
All the World's a Stage...

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Abstract

William Shakespeare was clearly aware of the role language plays as we pass through his seven ages from childhood to adulthood.

While there is some overlap of language between and among the roles we manifest as we mature, there is a core of language common to all speech acts. Part of L1 proficiency involves learning the sociolinguistic rules as well as the language *per se*.

Little direct instruction is given to children as they learn their cradle tongues, yet they learn. Not all children learn the same linguistic roles because the ones they do learn are a function of their station in life.

The roles we learn to play on the world's stage are communicative roles--language used for a purpose, and roles differ in their complexity and seriousness of purpose.

The use of drama addresses the question of ways to help L2 learners use their L1 knowledge and skills as they learn an L2. It recognizes that L1 native speakers are already skilled users of a language and that they do not approach the learning of a second with a linguistic *tabula rasa*.

Much of language is learned without direct instruction using the context in which the language is used as a model from which to extract the rules of usage. These context-rich situations are not normally available to the L2 learner. Therefore, the classroom serves as the place for most L2 learning and the argument is made that this environment should be as stress-free and as communicative as possible.

Drama helps reduce the fear factor in L2 learning if appropriate context-rich materials are used. From this "data" learners can learn ways of using their L2 in a variety of social situations.

Successful actors use language in ways that are believable to their audiences. It is argued that L2 "actors" be afforded the opportunity to do likewise.

William Shakespeare was a practicing social psychologist with a firm grasp of sociolinguistic principles long before these two disciplines were given their present-day labels. In "As You Like it" he writes, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages." Shakespeare seems to have forgotten the women in the latter part of this quote, but we'll forgive him this sexist lapse. He then goes on to spell out, as only he could, the seven ages. Sprinkled throughout these ages are references to language: Mewling in the infant, whining in the school boy, the lover sighing and singing a woeful ballad, the soldier full of strange oaths and sudden and quick in quarrel, the justice full of wise saws and modern instances. Shakespeare seems to be saying that as people progress through their various ages they learn and use new linguistic skills. What Shakespeare did not say was that each of us plays a myriad of roles as we progress through his seven major ages and that each of these roles calls for the use of language, language appropriate to each separate role.

Life's many roles--and these roles differ from early childhood to adulthood and as a function of our station in life and our means of livelihood--call upon a variety of linguistic skills. Clearly, as noted, there is overlap in the language used when we manifest our different roles, but there still remains language which is exclusive to each of the roles. The task of first language learners as they go through life is to learn which linguistic units are appropriate and which are inappropriate in a

given role. Interestingly, the only linguistic feature which changes little across roles is phonology although there are subtle changes in one's pronunciation when different roles are manifested.

We all play the role of a child. This role will differ from child to child as a function of the ethnic and social conditions which obtain when we are children. Thus, the child of a well-to-do suburbanite will learn a role which differs in considerable degree from the role which the slum child learns and both will differ from that of the child reared in a rural setting on a farm. And yet the social and linguistic systems learned by each child will be learned in almost identical ways. That is, the child is exposed to language used in its social context, and from that language the child extracts the linguistic system and figures out appropriate ways and means of using that language in particular social situations.

Depending upon our family circumstances, we play the role of a sibling, the role of a niece or nephew, the role of an uncle or aunt, lover, spouse, grandparent and so on. Each of these different roles calls for varying kinds of language with, as noted above, a core of linguistic usage common to all. Thus, the uncle speaking to a favorite nephew in a "Here comes Uncle Larry" situation uses different language than he does when he is speaking to his wife Sharon after she has just succeeded in putting a dent in the fender of their new car.

Speakers in evoking their various roles do so with ease and dispatch--there is no apparent shifting of linguistic gears, no preparation; transitions from roles to roles are automatic. When we are participating

in each of our different roles we are *being* we are not pretending to be because we *are*. Each of our roles has a goal which can be either a major one or a minor one. Thus, a customer might say, "Excuse me" in order to get the attention of a not overly attentive department store clerk. A school teacher may say to his or her principal, "May I talk to you later some time today?", the goal of which is to make an appointment to discuss the possibility of a raise. What all of this means is that in manifesting our roles we have goals which we seek to reach. Some of these goals will be major ones and some will be trivial, but as we go about our attempts to fulfill our goals we are constantly and repeatedly engaged in acts of communication. From this it follows that our language has a purpose. (This is not to deny that there is a certain amount of empty-headed chatter that goes on in daily intercourse, but for our purposes, we can ignore this.)

Well, you say, what does all of this have to do with language teaching and specifically with the uses of drama for the teaching and learning of languages? We believe that uses of drama and drama techniques offer a way to prepare students in classroom situations to play roles and achieve goals in a language other than their native one. We are not overlooking the fact that our second-language students are already "expert" in role-playing in their first language and culture. We are also cognizant of the fact that roles across cultures are probably more similar than they are different, but that significant differences do occur and that they are worthy of study.

In learning our numerous roles in our first language and culture we do very little in the way of conscious preparation for learning. Thus, medical students don't study specifically how to approach a patient and begin a physical examination. To be sure, fledgling doctors are given some guidelines on appropriate behavior and are told rather specifically what kinds of procedures they should employ, but after knocking on the door of the examination room to announce their presence they are on their own to fulfill the role of doctor in a doctor/patient encounter. How does the neophyte doctor learn how to behave? It is reasonable to assume that all doctors have been patients themselves at some time and tucked away in the recesses of their brain is a doctor/patient scenario. The young doctor digs into his or her store of information (schema is the technical term for this vast fund of experiences) and acts accordingly. Depending upon the quality and quantity of the schema present in the brain, the doctor will be more or less successful in an encounter with a patient. The doctor will employ language that he or she has learned from a variety of sources, but most probably, the language will be very much like that used when the doctor, too, was a patient.

Thus it is with all of our roles. We have at our command (and we remind you we are still considering the uses of the first or native language) a phonological system, a morphological system, a syntactic system, a lexical system, a sociolinguistic system and we will make appropriate selections from those systems and then apply our selections to the different roles. By and large we were not taught in a direct fashion the components of these different systems,

but rather we learned them from exposure to language being used in social contexts.

Second language learners, unfortunately, are seldom privy to these situations carried out in the second tongue during their second language learning, but again we remind you that we are not working with blank slates when we are teaching second language students. All second language students have been busy during their lives building up the experiences which will enable them to play life's different roles.

So, what can we provide second language learners that will help them as they work out the intricacies of linguistic usage appropriate to the old familiar roles when they are "enacted" by means of a new language?

We feel the most important mind state we can foster in our second language learners is freedom from fear in the learning situation. Unfortunately, in many second/foreign language learning classrooms there is a lot of fear: fear of making a mistake, fear of failure to memorize something, fear of forgetting a grammar rule (and isn't it a commentary that no language on the face of the earth has written for it a complete and accurate statement of its grammatical rules, one which reflects that which educated native speakers carry around in their brains), fear of making a fool of oneself in front of one's peers, etc. In other words, the psychological learning climate may not be conducive to learning, but, rather is fraught with tension and anxiety. The proper and appropriate use of drama and drama techniques in second language learning situations can provide an atmosphere in which learning can take place without an overlay of fear to concern the students.

Drama can accomplish this because drama is not the memorization of the lines of dialog (although many people have the misconception that it is) and their recitation, but rather, drama is communicating. Accordingly, role playing in the classroom should be a reflection of life and students should be encouraged to engage themselves as they would when going about their daily rounds. In the final analysis, they are the same people in a given role regardless of which tongue they use to manifest that role. The only "fear" that students should have is that they might slip into "acting" instead of being themselves.

Our role as teachers of second languages would be enhanced considerably if textbook writers would give us--and our students--more information about the people who speak the dialogs that appear in their pages. Dialogs are a proven way to show second language learners how people use language in different roles, but unless these dialogs make clear who the people are that are doing the speaking it becomes very difficult for the second-language learner to develop a feel for how one should behave linguistically in a second culture. Thus, textbooks should indicate not only that Rose is speaking to Herman, but who Rose is, what her age is, what her relationship to Herman is, how long they have known each other, what their stations in life are, and any other information which is pertinent to an understanding of just who Rose and Herman are. Moreover, the students need to know what psychological states Rose and Herman are in when they are engaged in conversation: Are they happy, angry, tired, hungry, cold, annoyed, bored, upset, etc.? Then with this background information at

their disposal (and this kind of information could easily be given in the native language either in the text or by the teacher), the students are much better prepared to focus their attention on the kinds of language which these two interlocuters use in a particular situation. In other words, the students are now in a much better position to get a feel for how the second language works. A clever teacher could then engage the students in a discussion--either in the first or second language--about the differences which obtain when the first and second languages are used in "identical" situations in two cultures.

The kinds of detailed information we are suggesting that students be given in order that they can come to an understanding of what is happening in a given circumstance is precisely the kind of information that professional actors receive before they attempt a role. Having this background information helps actors make their performances real, genuine, and a reflection of life, and it is clear that if actors aren't successful in making their performances lifelike that their performances will fail. Is it any less to ask that our "actors" be accorded the same kinds of information so that they, too, may have an opportunity of making their performances as real as possible?

We have argued that life consists of a series of roles. We have also argued that each of us learns a variety of these roles so that we are able to manifest these roles with little conscious effort on our part. We have further suggested that much of the behavior that takes place in each of these roles, both linguistic and physical, is not learned through conscious study, but rather is learned through observation and, in some cases, imitation. We should add that much

of the lexis (vocabulary) is learned from the context of situation, rather than by direct study, although much can be learned from direct study. For example, the medical student learns the word "stat" and the phrase "scut work" in context rather than from a text book. It doesn't take medical students very long to learn the meaning of "stat" when a doctor hollers "stat" at an assistant and that assistant hustles to get whatever the doctor wants. Moreover it is the rare medical student who knows that this word is from the Latin (statum) which means 'at once.' In addition, the medical student will soon see in hospital and clinic contexts what kind of work "scut work" is and that it is dirty, distasteful, mundane and under normal circumstances performed by those without specialized medical training. We have pointed out that our students are are have been role players in their first language and cultures and thus are not neophytes at this business, and that what they primarily need to do is to use this skill in a second tongue. We have suggested that the use of drama and drama techniques is a way to provide a relatively stress and anxiety free ambience for the learning of languages where the emphasis is on people-to-people communication rather than on the mechanical and uninteresting rote learning of linguistic material. We have strongly argued for textbook writers to provide clear and explicit information to second language learners so that they will have a better chance of "getting into" the roles they will play in a second language because they will be able to envision the emotions and feelings of the speakers and identify with them through an application of their own previous experiences which may not match

exactly, but which should be a reasonable approximation.

We have not provided specific details on how teachers might utilize drama and drama techniques in their classrooms because that information is readily available in a rather extensive literature on the subject. (For example, see Maley & Duff, 1982; Nomura, 1982; Smith, 1984; Via, 1987).

Instead, what we have attempted in this brief article is to stimulate the reader to think about how language is used in real life situations and suggest that teaching second languages can and should lean heavily on the way first languages are learned rather than being taught as if language is a set of facts and a series of rules to be learned in a vacuum.

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