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| Title | Drama activities in a French undergraduate business school to manage speaking anxiety in English |
| Authors | Privas-Bréauté, Virginie |
| Publication date | 2019 |
| Original Citation | Privas-Bréauté, V. (2019) 'Drama activities in a French undergraduate business school to manage speaking anxiety in English', Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, XIII(2), pp. 157-170. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.2.10 |
| Type of publication | Article (peer-reviewed) |
| Link to publisher's version | http://research.ucc.ie/journals/scenario/2019/02/PrivasBreaute/10/en - https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.2.10 |
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| Download date | 2025-06-12 10:49:45 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/9422 |

Drama Activities in a French Undergraduate Business School to Manage Speaking Anxiety in English ¹

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1. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.2.10>

Abstract

According to a study dated 2012 and led by the *Confé'dération Française de l'Encadrement – Confé'dération Générale des Cadres (CFE-CGC)*², many French executives feel stressed out when it comes to speaking English at work. An English teacher in a business school (undergraduate level), I am committed to preparing future actors of the professional world to better handle speaking English, so I introduce role plays and drama activities to help them feel less anxiety when they must speak English and prepare them to transfer it to their work place. This article will give an account of an experimentation I carried out through a pedagogical unit on "advertising" for third-year Business English students. I will analyze the interaction of body, emotions and mind along Varela's "enaction" paradigm (1993, 1996) to show that drama games can foster students' speaking skills development in English, and encourage transferable attitudes that can accompany speech and decrease anxiety.

1 Introduction

The special issue (36) of the French scientific journal *Me'langes CRAPEL* presents observations and results of studies stressing the lack of linguistic competences in foreign languages of executives, engendering stress and fatigue and preventing them from earning promotions in French companies. An English teacher in a French undergraduate business school, I take these statistics very seriously and want to find ways to help students ease up when learning first and then speaking English and facilitate skill transfers to professional environments.

Believing that language needs to be supported by body language and emotions since contents already require all the businessperson's cognitive capacity, I

² See the website of this organization: <http://www.cfecgc.org/dossiers/langues-et-travail/>.

relied on Varela's paradigm on language emergence (1993; 1996), like Aden (2017), which indeed suggests that drama is a valuable pedagogical device enabling students to express themselves in foreign languages and prepare them to interact in professional environments. I thus introduced educational measures, including role plays and drama activities, in my English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses to prepare students to speak English in the workplace and lessen speaking anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986).

My study aims to examine how through drama techniques, learners can train their linguistic competences, develop self-confidence and co-construct professional automatisms where both body and voice are complementary. In this article, I will describe an experimentation carried out over a fourteen-hour pedagogical unit on "advertising" and analyze it along Varela's "enaction" paradigm (1993, 1996).

2 Theoretical framework and research question

I introduced role plays and drama techniques in my English classes after reading the work of Tardieu (2008), Viau & Louis (1997) and Aden (2009, 2017) in particular. The formers shed light on the cognitive development of language learners through group work interactions and intrinsic motivation while the latter puts the stress on the importance of body and emotions through drama in the context of such a development.

In *La didactique des langues en 4 mots-cle's*, Tardieu stresses the importance of social interactions in a learning/teaching environment and refers to socio-constructivist Vygotsky who thought that knowledge was created through social interaction. Interactions place the students in a conflictual socio-cognitive situation since ideas, discussions emerge, differ and are shared to give way to other discussions and ideas. Tardieu writes that pair work and teamwork foster social interaction, involve linguistic participation and stimulate the cognitive development of the learners.

Likewise, Viau studies interactions and motivation from a socio-cognitive standpoint and comes up with three situations that favor student motivation. Viau says that the interaction between the student's perceptions on his/her learning and his/her environment affects his/her motivation to learn more and memorize information. The first perception Viau underlines has to do with the student's control of his/her learning. The author refers to studies reported by McCombs in 1988 which have shown that students who perceive they have the control of their learning are more engaged cognitively (Viau 1997: 150). The second perception has to do with the value of the activities and tasks. The more authentic the tasks, the better the learning. Viau adds that tasks should be diversified and incorporated within other activities and tasks. Thirdly, if the student has a realistic picture of his/her own competences, says Viau, he/ she will be more successful. This requires the teacher to give clear objectives and precise directions, and give the student the possibility to interact and collaborate with the other students. In this context, the tasks should represent a challenge

and require the student to be involved and have enough time to complete the tasks. In my opinion, drama activities and role plays are educational measures that permit the students to develop a good perception of the above-mentioned situations and engender more interest in learning. That is why introducing drama activities in language classes stimulates the cognitive development of language learners through and from interactions and motivation.

Yet, from a neuroscientific standpoint, languages cannot be developed cognitively through interactions without the help of bodies and emotions. Varela (1993) writes that languages are what enable people to meet so as to make meaning emerge. His scientific research in cognitive neurosciences led him to develop the paradigm of “enaction” which relies upon three cornerstones: participatory/ structural coupling, individual learning paths, making meaning emerge. In other terms, Varela thinks that people adopt individual strategies to learn languages, and when they meet, they make meaning emerge. The context has an important role to play in this emergence of meaning as he writes in *Invitation aux sciences cognitives* (1996). For Varela, languages are not merely used to pass on information. They are a means to couple individuals from a same species for action coordination.

Aden studied Varela’s research, experimented with drama in language classes and examined the cognitive development of language learners through drama in light of the paradigm of “enaction”. After thoroughly analyzing Varela’s conception of language learning, she assesses that interaction is the place where knowledge emerges. She explains that Varela puts forward the creation of the world through the reciprocity of the action/perception loop of the subject and his/her environment (Aden 2017: 3). This is what is referred to as “structural coupling”. Varela subsequently ventures that if knowledge emerges in the sensorimotor interaction of the subject with his environment, it is not pre-determined but it emerges in interaction. Therefore, for Aden, drawing on from Varela’s paradigm, the language helps people to determine themselves and the others at the same time: it helps people to determine what/ who they are (ibid. 7) and what/ who the others are, together. Interactions – be they oral or physical or both – and contexts are thus at the heart of language learning and drama is a device that facilitates interactions in pedagogical contexts.

Varela also says that sheer reasoning does not exist and explains that one of the pitfalls in which people lure themselves when it comes to languages is to think that reason and emotions are two separate entities. On the contrary, he asserts that emotions, including the hormonal system, and reasoning are constitutive of the structure of a body. Reasoning is always affected by emotions. For Varela, emotions are part and parcel of the learning process (Trocmé-Fabre, 1994). Along those lines, he considers that the body/ mind continuum in learning – including language learning – enables long-term memorization (Trocmé-Fabre 1994) since the body helps the mind to remember what has been learnt. If thought is not separated from the body and emotions, then thought and speech are incorporated, they are incarnated, and cognition is enacted.

After examining research in cognitive sciences, language learning and

language acquisition, Lakoff and Johnson equally come to the conclusion that “reason is not disembodied, as tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies and bodily experience” and that “reason is not dispassionate but emotionally engaged” (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 4). If human beings learn from bodily experiences, then students can learn languages through bodily experiences as well; and drama offers them this chance. Therefore, since drama offers experiential learning, which is key to leading students to develop their linguistic abilities, strengthen the control of their emotions and enhance self-confidence, drama activities and role plays must then be a device that can also help them acquire professional skills through the preparation of professional gestures supporting language training. This is a hypothesis I aim at answering through this experimentation.

3 Presentation of the pedagogical unit and research methodology

In *Pratique du Théâtre*, Page explains that introducing drama activities in the classroom has four phases. You first prepare yourself to play, then you play (*le jeu*), then you receive feedback and finally, you play again (*le rejeu*) (Page 2001: 35), as can be seen in Fig. 1.

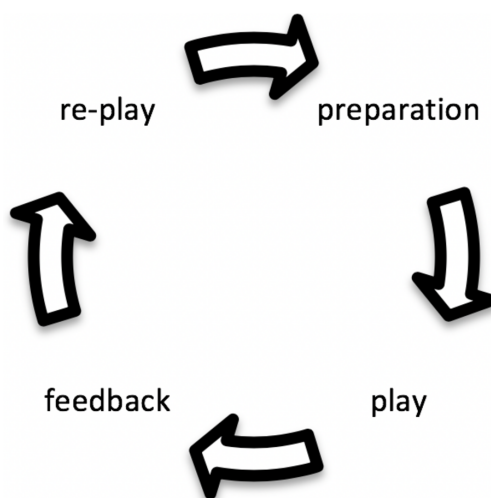


Figure 1: The four phases of drama as a learning device

The author also writes that drama is a training activity that is meant to be a stepping stone for handling real life situations (ibid. 17). For her, drama provides training for a set of many competences that are then useful in real life (ibid. 122). Likewise, Zafeiriadou reminds us in “Drama in Language Teaching: Challenge for Creative Development” that for any language teacher it is crucial to get students to acquire transferable skills:

Transferring acquired skills from educational settings to real life situations has always been a challenging task in education. The value of drama is often attributed to the fact that it allows the creation of contexts for different language uses, thus fostering students' language awareness. In both language teaching and drama, context is often thought to be everything. (Zafeiriadou 2009: 6)

Drama is thus a device that enables students to prepare and transfer some skills they have developed in class to the real world.

Since interactionists put the emphasis on the "importance of both input and internal language processing" in L2 acquisition (Ellis 1999: 44), the contexts in which language emerges are crucial. Along those lines, one of my objectives when I decided to introduce drama activities in my language classes was to define precise contexts so as to give students references that would look like real professional situations in which the preparation and transfer of linguistic and general competences are made possible. I assumed that immersing learners in communicative situations that make sense to them in the context of a business school, would prepare them for their future jobs in acquiring automatisms supported by their body so as to manage, if not lessen, speaking anxiety, and help them consolidate their lexical, grammatical and phonological skills.

I will here study the pedagogical value of drama techniques with a group of 27 B2-level students in their third year in a French business school. The photos and videos taken throughout the unit provide qualitative data to be analysed so as to verify whether drama activities and role play encourage speaking skills development and lessen speaking anxiety. These students follow a curriculum preparing them to manage cultural organizations such as museums, music schools, drama schools. The artistic component of their studies (music, drama, dancing, painting, singing) makes them particularly receptive to artistic practices. Being in charge of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, including marketing courses in English, I thus introduced drama activities and role plays. I did not want to introduce drama since the aesthetic dimension of this artistic practice is not what I am interested in in this experimentation.

In this article, I will give the precise example of one of my units on "advertising". It covers 14 hours (9 lessons, Table 1) and is suitable for drama activities since it is conceived as a series of lessons that invites students to play roles and express their creativity skills. The first 11 hours are spent in a traditional classroom using two textbooks – *New Insights into Business* (Pearson-Longman: 2001) and *English for marketing and advertising* (Oxford University Press: 2009) – so that students first get to know what advertising is about. For the remaining 3 hours, a rehearsal studio for dance, drama and music is necessary so as to embody and practice what was discovered and studied previously.

As shown in the above-mentioned table, the unit starts as a rather classic sequence of a language course since it is absolutely necessary for the students to discover the advertising world. Once the students' knowledge is good enough, the unit can then move on to team work and role plays particularly based on various approaches: problem-based learning, task-based learning and learning

Table 1: Overview of the pedagogical unit

| No. of hours | Activities and tasks | Language skills | Objectives |
|--------------|--|--------------------------------|--|
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> brainstorming about advertising differentiating product, service and corporate advertising studying slogans and cultural references in slogans (and the problem of translating them) | reading speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> learning specific vocabulary (lexical) differentiating the methods of advertising and the types of adverts (methodological) raising awareness of intercultural differences consolidating grammatical skills |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> learning about the AIDA strategy (catch the audience's Attention/ make them Interested/ create Desire/ and state the Action the audience should take) creating ads | reading speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> learning specific vocabulary consolidating grammatical skills understanding advertising techniques (strategic) pronouncing well (phonological) |
| 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> discovering two companies: Red Arrow and Joys of Germany placing an order: creating a new ad to attract British people to Germany for their holidays | listening speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> raising awareness of intercultural differences learning specific vocabulary consolidating grammatical skills |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> commissioning a new ad campaign to promote a product | reading speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consolidating grammatical skills pronouncing well (phonological) |
| 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Red Arrow meets Joys of Germany to discuss the offers. | listening | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> learning specific vocabulary consolidating grammatical skills |
| 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writing an email to let consultants know the decision of the advertising agency Red Arrow | writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consolidating grammatical skills writing e-mails (methodological) |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing a budget and choosing the right medium to advertise | reading writing speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consolidating grammatical skills meeting clients' needs (methodological) |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> final task: Approaching an advertising agency to advertise a product, a service of your choice. | speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consolidating grammatical skills meeting clients' needs (methodological) learning specific vocabulary improving pronunciation (phonological) being creative |
| 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> feedback from the teacher and the other students | speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> evaluating decisions and proposals improving linguistic competences (cognitive and metacognitive) |

by doing. This unit also falls within the action-oriented approach put forward in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2001). Lesson after lesson, learners accomplish real life tasks that enable them to solve problems. They are encouraged to be involved in their learning since they are required to do the tasks on their own, in pairs or in teams. For the final task, the students work in teams exclusively.

There are six groups (A, B, C, D, E and F) of three students; each group is assigned two roles: playing the clients and the agents in turn. They all have to solicit an advertising agency and ask them to advertise their product according to a bill of specifications of their choice, having previously studied writing bills of specifications in English. The students finally play the roles they are assigned in the last but one lesson, lasting two hours. This lesson (covering the last three hours: final task + feedback) is divided into two phases: a preparation phase (1 hour) and a performance phase (1 hour). It is completed by a feedback phase (1 hour) during the last lesson. For lack of time, I could not organize any

re-play phase.

3.1 The preparation phase

These students are used to playing roles and being put in situations of communication through drama in their English classes, so they know how important the preparation phase is. My drama classes always start with physical and vocal warm-up exercises (walking, stretching, vocalizations – Fig. 2) to engage in team building activities.



Figure 2: Walking to wake up your body

One of the preparation phase activities requires students to think about the product they want to have advertised and hand it along from one student to the next. The product thus constantly changes aspect, weight and size, giving rise to humorous situations as can be seen in figure 3: one student makes his object turn on his finger tip, which makes other students laugh, thereby creating a relaxed atmosphere.



Figure 3: Passing along the product

The last preparation activity consists in letting each group prepare their bill of specifications. The absence of furniture helps to create a relaxed atmosphere: it enables the students to stretch their legs, work more closely, face one another, in other words make their bodies comfortable and create more intimacy (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Preparing your bill of specifications

3.2 The performance phase

Once all the students and groups finish writing their bills, they must approach an advertising agency – the roles are given by the teacher (Table 2) – and place their order for a new advert. When they play the role of the advertising agency, they have to follow the AIDA strategy (Strong 1925).

Table 2: Matching the groups

| Clients | Advertising agents |
|---------|--------------------|
| A | B |
| C | D |
| E | F |
| B | C |
| D | E |
| F | A |

The members of the group playing the advertising agents carefully write down their client's requirements to come up with the best offer. Once all students have played both roles, they have to find the best advert for their clients and make suggestions. The room is set up with a desk and a few chairs only to simulate an office environment.

This task is presented in front of all the other students (Fig. 5), who must listen carefully, check if the AIDA model is respected and take notes on the attitude of the professionals-to-be.

3.3 The feedback phase

Following the performance of all the groups, the students give their opinions on the proposals and the attitudes of the professionals. The English teacher remains in the background to note the phonological, grammatical and lexical quality of the students' English so as to give them some feedback on their language skills. Some presentations are video-recorded for students to see their own strengths and weaknesses thereafter and for the scientific research questions mentioned above (i.e. getting qualitative data to study to what extent drama activities help manage speaking anxiety).



Figure 5: Presenting your advertising project

4 Results and discussion

All students show motivation and interest for the tasks. I notice that when they work in groups, even the shiest students or the students that have doubts about the quality of their spoken English participate in the projects. They seem to feel more confident and rely on the other team members to help them overcome lexical, grammatical and/or phonological obstacles.

Aden writes that creativity leads to speaking more and speaking more develops creativity in a virtuous circle (Aden 2007: 174). Along those lines, I ask the students/spect-actors³ to write down a few pieces of advice on the creative quality of the suggestions and on the professional attitudes of their class mates. All the students show they are creative indeed, since they suggest various interesting outstanding advertising campaigns. This leads them to speak more, so I can verify that speaking more also leads them to be more creative and vice versa. Speech is never interrupted, the more the students speak about their ideas, the more they want to speak and add details, explanations.

I can also observe that the position of the teacher in such pedagogical situations, i.e. remaining in the background and ensuring that students learn well, encourages students to inter-correct each other and self-correct language use. Following my individual observations, they will know where to consolidate their linguistic weaknesses so as to reach linguistic autonomy and transfer their linguistic skills to professional situations later.

Furthermore, the language of their bodies comes to complete and support the language of words and adds to their pre-professional learning (Di Pastena *et al.* 2015). If we first look at the facial movements of the students, the positions of their bodies and their gestures, we realize how words and bodies are both complementary languages. In figure 6, we can see a student explaining the solutions she was offering and miming them with her right hand. As we can see in the photos, this student makes different gestures with her right hand,

³ See the active role of the “spect-actor” in Privas-Bréauté 2016.

especially when she is looking for a word or trying to explain it (Fig. 6 and 7) or when she wants to insist on a concept and/or word (Fig. 8).



Figure 6: Hand movements



Figure 7: Hand movements

As the student wants to make sure they understand what she is saying, she puts emphasis on key words and key concepts with her right hand (Beattie & Shovelton 1999).

Studying the faces of the students, especially their gazes, is also revealing (Rossano *et al.* 2009). In photo 8, we can observe a student who is carefully looking at her class mate (mock colleague) showing her complete interest in what is being said and seemingly supporting her speech. Judging her attitude and the uninterrupted flow of her speech, this leads the speaker to feel more confident in what she is saying.

Students here co-develop attitudes that will help them manage speaking anxiety when they must speak English and understand that these are attitudes that can be adopted in the professional world. In *Le corps dans la langue. Les techniques dramatiques dans l'enseignement/ apprentissage des*



Figure 8: Hand movements



Figure 9: Carefully looking at what is said, showing interest

langues, Cormanski writes that the body has a memory relying on emotions and senses, which involves and facilitates cognition (Cormanski 1993: 315). This ensures lasting knowledge and lasting competences, echoing Varela's long-term memorization process explained before.

Through this unit and the observations that follow, I can say that drama games and role plays, thanks to the body and mind complementarity in life-like contexts and through interactions, help learners consolidate their linguistic and communicative competences and co-develop their professional abilities. Students rely on one another and their teacher to build these competences.

However, since the students have to play the roles of advertising agents organizing a meeting with their clients to present them with an advertising solution, they remain seated all the time, not daring to stand up and mime the commercial for instance. I expected them to do that. Therefore, disappointingly, this first experimentation is compromised partly because of the presence of the furniture, no matter how scarce it is. As was studied previously (Privas-Bréauté

2016), students are less encouraged to perform in a room with chairs and tables. In the future, I will offer only one chair for the team of advertising agents to encourage them to stand up, mime or illustrate the adverts with their bodies.

Finally, requiring students to fill in a questionnaire after the unit so as to get their impressions on a) lessening speaking anxiety, b) implementing professional automatisms, c) developing linguistic abilities and d) encouraging body language through drama activities would help gather quantitative data. These would corroborate or not the results of the qualitative data I get from observations, photos and videos.

5 Conclusion

In light of Varela's (1993, 1996) "enaction" paradigm falling within the theories of embodied cognition, drama techniques and role plays used in a pedagogical context become valuable devices to train the bodies and the voices of students who will have to speak English at work. They facilitate linguistic acquisition and, because the preparation phase enables students to be more at ease within the group, they also lead to easing tensions related to the use of English in front of a group. Helping students in English to prepare their voices and bodies to enter the business world will help them not being stressed in their future professional situations. If students are made well aware of this objective by their teacher, they might even be more motivated and learn more. Contacting these students later, when they start working, and asking them how well they are doing in their jobs when it has to do with speaking English, will help me verify whether drama is a device that really develops linguistic, professional competences and strengthen emotional abilities in the long term.

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