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Authors	Sievers, Ulrike
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

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Inviting performance into the English foreign language classroom

Ulrike Sievers

In this article the foreign language classroom in a Waldorf school is described as a space inviting active performative participation. It gives examples spanning the lower, middle and particularly the upper school, in which performative methods and creativity are specifically encouraged. The aim is to involve the whole child and young person not only in reproducing but in producing actions in and through the foreign language, using methods such as enacting stories and pictures, producing and playing scenes, translating prose texts into scripts for plays, radio plays and story boards for film.

1 Introduction

It is a central goal of foreign language teaching that children and young people are enabled to understand a language that is initially new and unfamiliar to them, to expand their passive as well as active vocabulary, and to internalize the structures of this other language to such an extent that they can move joyfully within it (see Rawson's article on Shakespeare in this issue). Since each language has its own way of looking at the world, people who learn another language broaden their horizons and gain new perspectives. Thus, being able to use a second or third language opens up new spaces and represents an opportunity, especially for adolescents, to develop a new, different voice of their own. This paper argues that these aims can be more effectively achieved with performative methods.

If our goal is for young people to actively use the target language to express their own ideas and thoughts, and not merely repeat learned phrases and sentence structures, then it is important that the classroom opens up spaces and provides activities from an early age that invite students to actively use the other language. What starts in the beginning with spoken and sung texts, verses, songs, stories and small plays continues through the grades, though with age-appropriate material. In accordance with the age and the increasing linguistic ability of the pupils, the content and performative tasks become more challenging and complex. From the 7th or 8th grade on, digital forms of performance can also expand the spectrum and open up additional spaces for the learners.

In the examples I present below, I expand the notion of performance beyond role play, enacting scenes or actual theater plays (see Schewe, 2020) to include other forms of personal

expression - in analog and digital form. The criterion for the selection of the examples referred to in this paper is that the respective tasks invite young people to leave the space of listening and taking in for a while and to become speech-actors themselves. The teacher has the responsibility, on the one hand, to set the tasks in such a way that they correspond to the linguistic and performative abilities of the students and at the same time allow for a wide range of competencies. On the other hand, it is crucial for the emergence of performative contributions as well as for the positive experience of the students that they can move in a safe space in which all contributions are encouraged and also respectfully received and appreciated.

2 From choral speaking to enacting scenes

In the first years of language acquisition (classes 1 – 4, ages 6-10 years), performing activity is predominantly embedded in the community of the learning group. Initially the children join in the chorus, as it were, repeating what has been said. Step by step, individual children then take on their own speaking roles and thus venture out of the group, although the group continues to provide a safe framework until finally, in the 5th or 6th grade, the first small plays are performed in the foreign language. The scripts, which will be read together beforehand, usually offer a variety of shorter and longer roles, so that each pupil can participate in a performance of the play. Depending on their courage and ability, each child finds their own place in such a community project. Similar to those methods in which certain everyday situations are staged in the classroom, small plays offer the opportunity to create a language space in which "we" speak English, e.g., because Robin Hood and his friends communicate with each other in English. In other words, speaking the other language is embedded within an imaginative context of the story and the various characters. The play becomes an authentic, yet structured language space in which the meaning is situated and contextually comprehensible. If the students understand the relationship between Robin Hood and Little John, then the meaning of the exchange will be comprehensible. This forms a bridge to actual free dialogue, as long as the students are not yet able to converse and exchange fluently in the foreign language.

3 Creative writing projects - reading the stories aloud and acting them out

As soon as the students have learned to write not only single words, but also simple sentences in the other language, we start with the first story projects. Children love to immerse themselves in stories and by the time they are in the 5th or 6th grade, they have already listened to many stories. Now they are invited to invent and describe places, endow characters with certain traits, and decide on plot lines. These first simple story projects, patiently

accompanied by the teacher in an encouraging and benevolent way, form the basis for larger projects in the higher grades. Step by step, the children are invited and empowered to weave their own ideas and thoughts into their stories, which are then collected in a small storybook, for example, and read aloud to the class.

Through the following years, the use of stories in different forms is an important part of their foreign language lessons. The simple stories of the 6th grade become literary short stories in the 11th grade or the script for a short film in the 11th or 12th grade. Along the way, stories not only form the bridge from the classroom to the world, they are also the starting point for various tasks and projects that invite learners to become productive in the other language themselves.

In order to bring variety into the shared reading of a story and at the same time deepen the understanding of the text, students from the seventh or eighth grade onwards are given the task of transforming short sections or chapters of a story that has been told or can be read in the class reader into scripts of scenes that can be performed by small groups. In doing so, they can adopt the dialogues contained in the text and must also consider how to make other important information from the text visible to the audience. In this way, the students first engage intensively with a foreign-language text and discuss both the content and a possible performance in the target language. In order to be able to slip into the different roles and to visualise the plot, they must have developed a feeling for the characters as well as for the spatial relationships between the characters in the scenes. This intensive engagement with a text leaves a lasting impression on both the active presenters and the audience. The content of the class reader is thus brought to life when presented by several groups.

In the context of book projects, in which the students read different books in small groups and develop an understanding of them with the help of various tasks, it is possible that individual key scenes are acted out in front of the class for a final presentation of the books or that the main message of a book is presented in the form of a self-written scenic performance. Extensive reading projects (Sievers, 2017) in which each student works with their individual reader can already be started in grade six or seven, when the teacher provides a collection of books at all language levels, from picture books with simple sentences up to authentic children's literature. In each lesson the pupils then get some time to read in their books, alone or in pairs, according to their capabilities and keep a simple reading log. While some pupils read several shorter stories, others engage with one longer reader. Whether a presentation of a scene taken from the reader is already possible in class seven or eight, depends on the language skills and the overall situation of the class.

In high school, at the end of an extensive-reading project in a tenth-grade language lesson, the pupils are given the task of slipping into the role of the protagonist in the book they have read. A situation is created, such as an "International Youth Meeting", and the various protagonists, often young adults in these books, then take part in a staged event where they meet the other protagonists from the different books and share their experiences with each other. It is amazing to observe how the students identify with 'their' characters and how lively the conversations are.

4 Learning to form aesthetic judgements

One of the important aspects of school is that young people learn to form sound judgements from accurate observations and perceptions (Zech, 2016). Foreign language lessons can also contribute to this schooling of judgement. As part of a newspaper block in class 11, for example, the pupils are first asked to read and compare different newspapers in the target language in order to form some judgement about the way newspapers are made and articles are written. Once the criteria for designing a newspaper and the stylistic means of article writing have been discussed, the class is divided into groups and each group is given the task to plan, write and produce their own newspaper, including design, layout and content production (Sievers, 2017).

Another way of inviting the pupils' judgement is to ask them to transform one form of text into another, for example turning a short story into a play or a photo story. They do this in small groups that are working on the same or on different texts. When transforming written texts into scripts for scenes, it is necessary to make a number of decisions. First, the text must be understood and, in a sense, analyzed. Then it is necessary to decide what is important and what to leave out, how to represent the relationships, how and where characters move, who speaks when, and much more besides. These decisions are important, because it is not just about role-playing; the audience should get an impression of the content of the story. In translating from one medium to another the students practice forming aesthetic or artistic judgements because they also experience what effect their production has on the listener. Moreover, the audience, i.e. the other groups, learn to offer discerning and relevant criticism, which also involves judgement and tact.

A variation of this transformation is to create a radio play from a prose text. Here, in addition to the steps just mentioned, the students must also decide how those things that are described in words in the book and that we can see on stage can now be made audible to the audience - without simply reading the text aloud. Are there typical sounds, such as the opening of a door or footsteps in a corridor? Or can the description of a landscape be embedded in a dialogue between two protagonists looking out of the window? Students are challenged to

use their imagination and to become inventive. In doing so, the change in the text type invites them to take different perspectives, to look at the world from different points of view, and to develop their own voices in the process.

5 Pictures and paintings as prompts for creative writing, staging or storytelling

Not only texts, but also pictures can be used as prompts for performative activities. When pupils in the lower middle school, from class 4 onwards, read their first illustrated readers, the illustrations provide a welcome stimulus to talk about what they have read. From simply describing the pictures to retelling the story, the illustrations provide multiple opportunities for all students in the learning community to talk.

Working with pictures or images can be transformed into creative and performative tasks in high school, for instance, in having students work with postcards which depict famous works of art. Such a postcard project in a ninth or tenth grade goes far beyond merely recalling a previously read text (“what happened in the last chapter?”). Through specific tasks, the students are invited to describe the part of the world depicted in the painting and to enhance this by adding dimensions only accessible to the imagination. The focus is not only on what is externally visible, but also on a wide range of sensory perceptions that we normally register when we consciously engage with our physical surroundings. Which smells are there? Which sounds can be heard? Is it warm or cold? Is there a wind blowing? And so on. In this way, the young people first live into the scene painted by the artist, and then put themselves in the place of the persons depicted, e.g., by telling somebody what they see, hear, smell when looking around. I prefer to work with art postcards that reproduce paintings depicting people, such as "Breakfast of Rowers" by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, “Standing Gipsy Children” by Otto Mueller or art photographs that show staged scenes with several people in interesting situations. Postcards of works of art have richer content because the ‘scene’ has been consciously structured by an artist. Knowledge of the art used is not necessary, in fact this may even get in the way of ‘reading’ the story and feeling the situation, if the students know this is an expressionist work by Edvard Munch. A naïve ‘reading’ is more helpful for this task. After sensing into the situation, the students are called on to create biographies for the figures in the picture, and imagine their interests, preferences, professions. Asking about the childhood or youth of the figure, or what happened the previous day, allows a picture of the past to grow until the painted figure comes to life. Now the students are invited to slip into the various roles, first acting out the scene depicted and then developing the story further.

Through a careful, step by step approach with supportive preparation, even students who are not yet confident in the foreign language can find their bearings and move within this

imaginative space. The assumed role makes it possible to talk about a wide variety of things without talking about oneself.

6 Built-in grammar

Performative approaches invariably and unobtrusively require the use of a wide range of grammatical forms. In the postcard project, for instance, descriptions or images call for the present progressive ("she is sitting on a swing watching the butterflies dancing among the flowers") and particularly draw on adjectives and adverbs ("she was sitting thoughtfully on the gently turning swing, watching the brightly coloured, etc."); prepositions can help when talking about locations or movements within the scene ("beside the chair, behind the fence, beyond the fields, above the green valley"). Biographical information is told in the past tense ("she was born in Triest, moved to Vienna and then started studying physics, fell in love and left the academy"). Conversations with other people are reproduced in indirect speech and if-phrases come into play when speculating about the future. Almost as a side effect, creative writing and storytelling deepen language skills and, if necessary, raise them to consciousness ("how do we express doubt about what she said?"). However, it is important that the creativity and playfulness should always be in the foreground, and the stylistic and grammatical means to achieving this are secondary, though obviously also important.

7 Digital opportunities

Since media literacy is part of the curriculum and today most children and teenagers are familiar with stories in digital form, schools have to develop a concept of how and at which age to integrate digital media in foreign language lessons in meaningful ways. According to Dillmann, Hübner, and Neumann's (2021) media curriculum, Waldorf education approaches the issue of media literacy in age-appropriate ways, initially in an indirect and subsequently in a direct way. After focusing on developing analog media skills in the first years of school, digital media competence is developed from the age of 12 onwards. Thus, digital storytelling in the form of short videos, Instagram accounts, blogs/vlogs, music videos and the like can be used as authentic media in foreign language lessons, just as authentic literature and images are, and offer a variety of stimuli for the pupils' own productivity. Based on my experienced, digital media should be introduced step by step from class 7 or 8 (13 to 14 years old) onwards and can also be recommended as a source for informal language acquisition at home. After exploring the essential stylistic and creative means of the respective medium or text form through observation, students can then be invited to use these different types of media and to tell their own stories. In my view, the best way to do this is to define a common thematic framework within which the young people can then move and try things out. As with other

digital formats, such as radio plays, some things can be acted out in the analog space - or prepared before they are recorded or filmed. For example, a novel or play is first read together before the young people are given the task of working on parts of the story or related topics in groups in a format of their own choosing and then presenting them. After having read the musical West Side Story in a 10th grade, the students were given the task to find and work on their own project related to the plot of the musical. After several weeks students had created newspapers from the time, short plays of central scenes, a radio play version, a diary with letters from Maria, a self-written scene in which Maria's granddaughter stands at her grandmother's grave and asks her questions, and a photo story in the creation of which the entire class had been involved as actors. In the final presentation, each student contributed to the overall performance and experienced themselves as part of a community with an individual contribution.

Digital storytelling is considered a pre-form or a related form of film. However, it is worth looking more closely at various movies with the students in order to identify the unique cinematic, stylistic, and narrative possibilities of film. Just as there are differences between a role play on a story, a short, staged performance with improvised props and a fully dramaturgically staged performance of a play, giving students precise observation tasks will alert the young people to the fact that film offers a wide range of possibilities as a means of expression and as an art project. In the context of foreign language classes, camera options such as framing, camera movement, and perspective, or aspects such as scene selection, lighting, music, and sound, but also narrative devices such as narrative perspective, character construction, flashback, and foreshadowing can be examined and discussed in terms of their effect. After some preliminary work, students are then equipped to set out on their own to storyboard a scene, a short story, a chapter from a novel, or even to storyboard the story to their own short film. During the actual filming, the difference between the theatrical rehearsals we have seen so far, and the reality of filming can be addressed (Sievers, 2017).

Films are important for foreign language teaching for several reasons. They represent an authentic language source. They offer a possibility of language learning in an informal sphere and facilitate language comprehension through the presence of facial expressions, gestures and visible action, in which the auditory is complemented by the visual. They are also generally an important medium in our time and thus language teaching can contribute to the development of media literacy. Filming represents a manageable form of self-expression for young people and is widely used in social media and is easily available to almost everyone through today's smart phone technologies. It is therefore all the more important that adolescents learn not only to consume films, but also to assess their effects on themselves and to be able to learn to use the medium actively and creatively. If we expand our view

beyond literary film to include documentary film, the Internet is a rich source of authentic, regional study materials that can be put to good use. Taking into account the language levels of second language learners, authentic material from the internet as well as authentic audio and film sources can be used from class 8 (14 years old) at the earliest, but more likely from class 10 onwards.

The TED talk format, with examples available as videos, is another form of face-to-face performative learning in the classroom. Complementing the format of speeches, which are often first read and analysed in classes ten or eleven, often modeled on monologues or speeches by famous people, TED talks provide a format and frame for individuals developing and presenting their thoughts on a topic of their own choice. In a block (see Rawson in this issue on block teaching) on the topic of "Growing up", 12th graders were given the task of choosing a topic, researching it, and then presenting what they felt was relevant and interesting in an appropriate presentation format. This resulted in some very impressive TED talks - inspired by the examples we had watched and discussed together. In this project, the young adults seized the opportunity to find and use their own voice. The results ranged from more factual or technical presentations of selected educational topics with some examples or comments of their own, to very personal presentations of their own experiences, which were then placed in an educational context. The format thus provides a relatively broad framework in which students can find their own place according to their linguistic abilities and individual approach. In addition, they practice preparing a topic and presenting it in such a way that it is interesting and understandable for their classmates. Here, too, everyone can contribute to the overall project in their own way.

8 Conclusion

Performative activities – when set in a safe space, offering enough scaffolding and inviting variety – are an ideal environment for language learning for numerous reasons. Young people generally enjoy stories and playing roles and stories enable them to unfold their own creativity. Theatre performances offer roles at different language levels and at the same time provide a coherent language context. Performative activities using existing text counter the tendency to atomize language in the foreign language classroom into phrases and isolated sentences; on the contrary, they lift language off the page and into life and at the same time blend gesture, facial expression, and body language with spoken language. Creative performative work enables learners to find and explore their own voice in both a literal and figurative sense, shifting the focus away from words, grammar, syntax towards communicative interaction and self-expression.

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