorial metaphor – and a focal one in the context of the present article – is in the setting, in the picture of the background landscape: part of it is a realistic photographic picture, part a geometric conventional rendering, pointing at the necessary balanced mix of authenticity and simulation (a didactic kind of “suspension of disbelief”) needed in the language classroom.

If, rather than being tested by teachers for their acquisitions, students *play* roles following the scripts they have learned, if they *act* for an audience, no matter how a large or a small one, authenticity of purpose can be restored to their task.

The short sketches played by my *scuola media* students in 1992 (videos 1-6) were quite elementary (it must be remembered that they had been studying English for six months only) and they lacked authenticity in their sources, but there are excellent examples of the level of performance that can be attained even by very young students. In 2003 Guido Cataldo and Janet Shelly published for Zanichelli *Sing and Act with Musicals*, an original project presenting six short musicals based on well-known literary works (the musicals are *Cinderella*, *The Jungle Book*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Christmas Carol*), six short musicals that students can perform. The project includes audio CDs with the musicals’ base tracks. At the British Council 2003 Conference held in Sicily, the students of the “Galileo Galilei” *Scuola Media* of Acireale showed their talents performing *The Jungle Book*. [\(Videos of the musical on YouTube can be watched from Mario Papa's site: click here\)](#)

1.4 *Repetita iuvant?*

Repetition is a *vexata quæstio* in language teaching: it is seen as necessary to get acquainted with foreign sounds, to gain confidence with novel pronunciation and intonation, to memorize language chunks. Yet repeating (similarly to what has happened for memorization) has developed a growing bad reputation as a boring, mechanical, meaningless rote. The behaviourist approach of the Audio-Lingual Method (a.k.a. the *Mim-Mem Method* – mimicry and memorization) played an important role in developing such a despising view. In that perspective repetition was aimed at automating unthinking

responses; both cognition and emotion had to be cut off in a feedback reinforcement of neuronal loops, a form of subliminal hidden persuasion. Possibly, cognition and emotion should be reintegrated in repetition activities, abandoning iteration of minimal units and substituting that with rehearsal of meaningful utterances pronounced in an expressive intonation justified by a communicative contextualization. That sounds indeed like rehearsing a play or for any kind of show! Cooperative learning

One characterizing and positive essential aspect of drama and the performing arts in general is that they are the result of a cooperative effort of different agents or, if you prefer, actors. Although the *prime donne* are inevitable, albeit not in the books of rules, one could say that the stage is the field of what, in a sport metaphor, could certainly be defined as a team game.

Advocates for a cooperative approach to learning can be traced back to Quintilian and Comenius (Coppola et al. 1997: 1) or more recently to Dewey and Cousinet, yet it is in the 1960s and '70s, starting in the United States (Johnson & Johnson, Slavin) yet with different but vigorous European experiences, that cooperative learning practices are studied and defined. The key phrases for cooperative learning are '*positive interdependence*' and '*individual accountability*'. One of the main points in Coppola's, Giuli's & Invernizzi's (1977) book is that cooperative learning needs structuring to be effective, and that students team-working in a group should be given a definite set of roles. 'Positive interdependence', 'individual accountability' and attribution of 'a definite set of roles' fit as sartorial suits the players performing on stage, and 'roles' are naturally inbuilt in performing arts.

In the 'positive interdependence' setting, errors change their nature and appear in a different light, too. The prime norm reference and evaluator is no longer the teacher, but the audience and the main individual responsibility is faced towards one's fellow players, whose collection of individual accountabilities becomes also one's most relevant asset. A short collection from the trim bin of the aforementioned *Scuola Media* videos shows evidence of such a different perception of errors and proves, most of all, that playing together can be a lot of fun (video 7).

[Capra4Scenario_video7.mp4](#)

2 Body & Soul: the ‘mirror neurons’ connection

Up to this point I have discussed performing arts activities as if they were fundamentally an oral and verbal matter. We know very well that this is not true: bodies, physical attitudes, movements and gestures of the performers are crucial, the very essence of performing arts, and they can or can not go along with voices, sounds and/or music.

Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia (2006; 2008) explained to the layperson the role of the *mirror neurons* in our brains, their paradigm-shattering discovery of the early 1990s. Rizzolatti and his co-workers in Parma observed neurons in motor areas of the brain *spark* not only when a subject performed a given action, but also when the subject observed someone else performing that same action. This discovery has caused a revolution not only in the interpretation of the relationship among perception, motion and cognition, but it has also shed a completely new light on how we interpret and share emotions, so much that mirror neurons have also been called ‘empathy neurons’.

In a speech delivered on May 23rd 2005 at Tel Aviv University on *The Art of the Present*, the director and playwright Peter Brook stated that mirror neurons throw new light on the mysterious link that is created each time actors take the stage and face their audience (video⁸). [Capra4Scenario_video8.mp4](#)

⁵ Excerpt (courtesy of Tel Aviv University, Yolanda and David Katz Faculty of the Arts) extracted from the whole video of the lecture, available at <http://video.tau.ac.il/Lectures/Arts/23-5-05/> (MS Internet Explorer needed for the original video).

Transcript of video 8: *“This brings us back to a great new discovery of neurology. But this is very new. Neurology has discovered that there is something called the ‘mirror neuron’. That means that in all the circuits of the brain – amongst all the many things happening – there is something that’s moving, a neuron, that they have named the ‘mirror’. Now, what does this mean? [It] means that it has now been discovered – with very advanced and incredibly expensive instruments – that if one human being is sitting watching another human being and the other human being says “Ouch” [left hand goes to cover right eye as for sudden pain], a certain neuron lights up in his brain and the person watching – who at this moment is being tested by an enormous magnetic resonance instrument – exactly the same neuron lights up in his brain. Which proves that when an actor acts the person watching can participate in his experience [audience laugh]. So you will see how astonishing it is that science has at last proved that acting is ... [P. B. stops and his face expression turns from smiling to very serious] Now, this goes a long way; not, I don’t want to take away from this vast and magnificent world of exploration that neurologists are doing, but, on the contrary, to show that*

It is the mirror neurons that create the “*shared understanding*” including both actors and audience, their actions and their emotions. Neuroscientist are helping us in the comprehension of the mechanisms or circuits behind the shared experience that has been driving different individuals in the same given place, for a given, relatively brief span of time to perform or watch and – now we know how – share actions and the emotions they manifest. Such understanding gives a new ring to the old word ‘authenticity’ and explains why *acting* a conversation, a dialogic situation or the like can really bring new *expressive and emotional authenticity*.

2.2 Total Physical Response for Adults: the Mask and the Emotions

Rizzolati and his fellow neuroscientists not only give a revolutionary new explanation of empathy; they also define a completely new role and correlation of the motor neurons in cognition and language development.

Language teachers have now been familiar for some time with the idea that language can be better acquired or learnt by its association with movement: James Asher’s call for a *Total Physical Response Approach to Second Language Learning* grew from the original articles at the end of the 1960s to the present worldwide circulation. TPR is based on the idea that “*the fastest, less stressful way to achieve understanding of any target language is to follow directions uttered by the instructor (without native language translation)*” (Larsen-Freeman 2000: 108) except for the “translation” offered by model motions or actions by the teacher. TPR has been criticized on the basis of the narrow range of language it can expose learners to (notwithstanding some attempt at ingenious workarounds, it is mainly orders and directions, no matter how elaborate). At the same time it has been observed that children are much more at ease than adults in performing *weird* actions obeying Simon’s orders, and that the expected relief from stress evaporates with grown-ups and their fear to ‘lose face’.

they have done to us a great service, in showing that the act of playing something and the act of observing someone who is playing is an enormous act of human participation; that as one person enters more and more deeply into something that comes only from their own deepest subjective experience – doing beyond what they think to be the experience into something even further, even deeper – there can be an instant recognition, an instant understanding, a shared understanding between everyone who is watching.”

Probably the best way to save one's face is to wear a mask; and drama is a game adults enjoy playing. Theatre and the performing arts can then be considered, in my opinion, the proper *Total Physical Response for Adults*.

This last statement should not sound too surprising once considered that wearing a mask (i.e. assuming different pretended identities) and playing roles are typical techniques (together with the use of music and the fine arts) of a method aiming in the first place to lower the so called 'affective filter' (Krashen 1981), to remove any stress from the learning environment, to overcome the emotional barriers that limit students' ability to learn: in a word to '*desuggest*' as in Georgi Lozanov's (and Evelyn Gateva's) *desuggestopedia*⁶. Desuggestopedia is probably one of the ripest examples of the many so called Humanistic Approaches: it largely exploits all forms of arts (the performing arts not the least) because it levers on them as the perfectly fitting key to reach inside the hidden trunk of our treasured emotions.

2.3 Learning and understanding from the show of emotions

At a different point of his aforementioned speech, Peter Brook remarked how neuroscientists, through their recent findings, had to re-evaluate emotions and their cognitive role (video 9⁷). [Capra4Scenario_video9.mp4](#)

Actors, playwrights, dancers, musicians – in a word: artists – have been realizing it for a long time. Now the 'hard sciences' offer language teachers a further strong argument to support the arts, and specifically the performing arts, in the language classrooms.

In Western thought emotion has often been viewed as a disruptive antagonist of rational thought and cognition. In 1990 Salovey and Mayer titled "Emotional Intelligence" an

⁶ Formerly known as 'suggestopedia' (cf Larsen-Freeman 2000: 73)

⁷ Transcript of video 9: "At this moment, science is doing very remarkable things. Science, in its astonishing discoveries of the present, is doing something even more remarkable, which brings us right back to our theme. Because science is brilliantly discovering what mankind has known intuitively for many thousands of years. For instance, neurology – which we've been deeply involved in – has begun quite recently to discover an amazing thing: which is that human beings have emotions [audience laugh]. Perhaps one day they will also investigate laughter! I think that that's on its way... But until – oh – ten years ago, subjectivity – subjectivity in the sense of what any one of us is actually experiencing personally – was a dirty word in neurology."

article devoted to argument that such an apparent oxymoron should be considered (185) “*a set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and in others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one’s life*”.

Could it be a mere coincidence that Oatley in the chapter in his *Emotions: a brief history* (2004) devoted to emotional intelligence largely refers to William Shakespeare and his *Hamlet* to exemplify? In the hypothesis of evolutionary psychologists (e.g. cf. Dunbar 1996) there is a close connection between social activities of physical care and interaction among primates – like grooming – and the development of verbal language. What we are learning about mirror neurons and their role reinforces the former intuitions about the tangled but strong link binding together motion, emotion and especially empathy, identity and language. Body, voice, motion, emotion spelling a different learning language for language learning (Capra 2005, 178; 2008). In conclusion, it can be stated that drama and the performing arts in general do offer a peculiar combination of benefits to (modern) language learning:

- an authentic reason for repetition and memorization, grinding meaning and expression out of rote;
- a paradigmatic case of cooperative learning, with naturally inbuilt roles;
- a memorable match of meaning, intention and intonation, directed, guided and forwarded by proper gesture and physical attitude;
- a perfect setup to trigger empathic sparks running the circuits among mirror and motor neurons and the language areas of the brain;
- a face saving protective mask lowering the ‘affective filter’;
- a rich emotional reservoir to soak and fertilize cognition.

Playing in languages on a stage will contribute to open our students eyes, ears and hearts, finally enabling them to share a deeper understanding with any Caliban they’ll meet, be it Shakespeare’s or Ridley Scott’s⁸. And it will be their own spell to set them free.

⁸ It’s easy to recognize in the replicant Roy Batty (“*I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. All those... moments will be lost... in time, like tears... in rain. Time to die*”) a futuristic projection of Caliban and to

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imagine mirror cells at work when he decides to save Blade Runner Deckard and when his ‘tears in rain’ wet the audience’s eyes.