

"Sorry, you're muted!"

The challenges and opportunities when using drama as a language learning tool online

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis is an unprecedented tragedy that has affected the education sector worldwide in a way that no one has probably ever imagined before. The ongoing lockdowns had forced schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) to close, and this has had a huge impact on us as we were planning for our drama modules for language learning to be conducted face-to-face. In this reflective piece, we recollected not only the challenges that we faced along the way, but also the opportunities that we saw whilst navigating drama in this whole new online world.

Keywords: Drama, Process drama, Online drama, Language learning, Virtual learning, COVID-19

Introduction

Nicole and Shakira are two English language teachers in Chile and Malaysia, respectively, who embarked on a PhD journey before the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic hit. We had both been studying the effects of using drama as a pedagogical tool in language learning and teaching. However, we had different reasons for wanting to try out drama within our teaching contexts. While Nicole wanted to focus on training English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Chile to be confident users of drama in their classrooms, Shakira wanted to use it to engage English as a Second Language (ESL) students in Malaysia. We were both faced with similar circumstances as we, before the pandemic, had initially planned for our modules for the teachers in Chile and the students in Malaysia to be conducted face-to-face and had to pivot to online delivery. We were also faced with various challenges whilst adapting and implementing the drama, and we are sure teachers all over the world had faced extraordinary circumstances in planning and delivering their lessons during this strange time too. Nevertheless, despite the challenges, we managed to identify some distinctive opportunities afforded by both drama and the very nature of the virtual platforms used.

The Challenges

Adapting face-to-face drama to online drama

The use of drama in the language learning classroom has become a topic of interest over the last thirty years and this can be confirmed by the large body of research that has been made in the field (e.g., Kao, 1995; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Stinson, 2009; Piazzoli, 2011, 2018). According to Kao & O'Neill (1998), drama is an authentic approach for language learners to communicate and

engage with the target language by building a creative and imaginative environment for social roles and relationships. Process drama, which is the strategy that we had adopted, requires teachers and students to work in and out of role. Piazzoli (2018) asserted that process drama is participatory in nature whereby participants have a dual function, namely artists and audience at the same time. Because process drama is an art form and a pedagogic process, students can learn not only about drama, but also through drama about other things (Bowell & Heap, 2017).

The shared space and the social elements are crucial for pedagogical drama. Since we had to adapt everything to be done online, our first thought was: It is impossible. You cannot do drama online. It is funny how our beliefs about how drama can help you to become more flexible as a teacher were put to the test with this situation. How can we teach through drama when students and teachers are not in the same room together?

We both were going through the same process, therefore we became each other's critical friend and started navigating the adaptation process together. We were fully aware that adapting conventional drama strategies and making sure that they would work online was not going to be easy. However, our critical friendship, advice from our supervisors, conversations with drama practitioners and, ultimately, attending other practitioners' online drama workshops, made us believe that it was possible to do it.

In Nicole's conversations with experienced drama practitioners, they were asked about their own process of adapting drama strategies online. Some of their answers helped her gain confidence in online teaching through drama.

...but it is the same, isn't it? with every kind of art form. It is just about working out where the limitations are and try to use them on your advantage.

And I felt that I had to rethink in my head how they can do drama online with their students because I had designed the course for drama in the classroom. That was an effort on my part to think how we did it and I was able to do with them online. I was showing them exercises they could do with their students online and some of my teachers on this course even made up their own online drama exercises.

After this interview Nicole was able to see how besides the fact that we were all struggling, at the same time we were discovering new outcomes in the process. It also showed her the generosity of more experienced practitioners as well as the process of co-creation in action.

Nicole also attended several online drama workshops in the process of adapting the drama. After attending an online session led by Erika Piazzoli at the 2020 *Drama in Education Days*, Nicole felt that it was possible to challenge our students, appeal to their emotions and make them experience drama in a similar way as in a face-to-face session.

Erika's drama session was about *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*. The participants watched a video of the story and then were asked to fetch the closest book they had in their desks/rooms. They shared their stories about those books, about their smell and texture, how they made them feel, where they got them from, and why they had them there. Then, they saw Mr. Lessmore arriving to this new library with all the books looking warily at him. In role, the participants became the books staring at this "new arrival", thinking about all the questions they wanted to ask him. Still in role as books, Nicole and other participants were sent

into breakout rooms in groups of three for a *hot seating*, a process drama strategy by Neelands & Goode (2015: 43). One of the participants adopted the role of the new book, and the others took the role of the old books from the library asking all the questions.

This experience helped Nicole realise that, by acknowledging that the teachers are all working from different places in the world, they can plan sessions in which they incorporate the elements that are part of this unique new drama space. With a few exceptions, drama conventions and strategies can be adapted to be used in online meeting rooms making the most of the platform's features.

The move to online learning due to the pandemic meant that, although Shakira had also planned for her teaching to be conducted face-to-face, she had to find ways to adapt drama to online delivery. Through Shakira and Nicole's critical friendship, Shakira was invited to participate in one of Nicole's workshops in which she had the opportunity to do drama activities with other participants virtually. Another fantastic experience that Shakira had was during one of the interviews with a drama and English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioner in which she had the chance to do hands-on drama activities as the interviewee demonstrated a few drama strategies which she had adapted by involving Shakira as a student. For Shakira, this has helped increase her confidence to innovate drama pedagogical practices, and she also found adapting the strategies to become easier as she progressed in the process.

Whilst planning for the online drama, Shakira was given a useful piece of advice by another practitioner whom she interviewed as part of the planning process. He talked about the need to keep it as simple as possible. In his words, the use of overly complicated

tools in a way takes away the element of using the students' imagination.

...I think in a way actually takes away the element of using their imagination. The communication between the teacher and the students, if the teacher is a facilitator, and guiding the learners, and of course it depends on what you're actually doing in the class, but in essence, the teacher can get the students to be engaged in their imagination and to be focusing on that. It's not as difficult as it may first seem, again I go back to keeping it as simple as possible.

Conducting online drama

Believing that conducting drama sessions online was possible, was just the beginning. Now we had to plan the online sessions and predict what other problems would arise while teaching remotely. We also had to choose – and learn how to use – the correct platform(s) or Learning Management System(s) in order to support participants during the sessions.

Despite the prior planning, not every lesson goes according to plan. There is a difference between a lesson as planned vs. a lesson as lived. These differences lead to *reflection-in-action* moments. Knowing how to react to these events and incorporate them into the lesson has been described by Piazzoli (2018:110) as *wise practical reasoning in education*. When teaching remotely you notice you are reflecting-in-action at all times and for various reasons.

For instance, Nicole had assumed that all participants would have their cameras on, and she did not consider the fact that technical issues might prevent them from doing so. One of the participants stated that she was not able to turn her camera on as it would affect the bandwidth of her internet connection. Nicole quickly had to think of ways of making this participant feel

included even when her camera was off. For example, while doing the *Spectrum of difference* exercise – where students are asked to move closer or farther away from the camera depending how much they agree with a statement – she was asked to type the words *close*, *far*, and *middle* in the chat box to show her preference. In exercises where participants needed to have their camera off, she was asked to participate first.

On reflection, Nicole noticed that in online sessions you cannot do as much as you would in face-to-face sessions. It takes you more time to give instructions, especially when participants are not familiar with the exercises. Therefore, it is important to plan accordingly and keep it simple. Using too many different online resources can be motivating but at the same time, it can be frustrating if participants are experiencing connection issues or not familiarised with them beforehand. It can take up a lot of your teaching time and you cannot make the most of them.

Shakira also learnt that adhering to lesson plans meant for an online lesson is not as easy and as straightforward as adhering to the lesson plans meant for face-to-face classrooms. She was not able to conduct all of the planned activities despite having carefully timed each activity in the lesson plan. One reason for this was due to connection and technical issues, which consumed much of the session time. For instance, some students kept getting disconnected and had to re-join the meeting several times. Although admitting them into the meeting sounded like a simple chore, this became much harder than expected as we might be performing whilst this was happening.

As noted by Nicole, due to internet bandwidth and connection, some students were not able to switch their

camera on during the sessions. To tackle this issue, Shakira designed the sessions in such a way that some drama activities would intentionally require the students to switch their camera and/or microphone off. For example, when using the *Whoosh! Storytelling* strategy (Winston & Tandy, 2012) which had been adapted, Shakira only asked those students who were performing to switch their camera on. In this activity, the students had to act out spontaneously based on her narration of the story, and every time each scene ended, she would say 'Whoosh!' and clap her hands twice to indicate the end of the scene and to signal those performing to switch their camera off to give way to those who would perform in the next scene. Apart from making sure that their internet bandwidth was more stable to prevent any disruptions, she believed the students were able to concentrate on the characters better whilst they were performing. It would have also been more chaotic if everybody were to have their camera on as the audience might not even know who was performing and who was not.

Shakira also found herself having to constantly think of ways to make sure that things would work out for the students under various circumstances whilst the sessions were happening. As Nicole has described earlier, these moments would require us to *reflect-in-action*. For instance, before beginning the lessons, Shakira and her students had co-created their Drama Contract using a feature in Microsoft Teams called *Whiteboard* in which the students were to think of how they wanted everyone in the group to behave throughout the lessons and come up with rules that they would all review together before they agreed and signed the contract. The students had expressed these through drawing and writing on the *Whiteboard*. However, not everyone was able to take part;

some had joined the meeting as a Guest due to technical issues and this feature was not available to them. Not wanting anyone to feel left behind, she had to think of a workaround and make a quick decision so that the activity could be inclusive for everyone. Because the *Chat* feature too was not available to a Guest, Shakira had finally asked these 'guests' to type the rules they wanted everyone to review in their dedicated WhatsApp group which she then helped write on Teams' Whiteboard.

The Opportunities

"Everybody is at the front"

Despite the challenges that we had faced when doing drama online, we found that the online platform does provide distinctive opportunities that are not afforded by a physical space. One of Shakira's interviewees, an English language instructor teaching in a HEI in Malaysia that she had interviewed whilst planning for the module, said:

And if you're in a real classroom, you've got students sitting at the front, and you can very easily see their faces, but the ones who are right at the back, you don't really know what they're up to, you know what I mean? But on the gallery, everybody is the same. It's like everybody's at the front. So in a way you feel closer to the students.

This resonated well with Shakira's own experience when implementing drama online. The fact that the students' names appeared as display names in Microsoft Teams, the platform that she had used for her synchronous sessions has given her the opportunity to engage with the students especially at the times when she has not fully memorised their names. For Shakira, it would usually take some time for her to memorise students' names. As a result, those students whose names had been memorised may get called on more than

others. Nonetheless, she noticed that in her online sessions, she was able to acknowledge each and every student almost effortlessly due to having their display names on Microsoft Teams.

The fact that everybody was “at the front” was also very helpful for Shakira to gauge students’ engagement, especially when they had their cameras on as she could clearly see their facial expressions and reactions. Seeing their joyful expressions when doing the drama activities was one of the things that had kept her motivated especially when considering her apprenticeship in drama. Establishing a sense of intimacy in the exclusively-online pedagogical work has been noted as a challenge for drama educators by Gallagher *et al.* (2020). It was indeed challenging for her especially at the beginning, but she felt accomplished as not only she felt closer to the students, but the students too talked about how they felt more intimate to one another in the online sessions.

Nicole also noticed that, at the same time as putting everyone at the front, an online context provides the students with other forms of class participation that are not necessarily available face-to-face. Students who are less confident and usually do not say much in classes might find an opportunity when expressing their opinions and ideas by using the chat feature the online platform offers. This can also help them gain confidence in the use of the language, especially if the teacher comments in it or provides feedback.

In Nicole’s context, the camera feature also proved to be helpful for anxious students. According to them, it was easier to use the language orally since by turning the camera off, they felt less exposed and “on the spot”.

A Shared Virtual Space

For Shakira, the fact that her drama sessions happened fully virtually has afforded her and the students a sense of

community within a shared virtual space especially when the sessions were conducted during strict lockdown in Malaysia where social meetings and gatherings were totally prohibited. Research indicated that the social restrictions posed during the ongoing lockdowns have had an impact on students’ well-being (Son *et al.*, 2020; Chen & Lucock, 2022; Holm-Hadullaa *et al.*, 2021). Hence, she knew she needed to prioritise the students’ well-being to avoid worsening the pandemic-related impact that the students were already going through at that time. To do this, she attempted to create a more welcoming space for the students, hoping that this would in turn make the students feel safer in the virtual space they were sharing.

In Shakira’s case, having a shared virtual space could in a way help alleviate her students’ stress not only through the interactions that they had in the drama activities while learning the English language, but also through social interactions that happened out of role. Although the synchronous sessions took place on Microsoft Teams in which most of their interactions took place, Shakira and her students also interacted on another platform – WhatsApp. For her, this was helpful in building rapport with the students and making sure that the students feel that there was a sense of community, something which the students had abruptly lost due to the lockdown. In making sure that the virtual space was more welcoming for the students, Shakira also ensured that she was more friendly in her approach whilst ensuring that she was still in control.

Many of the students also talked about how the drama sessions made them feel and how they were different from other classes they previously had. One student in Shakira’s focus group commented,

Actually it's because, [...] chemistry, and then how much fun we had in doing the activities. I didn't expect it to be like this, to be honest. For me, I thought the activities would be the same like the classes that I've been through, like off the camera, off the audio and then waiting for someone to respond... and then the activity, it hit, dang. It hit me, man. Ok, I will participate. Yeah, it's kind of fun for me to interact with everyone.

In Nicole's case, the teachers commented on how much they would have liked having face-to-face sessions instead of online sessions. However, they acknowledged and appreciated the opportunity of getting to know and work together with people from all over the country and the fact that despite being physically far away, they had felt as part of a group and that the drama activities, actually made them feel connected to one another almost as if they were sharing a space together. In their words, *...people were very enthusiastic in the sessions and although I was tired I felt good and motivated.*

It was nice because I was tired after work and we had two more hours of screen time, but I was very motivated a to attend these sessions.

Conclusion

Although online teaching existed before COVID-19, its usage quickly grew during the pandemic. As teachers we had to quickly adapt to new ways of teaching and let go of what we were familiar with. Throughout the adaptation process, we encountered various challenges, but at the same time we discovered how to work out those limitations and use them to the students', the teachers', and our own benefit.

With the restrictions being lifted and the return to onsite classes, it is important not to forget the lessons learned from this experience and the effect it has had in our pedagogical practice. The sense of community or critical friendship can allow us to reflect upon our practice and co-create new spaces for learning where our students can be at the front and have a sense of belonging. We have learned that drama can do that even if it is online.

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