

Language plus Life Skills: Engaging in English through Literature, Drama, and Art



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Introduction

“Involve me and I learn.” This paper explores a parallel thesis of interest to language teachers and learners: “Involve me in literature through drama and art, and I learn language, plus life skills.” This adds up to education and entertainment, combined.

Why literature? Through literary works, learners lose themselves in stories, the oldest teacher of all time, told in authentic language. About matters that matter the most, O’Shea and Egan (1978) assert that literature opens the horizon of human experience to learners, inviting them to interpret, ponder, weigh possibilities, and wonder: “Who am I? What are my roots? Where am I going? What will I become?” (p. 51). Through literature, language students absorb vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, all while opening their minds to universal themes that speak to everyone.

Clearly, drama and literature are each major power tools for English learners and teachers. Imagine combining the two. That is what I do. The potent elixir of drama and literature squared has been summed up by Brinda (2008) as follows: “By combining reading (literature) with seeing (drama), students find ways to immerse themselves in the actions, thoughts, and dialogue of characters, as well as the settings, sounds, and symbols in the literature” (p.488). The purpose of this paper is to explain how engaging English learners in literature, drama, and art became my passion quite by chance. What follows might be called “The Diary of a Dare-to Teacher.” It traces how a turning point, an ‘aha moment,’ leading through student sketches of characters from

novels, led me to establish “Bring Reading to Life” as a powerful English language teaching technique wherein learners acquire significant language and life skills through dramatized literature. Instinct was my only GPS for this journey of discovery.

From the Classroom to the Stage

Turning Point: “Aha” Moment

I discovered artistic talent in students in one pivotal 2011 class. This “turning point,” soon drove me toward my passion – both professional and personal – like the arrow on an Ouija board.

An EFL instructor in the American University of Kuwait’s Intensive English Program, I was assigned to teach novels as a sideline “lab” enrichment activity in a conventional foundation academic reading – writing course. My students were high intermediate level 3 (5–5.5 on the IELTS scale). The novel that semester was Bram Stoker’s 1897 tale of the heights and depths of human and super human nature, “Dracula,” slightly simplified but still over 400 pages (Johnson, 2003). Like most instructors, I assigned chapters as homework, and during lab students worked in groups to discuss plot, setting, the plight of the characters, and theme. They worked in “reading circles,” highlighted new vocab, and responded to “WH” questions about the action and emotion in the novel. I created quizzes and exams. All was going reasonably well.

Yet student fatigue caused detours and delays. The lab was scheduled after 4 hours of Intensive English classes, and though the students were bright, cooperative, and curious, they often flagged. Lacking steam, and motionless in desk-chairs, it was a struggle

to conquer new vocabulary and hold on to plot particulars. Higher stakes assignments in other classes weighed on my students. At novel time, they sometimes wilted in their seats.

That special day, the student worker did not appear with the lab worksheets I had planned to distribute. Waiting for the sheets, an idea came to me. Out of the blue, I said, “All right class, while we’re waiting, let us draw a character or scene from the novel.” I did not expect much. This was a fill in.

About ten minutes passed on the wall clock. I collected the papers and walked up and down the aisles, showing the drawings for students to see. There was laughter at Count Dracula sketched in pencil as a stick figure with fangs, and a crude hut on a mountainside meant to be his castle. I leafed through more drawings as I strolled. The next sheet shocked me, and stopped me in my tracks. I felt my heart beating, first in awe, then in anger, then in awe again. It was a head sketch of the bright and humble heroine, Mina, beautifully rendered.

More drawings were called for, and more drawings came. Artistic talent rolled out, and interest in “Dracula” deepened. Students dared to reserve a bulletin board in a well-lit campus hallway and plan a sketch display. The board was counted as an extra credit project, and a core group of ten took on design and logistics. These ten, who normally left at 2 pm, were still working at 6 pm for over a week, mounting the drawings on red paper, captioning them in Gothic font, and arranging them in a striking collage. I stayed in my office as they worked, but walked past occasionally to check. Exhilaration lit their faces, not exhaustion. That surprised me given the late hour.

Students gained a great sense of achievement through this novel-based art display, and it opened the door to more “bring reading to life.”

Courtyard Acting

The same semester, in our next novel, I noticed that the following scenario in “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” was low-hanging fruit for acting intense emotion, action, and verbs of specific movement:

He put the glass to his lips and drank the mixture in one gulp. A cry followed. He reeled, staggered, clutched at the table, and held on. Staring and gasping, he swelled. His face turned black, and his features melted.”

I sprang to my feet and leaped back against the wall. My arms were raised to shield me from what I saw. I was overcome with terror. Oh God I screamed again and again. (Dunayer, 2005)

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The following semester, we crossed into acting for Halloween. As luck would have it, there were actors and dancers among the students who registered for my academic reading-writing course. The novel again was “Frankenstein.” There were no signs or wilted sunflowers; we spent the daily novel hour, “lab,” reading, imagining, improvising, and rehearsing vignettes. We planned to perform outdoors in the central campus courtyard. The idea of entertaining an audience sparked intense student interest. Students worked together to create their performance agenda, and soon a “Eureka!” moment occurred. Hadn’t Victor Frankenstein told the creature to get out when he beheld “the monster’s” unsatisfactory physiognomy? And wasn’t the Michael Jackson song “Beat It!” an all-time favorite for all? They lined up a half hour show with these silent courtyard actions performed to dramatic music: Victor performs a “heart transplant” on the creature, the creature awakens, and the creature attacks Victor. They are “fighting to the death” when the leader of a troupe of 7 in black and white make up, “bring reading to life” T-shirts, and leather jackets separates the two scrappers and in V formation starts their flash dance as the Michael Jackson song begins. Seven “brides of Frankenstein” walk in like zombies in their ghoulish make up following the dance. Red velvet ropes cordoned off the crowd of over 100 students and teachers. Two of my students wore neon vests and served as security. Later, another created a trailer of their performance.

The “Beat It” project showed the principle of multiple intelligences and learning styles at its best. All members of the class contributed their particular talents to the project in teams of their choosing: actors/dancers, sound, costumes make up, posters and advertising, best essay judges in the “Writer’s Corner,” and historian’s log of rehearsals and photos. Meanwhile, in the writing component of the course, in depth knowledge of the novel was put to good use as students contrasted novel and film in their analysis/synthesis essay.

From the Courtyard to the Stage

Performing at close range to the audience in the courtyard was powerful and fun; it fostered audience interaction, which in turn, motivated students to deliver their most engaging performance. Our next novel was “Pride and Prejudice” (Hopkins & Attwood, 2008) and when a colleague suggested going to the auditorium stage for the next “page to stage” engagement, instinct told me that the magic of audience interaction would be lost. An invisible wall, known as “the fourth wall” in drama, would destroy the connection between performers and their audience. Soon this was solved. We could perform on the big stage and still keep the audience connection with a device that I later realized is common in drama: the theatrical “aside:” one actor speaks directly to the audience while the other actors freeze. Students wrote asides into the script of our next show: the 5-act “Pride and Prejudice” scripted stage play. For example, when the rude and pompous Darcy proposed the second time, Elizabeth, wearing a look of consternation, walked to the edge of the stage. With an imploring gesture and worry in her voice, she asked the audience, “What should I do?”

With this first aside, we gambled and won. The audience out-shouted each other with, “Say yes!” “Say no!” “Forgive him!” “Grab the ring!” “Throw him out!” “He’ll never change!” People stood up and shook their fists. We had transitioned to the stage and kept audience engagement as well as audience empathy—the sparks that ignite students’ best performances as they know their characters and being heard, understood, and felt.

This time the novel versus film contrast essay written by my students changed to novel vs play. What is more, students from other classes in the audience wrote impressive essay about their three favorite characters in the play. Witnessing the depth of student engagement in the essays, a light turned on within. It showed that one group of students had inhabited their characters so totally and been able to inhabit the stage as those characters so effectively that another group of students was able not only to understand them, but to feel them emotionally.

“English of the students, for the students, and by the students” came to mind. “Bring Reading to Life” had brought ELT to life in my classes.

Life Skill Benefits of Dramatized Literature: the 7 Cs and beyond

Language skills transmitted to English learners through dramatized literature come with mega plusses: the “7C” life skills, and a host of transformations:

- The “7Cs:” Creativity, Collaboration, Critical thinking, Commitment, Confidence, Camaraderie, and Compromise. The process of brainstorming, negotiation, teamwork, and experimentation required to choose a literary work, choose a stage team, synthesize ideas from novel, film, and available scripts, rehearse, decide how to act, commit to keep trying, and stay calm under the stage lights integrates these life skills and allows students to internalize them interactively.
- Transformations sparked by dramatized literature:
 1. The teacher-centered classroom transforms into a beehive of student-centered activity where one teaching voice is replaced by several student voices acting and negotiating meaning.
 2. Students in “wilting sunflower” status transform into “live wires” as they connect with each other, the audience, and the literature.
 3. Novel plot, character, and theme become highly charged and compelling.
 4. Bloom’s learning domains shift from Knowledge and Comprehension to higher order Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation.
 5. Leaders among students shift to higher confidence as they call upon skills they never knew they had.
 6. Followers among students in backstage, sound and lights, costume and make-up commit to better teamwork as they see their tasks’ importance to the performance.
 7. In rehearsals, all students transform from ordinary pupils to directors and script writers as they advise each other, make decisions that matter, and experiment to compromise.
 8. Students transform mental images as they visualize stage moves and props.
 9. Students experiment with roles in life by transforming into other characters in another time and place.

10. The ordinary classroom experience transforms into unforgettable brainstorming, rehearsal, and stage sessions.

Conclusion

My teaching journey has led to the creation of *Bringing Reading to Life*, a project based pedagogy in which students experience and communicate literature through art and stage productions. Just as wilted sunflowers drooping their heads suddenly rise and shine when watered; a dramatized story recharged my students to “full battery.” Someone once said, “Never underestimate the power of story,” yet I sense that in ELT we are doing just that. Watering wilted sunflowers brings them back to life in minutes. Dramatizing stories does the same for our students, while also providing practice in a host of both language and life skills.

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