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Workshop in German Drama

Using Period Acting Techniques to Enhance Second Language Acquisition

Michael J. Sosulski

Abstract

This article presents a model for teaching a true four-skills second language course in German using student drama performance as the primary vehicle of instruction. Students in this workshop-style course learn to closely read literary German drama while enacting key scenes using authentic period acting techniques. Both the study of literary drama and the historical acting techniques with which they were performed offer students special access to important elements of German culture during notable eras while sharpening their mastery of advanced vocabulary and linguistic structure in German. The value of teaching drama through active learning, as well as the use of reflection in assessment are among the topics explored in this article.

1 Introduction

The essence of drama is in its performance, and performance traditions offer us a rich opportunity to observe values as they are enacted within language and culture. Despite the fact that dramas have often been written that were never performed during the lifetimes of their authors (sometimes quite intentionally so), most dramas only blossom into their full range of meaning when realized upon the stage by actors in flesh and blood. It is also true that in order to gain a deep understanding of the internal mechanics of the drama, and an appreciation for the craft of the playwright, it is invaluable to take part in the production of the play in question. Here one sees the play *from the inside,* a radically different perspective than that afforded by the comfortable seat in the audience or the armchair. Just as acting the part affords the actor the chance to peer deep inside the character to reveal hidden motivations, directing a play or a scene requires the director to think both locally (about character and motive) and globally (about constellation and plot).

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2 Learning by Doing: The Course Model

In the course *Workshop in German Drama*, students play the parts of both actor and director with a view to gaining access to these deeper levels of understanding found within a selection of German plays. Following collective reading and discussion of the dramas, each course participant has the chance to act or direct a scene him/herself. Each student is responsible for reading *all* the plays in a timely way and for being prepared to discuss each drama in class. In addition, students are assigned either a character to act or a scene to direct. After a "production period" of several weeks, a key scene from each play treated in the course is played for the class and discussed. Post-production responsibilities include the writing of a three- to five-page paper explaining the acting/directorial approach to the character or scene. A critical element of this course is discussion in the target language of the cultural contexts in which each drama was originally written and performed, including comparative acting techniques (neoclassical, naturalistic, Brechtian and others), and what these tell us about the epoch of German culture in which they emerged. Linguistic targets of this course include advanced vocabulary building and structural acquisition, as well as a nuanced appreciation for the ways in which corporeal and verbal semiotics are intimately linked in dramatic art.

For years various scholars and language acquisition specialists have encouraged the use of dramatic role-play in the context of second language acquisition. As early as 1929 Mark Waldman reported this in the *German Quarterly:* "What ought to be done is this: from the very beginning short easy stories and poems should be dramatized and enacted in the classroom, gradually leading up to some more difficult ones. [. . .] What joy, what pleasure the students evince in this sort of work! There is life; there is interest; there is enthusiasm! I have experienced it time and again."[1] Beyond making the task of learning a second language more enjoyable, scholars and teachers alike have recognized the value of drama in the classroom for placing students in realistic, quasi-immersive language use situations. Stowell Goding, writing in *The French Review* in 1934, asserted that "For most students. . . the interplay of character situations, the give and take of conversation, *the drama* will prove entirely effective in inducing the student to 'live' for a time, another language."[2] The 1980s saw a great deal of interest in the use of drama in the second language classroom, as evidenced by a number of relevant articles in scholarly journals. Among them are salient contributions by M.H. Short (1981), Lucy Stone McNeece (1983), Stephen Shearier (1987), William Packard (1987), and others. More recently, researchers such as Russell DiNapoli (2003) have made important contributions to the study of drama in second language acquisition, calling attention to the cognitive and affective benefits of dramatic role-playing in the classroom.

[1] Mark Waldman, "Some Thoughts on the Teaching of the Drama." In: *German Quarterly* 2 no. 1 (1929), 15-16.

[2] Stowell C. Goding, "Dramatization: An Effective Aid in Modern Language Teaching." In: *The French Review* 7, no. 3 (1934), 226.

3 Linguistic and Cultural Benefits

Despite this long-standing interest in the pedagogical uses of drama, one might still reasonably ask, "Why do this? Why offer a course that essentially only "covers" five dramas over the course of an academic term? Isn't this a bit of a luxury (or, more cynically put, a waste of precious time) in an undergraduate German curriculum?" I will argue that it's not. As Stephen Shearier has expressed it, "Literature should be treated. . . as a viable, multifaceted entity, a manifestation of the vitality of language and a means of enriching one's knowledge of history and culture."[3] But if we really want to take the most that we can from literary drama, we need to see it– *and use it*– as more than simply canonical literature. The thesis of this article, and which also underlies the course that it describes, is that the experience of *performance* aids both linguistic and aesthetic comprehension (of literary and theater art), and that it also enhances student learning about culture. The workshop model that I propose here asks students to engage intensively with a small selection of German dramas chosen from different eras, and to learn to perform key scenes from each using acting methods drawn from the period in which they were originally written. Students then write – in the target language– brief reflective essays in which they examine their acting and directing choices, using the language and cultural material they have acquired in the process of working with each play.

Working with drama in an active way offers learners a range of linguistic benefits, including rich opportunities to acquire new vocabulary and structures, to engage in sophisticated writing tasks, and to interact with others in realistic discourse situations. As DiNapoli argues, "the process of nonexhibitional engagement in dramatic role-plays facilitates authentic communication" by encouraging students to engage both cognitively (through a process of hypothesis-testing) and affectively (through empathy and personal commitment) with literary characters, and with each other as interlocutors.[4]

In this course, each unit begins with a thorough reading, analysis, and discussion of a play with specific attention paid to new and more sophisticated lexical items and elements of grammar. This course is offered at the highest level of the curriculum, so it targets the more advanced learner. In the initial stage of the unit, students are focused upon linguistic comprehension of the play as text. I provide a basic glossary for each drama, from which class participants create subsets of key vocabulary targeted by the class for active acquisition. Each participant is further required to add at least a half dozen items (not included in the glossary) to this list for each play for personal learning. Weekly spot-quizzes serve as local assessments for this area. As we encounter them in the text, I highlight more complex elements of grammar, like advanced uses of

[3] Stephen Shearier, "Language through Literature/Literature through Performance." In: *Teaching Language through Literature* 27 no. 1 (1987): 30.

[4] Russell DiNapoli, "Towards Natural Engagement in Nonexhibitional Dramatic Role-Plays." In: *Iberica* 6 (2003): 15-38.

the genitive case and extended modifiers. Using a focus-on-form approach, I normally micro-teach the structure and reinforce it with targeted exercises for at-home individual practice.

Writing tasks linked to each drama require students to reproduce targeted structures. Every unit of the course includes the performance of a key scene from the play, and their post-performance work involves a three-page reflective essay accounting for their choices, either in acting or directing the scene. Here students are required to discuss important literary aspects of the drama, and how these are linked to their creation of a specific character in the play, based upon what they have learned about various period acting techniques. For example, students performing roles Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* reflected upon their acting choices using late 18th-century techniques, while in Brecht's *Mutter Courage* students have written in detail about the ways in which they envisioned and then acted characters in this play using the tenets of Epic Theater. Evaluation of this writing includes every major target of the course: students' use of targeted linguistic structures, analysis of the literary work itself, and analysis of their own performance or directorial choices for the scene, based upon their learning about acting techniques from the historical period in which the play was written. More about this aspect of the course later.

4 Student Affect and Character Creation

The performative nature of drama provides the advanced learner an ideal space for language acquisition. Psychologically, the adoption of a dramatic character's persona creates two distinct advantages for many learners. First, it has the potential to relieve common student inhibitions about speaking a second language. One would like to think that, by the advanced intermediate level, students would have overcome this problem, and many in fact have. But for others, inhibitions remain an ongoing concern, particularly as they relate to skill differentiation between learners. Students with less native-like ability, especially in terms of pronunciation and accent, have *license* in dramatic play to experiment with things like vocal inflection, intonation, accents, and cadence when their own personalities are allowed to recede into the background. Other inhibitions– like fear of performing– may for a time replace the others, but experience has shown that these tend to subside as the group dynamic develops. Here the instructor has an extremely important role to play by creating positive rapport among the group and encouraging mutual support.[5] Also, because this is a workshop, scenes are rarely if ever performed for an outside audience.

The second psychological advantage gained through dramatic performance is the mandate for each student to identify with the character he/she is playing. As Packard has noted, students must have a "stake" in their dramatic characters.

[5] Shearier also notes the critical role that instructors play in overcoming student inhibitions about performance: "It is the instructors' responsibility at this time to assist their individual students in overcoming whatever may inhibit them from participation in the activity of performance." Shearier, 32.

"If the stakes aren't all that much," he writes, "then a character won't care very much about his action."[6] Identification, so often a primary element of drama, also conjures up the all-important element of urgency in the communicative process. The critical notion of urgency has long been established as a necessity for retention in the L2 learning environment. Identification serves as a mode of empathic connection, which generates meaningful interaction in language. Empathy is a key element of creating meaning in dramatic play, because, as Stern has argued, it aids in "forming positive intergroup relations because it permits the individual to understand and relate to the feelings of others."[7] In this course, students know that they must consistently create meaning through the vehicle of character, and the means of doing this is oral and physical reproduction of the author's dramatic text. It can, of course, be objected that students can quite easily memorize and regurgitate text without comprehension. This is not only true, it is also often a key to learning in this environment that gives the instructor an advantage. Students will inevitably do just this, from time to time, hoping to squeak by. However a lackluster performance by a student will often reveal a lack of comprehension, and therefore an excellent teachable moment in which to break down the text, structurally and aesthetically.

Furthermore, identification with a character can create a sense of ownership and personal investment in the language of that character. Surpassing the minimal gains afforded by the act of memorization, identification creates heightened awareness of and attention to idiosyncrasies and structural patterns particular to their characters, aiding students in making some of these their own. As Short has claimed, "act[ing] out parts of dramatic texts in class. . . bring[s]. . . a greater understanding of the rules governing language use. . . [. . .] But it is the process, not the product, which is important."[8]

5 Drama and Realistic Discourse

Perhaps most importantly, however, is the advantage that drama gives learners based upon its generic structure. The dialogic nature of drama stages realistic discourse situations in which learners *actually must participate,* giving them room for minimal structured language play. Simulating realistic dialogue is one short step removed from creating one's own discourse.[9] In many ways, dramatic re-enactment of discourse situations sets the stage for students' genuine enactments in their own lives. There is, however, a missing piece between re-enactment and authentic linguistic performance in the target

[6] W. Packard, *The Art of the Playwright: Creating the Magic of Theatre*. New York: Paragon Publishers, 1987, 14.

[7] S. Stern, "Drama in Second Language Learning from a Psycholinguistic Perspective." In: *Language Learning* 30 no. 1 (1980): 82.

[8] M.H. Short, "Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama. In: *Applied Linguistics* 11 no. 2 (1981): 200.

[9] "This is precisely what makes drama a valuable resource in teaching foreign/second languages and LSP courses. It is possibly about as close to real communication on a wide range of subjects that one can get in the classroom." DiNapoli, 22.

language. This is why I believe it is absolutely critical to include the task of ensemble improvisation when teaching language and culture through drama. I do this in two productive ways: by asking students to imagine alternative turns in the plot, and at critical moments to depart from the script, completing the scene in an alternative fashion. At times I also ask students to re-enact the scene using their own words, instead of those of the author. McNeece advocates this latter method of improvisation, because it

> . . . requires that [students] identify with one or another of the characters or an aspect of the situation. The greater the proportion of student input, especially as it involves emotional coloring of the basic situation, the more likely the students are to appropriate the language, that is, to make speech meaningful.[10]

Students are rewarded for continuing to employ target vocabulary and structures during this exercise, but this time while improvising while in character. The element of improvisation helps students to bridge the imaginative gap between the play's text and their own authentic discourse. Ideally, it cements linguistic elements in memory and aids the comprehension of the text and its characters by allowing for alternatives to the pre-ordained outcomes. It also helps students to think strategically about literature, by shifting the position of the student from pure consumer of art to that of temporary co-author of an artwork-in-progress. I contend that improvisation ratchets up the comprehension of linguistic structure and the aesthetics of the drama by making students own new elements of language and the text itself, from which they sprang.

Student ownership replaces passive consumption in this teaching model once again when students in turn take on a different role, that of director. Instead of being responsible for one character alone, the student director of each scene played by the group takes responsibility for the dramaturgy and for working with each actor to realize the best character creation through staging and recently acquired acting techniques. While the opportunity to identify with a character is absent in this particular role, the director– even more intensely than the actors– sees the play from the inside, thinking all along the way with the playwright about how best to realize the author's vision. This view from the inside allows for serious planning prior to rehearsals, and serious discussion in rehearsal about the meaning of the situations the students need to stage. Not simply discussing various possible "meanings" of the text, students in this situation must argue for a particular interpretation of the authorial vision, and then make it happen– all in the target language. This brings up another linguistic payoff of this technique: all aspects of rehearsal are conducted *in the target language,* including both the practice of scenes *and* the necessary side conversations. Thus even the preparation for performance necessarily implicates language learners in the urgent need to communicate with one another, in German. It creates real and meaningful communicative situations,

[10] Lucy Stone McNeece, "The Uses of Improvisation: Drama in the Foreign Language Classroom." In: *The French Review* 56 no. 6 (1983): 834.

instigated by a fellow student rather than the instructor– a highly valuable element in any second language-learning situation.

6 Cultural Understanding

The third element of this course aided by dramatic praxis is cultural comprehension. A third of in-class time is devoted to learning about the German cultural contexts in which each play was written and premiered. Through this study (which comes in the form of background reading and discussion, small research projects, and occasional presentations by the instructor), students acquire the necessary background and understanding of important matters relating to the social and historical context of the plays they've been asked to perform. Friedrich Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe,* for example, provides a wonderful opportunity to explore issues of gender, class, and economics during the late 18th Century. Life on the stage for women during this era (for that matter, in *any era)* offers a unique and valuable prism through which students can learn about the standards and limits of evolving gender roles in German society.

7 Historical Acting

The final piece in this pedagogical model involves the teaching of acting. In this course I include the added dimension of historically accurate, period-specific acting styles and techniques (some resources for this teaching are included in the bibliography), each of which my students apply to the scenes they are performing. This element of the course is clearly not necessary for the language-acquisition or literary and aesthetic goals of the course to be achieved, but it adds a powerful dimension to students' learning about culture. Strictly speaking, high quality acting *per se* is not a strategic goal of this course (nor can it reasonably be expected from an average college class!). But if an instructor has the expertise to deliver it, information and some elementary training in historical acting techniques can enhance the enjoyment of performance for students, teach more about the social context of the plays, and reveal to learners a good deal more about the medium of theater as an art form.

For example, I use the fascinating case of the 1780s to highlight the radical shift in acting techniques that began to take place in German theaters, from the stylized and highly mechanical use of neoclassical symbolic gestures to a slightly more life-like code of identification-based techniques, the rise of which accompanied (in part) the advent of Storm and Stress drama. Students learn about the coded emotions of the 18th-century gesture books, and contrast them with the less restrained and slightly more affect-based style pioneered by August Wilhelm Iffland and Ludwig Schröder during the 1780s. When working on Gerhart Hauptmann's *Vor Sonnenaufgang,* students become acquainted with Naturalism – both its literary aspects, as well as its manifestations in late-18th

century acting technique. These include the ground-breaking theories of Stanislavski, who based his work on the concept of "emotional memory." *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* initiates students into the world of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater. They learn about and employ the concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt,* this time *de-emphasizing* identification with a character and disassociating themselves (and therefore the implied spectators) from emotional involvement with characters they are portraying.

8 Assessment

An important aspect of any course is assessment. No performance experience or talent is required or expected of students, so the quality of their acting itself does not count. I do expect that they will make an attempt to employ some of the period-specific acting methods they have learned during the course, and that these attempts will be accounted for in their reflective essays about each play and performance experience. Assessment here is therefore based upon a combination of essay content and student participation. Ultimately the purpose of the course is to aid each student in thinking critically in new ways and from new perspectives about German drama. My evaluation of student performance consists of in-class participation, five brief writing assignments explaining questions of acting and dramaturgy, and an average of peer and self evaluations (see Appendix for an example). These evaluations are critical for two reasons. Peer evaluation helps to ensure adequate effort on the part of each student in the ensemble; students must work together cooperatively in order to achieve proper results. Self evaluation serves students as a step toward writing essays by starting the process of self reflection about their acting and directing choices. These writing tasks occur in the target language, and when properly done, function as a pre-writing activity to help them conceive their thoughts for the longer, formal writing task of the reflective essay.

One can see how a course like this one has the potential to place students in an active learning environment where both staged and realistic discourse situations abound. Performance and rehearsal contexts allow for creative and structured second language use, while the writing component ensures opportunities for students to develop their skills by expressing themselves in formal and informal registers. Cultural learning takes place through study of the social and historical fabric from which the plays emerged. And finally, due to the limited number of plays studied, students have the time and space necessary to acquire skill in literary analysis, adding depth and understanding to the oral and physical tasks involved in performance. When included as an option available to advanced learners in an undergraduate German program, this course provides an effective venue for teaching and developing multiple abilities within a true four-skills course– a rarity at the top end of a second language and culture curriculum.

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Primary Literature

Secondary Literature

A Appendix

A.1 Selbst- und Gruppenevaluierung

German Drama Workshop

- Wie viel Mühe habe ich mir als Schauspieler/in (beim Einstudieren meiner Rolle, Proben, usw.) bzw. als Regisseur/in gegeben?

1	2	3	4	5
Keine	sehr wenig	mäßig	viel	sehr viel

- Was genau habe ich getan, um diese Aufführung erfolgreich zu machen?
- Wie viel Mühe habe ich mir bei den Proben gegeben?

1	2	3	4	5
Keine	sehr wenig	mäßig	viel	sehr viel

- Welche Beiträge seitens meiner KomillitonInnen habe ich besonders geschätzt?
- Wie viel Mühe haben sich die anderen Studierenden als SchauspielerInnen oder als RegisseurInnen gegeben?

[Name:]				
1	2	3	4	5
Keine	sehr wenig	mäßig	viel	sehr viel

- Wie würden Sie die Qualität der dramatischen Aufführung einschätzen?

1	2	3	4	5
Mangelhaft	mittelmäßig	ausreichend	gut	hervorragend

- Was haben Sie über Drama neu dazu gelernt? Was über Schauspielkunst?
- Haben Sie während der Arbeit an diesem Stück unerwartete Erfahrungen gemacht? Welche und warum waren diese *unerwartet?*
- Was hätten wir/Sie – im Sinne einer möglichst positiven Erfahrung – anders machen können?
- Wie würden Sie Ihre Teilnahme an der Inszenierung nun einschätzen?
- Auf der Basis dieser Einschätzung, was werden Sie in Zukunft ändern?