

To be or have not been: Learning language tenses through drama

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Much of the research regarding the effectiveness of drama as a teaching tool is evaluated using qualitative analysis. This collaborative action study applied quantitative research techniques to assess the usefulness of drama as a teaching tool. The aim was to discover what happens to children's understanding of verb tense when taught using drama methods versus traditional methods. The pupils assessed were all native Italian speakers and attended a private international school in Milan, Italy. Two classes from the same year group received instruction in the differing methods over a three week period. They were examined pre and post instruction and an analysis of the results is provided below. Data were collected and analysed using a two-tailed t-test for two independent samples with equal variance to examine whether either method was more effective. The researcher's hypothesis was that there would be no significant difference between the two methods. The results of the study concluded that teaching language tenses through drama was more effective than using traditional methods. The proposed null hypothesis was rejected.

Background

The school used in this study is a privately owned K-9 international school in Milan, Italy. It follows the UK National Curriculum and has also achieved the status of "Scuola Parita", an equivalency term meaning it is recognised as fulfilling Italian national curriculum requirements. This bilingual, dual curriculum school has grown from its first class of 13 children in 1996 to over 600 students in 2008. Approximately 80% of the pupils are native Italian speakers with both parents being of Italian nationality. The remaining 20% are of mixed ethnicity but are mainly children whose parents/guardians (one or both) are native English speakers. The socioeconomic status of the families attending the school is upper-middle class.

Importance of the study

The researcher was asked by the directors of the school to develop the drama program within the school. The aim of this program was twofold; to raise literacy standards in line with requirements outlined by the UK Department for Education and Skills (2007) in terms of spoken and written English and to promote drama for the inherent educational benefits the study of the subject provides. However, for the purposes of this paper, the researcher wished to provide evidence of the impact of drama on developing language skills.

At present, much of the research on the effectiveness of drama in education focuses on the concept that "drama in education...is seen as a way of teaching and learning, rather than a conventional school subject with definite knowledge to be acquired or skills to be

learned" (O'Hara, 2001, p.318). In fact Pitfield (2006) maintains that in drama, "the important learning objectives are 'expressive' rather than 'instructional' (p.101).

However, Dinapoli (2001), in his support for the "great value of using dramatic techniques in the teaching of English for specific purposes" (p.68), concludes that learning through drama helps to develop the four main language skills: "Foreign language instructors generally agree that the notion of proficiency includes the four language skills as well as structural, semantic, discursal and other communicative aspects" (p.68).

At the beginning of this study there were no school-wide statistics available to measure levels of language proficiency at this school. However, evidence of the problem was provided by teacher observations and formal and informal assessments of students language skills.

Based on the researcher's evaluation of the available literature it seems that much of the research undertaken is qualitative in nature and provides little in the way of quantifiable evidence to support assertions as to the impact of drama on learning. This study was an attempt to examine whether drama could indeed be used to teach 'definite knowledge'. The researcher examined the effect of drama on learning language tenses to try to determine the effectiveness of this approach over traditional methods.

Significance to the researcher and the school

In her study on using drama in language teaching, Gaudart (1990) discusses the need for teachers to see how this technique can be effective in helping them to achieve their goals of teaching the curriculum. The significance to the researcher as the head of performing arts was to examine if indeed drama could help teachers at this school to teach a language area and do so in a more effective manner than their usual teaching methods. The results of this research will help the researcher to decide the direction for the development of the drama program.

When one talks about drama, one thinks of 'the play', the place where the action takes place, the story is told and meaning extracted. Shakespeare speaks of 'actors' as 'players', and implicit in the presentation of the play is the preparation, the playing with the character and the language to better understand the words and thus add meaning and emphasis to these words. To play! What better form of motivation can there be for students to learn than to play and learn?

Various measures have been put in place to develop the quality of spoken and written English throughout the school. However, due to the weight of a dual curriculum it is not always possible to give every child adequate practice at developing their linguistic skills in a controlled class environment. The directors of the school felt that aside from the educational benefits of teaching drama, that promoting drama could help to improve literacy and thereby play a part in the continued effort to raise educational standards in the school. The results of this study will, in all probability, have little effect on how drama is viewed as an important school subject. However, the results may give quiet comfort to the

administration that indeed its support of drama was a wise decision in its search for academic improvement. At the least, this study has provided an opportunity for a class to experience a novel way of approaching the learning of a topic area and for a member of the faculty to apply a different teaching strategy.

Literature review

Many researchers agree that the purpose of drama in education is one of personal and emotional self discovery and developing understanding of human relationships. However, there seems to be a lack of consensus as to what drama is and how the teaching of drama should be applied in education. Holden (1981) asserts, "Drama applies to any activity which asks the students to portray himself in an imaginary situation; or to portray another person in an imaginary situation" (p.1), while Pitman (1997) claims "The purpose of drama in education is to develop student thinking so that a common understanding of oneself and others can be reached" (p.12). McGregor, Tate and Robinson (1977) attempt to define it as an "expressive process which is best understood through the idea of symbolisation and its role in the discovery and communication of meaning" (p.24).

Although there is a lack of consensus as to what drama is, the concept of engagement with a process seems to run through much of the literature. Drama is seen as a process for engaging in learning both emotionally and cognitively. Reeve (2006) claims that "when engagement is characterised by the full range of on-task behaviour, positive emotion, invested cognition, and personal voice, it functions as the engine for learning and development" (p.658). One of the core tenets of Vygotsky's (as cited in Nicholl, 1998) sociocultural theory maintains that learning occurs through interaction. Lee, as cited in Carpenter (2000), claims that:

Task-based activities address the shortcomings inherent in a classroom dynamic born out of the restricted definition that *communication = question & answer*. Task based activities focused on problem solving, consensus building and interdependent group functioning not only promote the active participation of each individual class member but can be constructed in such a way as to provide learners varying degrees of linguistic support (p.11).

Drama provides an ideal opportunity for task-based learning in the study of languages. McMaster (1998), in her article *'Doing' Literature*, supports the effectiveness of drama as a useful tool in learning languages, stating "Drama encompasses all four of the language arts modalities and is an effective medium for building decoding, vocabulary, syntactic, discourse and metacognitive knowledge" (p.78). She refers to several sources to illustrate how it can promote interest in literacy although she does not provide quantitative evidence herself. She presents strong arguments for the benefits of drama in developing language skills. "Children involved in drama activities are constantly experimenting with different ways of talking, which leads to a higher awareness of the variations in language" (p.579).

Research question and hypothesis

Running a dual curriculum school makes huge demands on the children and on the amount of time allotted to teach each subject area. The researcher wished to explore the effects of drama techniques on understanding and use of verb tenses and compare them with the effects of the present traditional methods being employed at the school. The research was designed to examine what happens to children's understanding of verb tense as measured by a unit worksheet when they learn through drama versus traditional methods of instruction. The researcher predicted a null hypothesis in the results of this research project. Although the use of drama techniques in teaching is widespread, there was little quantitative evidence to support one hypothesis over another.

Research methodology

Materials

The language unit used in this study was based on the Year 4 English language standards as outlined in the UK national curriculum. The objectives of the unit were "To revise work on verbs from Year 3 term 1 and to investigate verb tenses (past, present, future)" (DFES, 2007). Resources facilitating the teaching of language tenses through drama included books on teaching drama, drama games for the classroom and exploring topics using drama. The researcher did not implement the research as it was felt this would create bias in the report. The teacher who volunteered to implement the research was given training in teaching drama and given advice as to what techniques may be used to explore the relevant topic area. Drama exercises/games were used to explore narration (past tense), explanation (present tense) and forecast/predictions (future tense). The drama lessons were held in the school theatre while children learning through traditional methods had their lessons in their classroom. The materials used for the comparison group included teacher generated tests and workbooks recommended by the UK Department for Education and Skills.

Sample

The sample was composed of two Year 4 classes with 22 children in each class. They were mainly composed of native Italian speaking students with mixed abilities. Native English speaking children participated in the process but their results were not included in the analysis of the data as it was felt they would unduly distort the outcome. The results of children who were not present for both tests were also omitted from the evaluation. The total number of participants was 38, 19 in each class. The genders were more or less equal with none of the children having major learning disabilities. All of the children came from an upper middle class background and had been together in the same class for at least 2 years. Students selected to work in smaller groups within the intervention class were chosen using random selection by counting off.

Procedure and instrumentation

A two group pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was used to collect and analyse the data for the research. Two year 4 groups were given a blind pre-test of a simple worksheet to examine their understanding of and ability to use the past, present and future tense. The purpose of the research was then explained to both classes in an assembly, confirming that both groups would be taught using the treatment methodology but at different times.

The research was carried out during two 45 minute classes per week over three weeks. The lessons were held on the same day for both groups and, where possible, at the same time. Students in the comparison group were taught language tenses using traditional, teacher-lead methods supported by exercises such as cloze procedure, conversion tables and paired reading in their classroom. The teacher of the intervention group facilitated exploration of the various tenses using a variety of drama exercises including role-play, hot seating, freeze framing and improvisation. At the end of the three week period, both groups were tested using the exact pre-test given pre-intervention to measure the development in understanding and application of the tenses.

Cooperative learning techniques were employed within the sample groups using random selection. The researcher explained the defining elements of cooperative learning to the implementers as outlined by Johnson and Johnson (as cited in Marzano et al, 2001) and planned activities supporting and evaluating each of the defining elements of cooperative learning. When required, children in the intervention class were placed in pairs or groups of three or four, using a variety of grouping strategies including taking names out of a hat, counting off, alphabetically etc. (Marzano et al, 2001). Individuals within the groups were given responsibilities to ensure full involvement in the cooperative learning process. Willis (2007) proposed "that strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (p.15). To this end, activities included warm-up games, fishbowl, brain storming, role-play, improvisation and jig-sawing.

The research was undertaken in collaboration with the class teachers and the English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher. Permission was sought and given by the administration to implement the research on condition of anonymity for the student participants. The research was carried out in the first three weeks of October and the data collected and analysed soon after.

Prior to the return of students from the summer holidays, the researcher prepared an In-Service Education and Training (INSET) program for all class teachers to teach methods of exploring topic areas using drama as a tool. In collaboration with the EAL teacher, an information pack was prepared for the class teachers containing drama activities such as role play and freeze framing which dealt specifically with the use of language tense. A drama class was modelled by the researcher who oversaw the implementation of the research and provided material, moral and advisory support throughout the process. The teacher of the intervention group requested that the researcher not be present during the

class as she felt more comfortable exploring the subject material without another adult present. However, regular meetings were held outside of class time to allow the researcher the opportunity to collect data for later analysis.

The researcher applied a quasi-experimental research design using a pretest-posttest sample of convenience. In the figure below, the O_1 represents the pretest, the O_2 , the posttest while the X represents the intervention.

Intervention Group	O_1	X	O_2
Comparison Group	O_1	--	O_2

Figure 1: Quasi-experimental research design

Class A was the comparison group while class B was the intervention group. Class A remained in their rooms during the lessons while class B lessons were held in the theatre. The lesson plans, pretests and posttests for both the comparison group and the intervention group were selected with the EAL teacher, class teacher and the researcher.

Class A was taught using returning verbs/conversion table, matching pictures to sentences and paired reading. Class B were taught in the theatre using the floor for whole class warm ups, paired activities and group activities. The stage was used only for final performances of prepared scenes. The students were encourage to correct each other within the group while preparing scenes and post-performance whole-class discussions were held to provide feed back on accuracy of language use.

The posttest was the same as the pretest and the results are here analysed and presented in table and graph format to aid in drawing inferences and conclusions. The researcher used surveys (Appendix A), note taking and a simple worksheet marked out of 10 for collection of data.

Analysis of data

The data was gathered and analysed using Microsoft Excel tool to calculate the mean, median, mode and standard deviation (Table 1) and to do a two-tailed t-test for independent samples of equal variance. The data was measured using an interval scale to compare the pretest and posttest results.

Table 1: Comparison of test results

	Intervention Group		Comparison group	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Mean	5.947	8.571	5.526	6.526
Median	6	9	5	7
Mode	6	10	4	4
Standard Dev	.870	1.228	.896	2.899

The standard deviation measures the spread of the data about the mean and is essential in calculating the p value.

Comparing the amount of difference between the means of the intervention group and the comparison group in the pretests and posttests (see Figure 2) seemed to reveal evidence of greater improvement in the intervention group's results. However, it would require a t test to reveal the effects of probability and to test the reliability of the results.

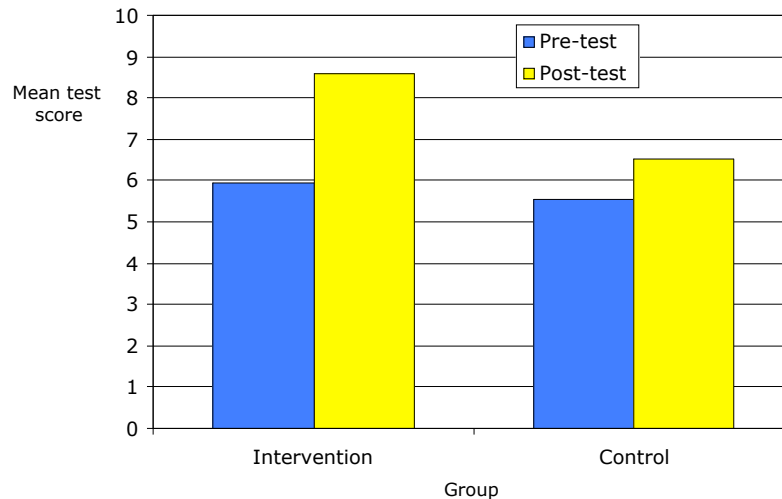


Figure 2: Comparison of the means of the intervention and comparison groups test results

The researcher used a t test to calculate the p value by comparing the amounts that the intervention group and the comparison group changed to see if there was a significant difference. According to Ravid (2005), in order to decide whether to reject or accept the null hypothesis it is essential to calculate the p value: "A p value of .05 is the most commonly used benchmark to decide whether to consider the results statistically significant" (p.36). The results of the t test revealed a p value of .0182 which implies that the results are significant as it is less than the significance value of .05. The null hypothesis is, therefore, rejected. However, this result cannot completely disprove the hypothesis but it does give us an indication of the effects of the intervention in this particular setting. It will take further research in this area to try to draw more definite conclusions from the question of whether learning through drama can affect the understanding and use of verb tenses.

Implications for teaching and research

There are a number of limitations to this study. Due to the unusual school setting it is difficult to imagine how the results of this study could be transferred to other school settings dissimilar to the host school. Class sizes are relatively small, there are no students

with severe learning disabilities, the students come from an enviable socioeconomic background and the classes are well resourced. The study was conducted over a short time span which makes it difficult to assess how effective teaching through drama would be in the long term. The number of students involved in the research does not reach the minimum 30 units recommended for a more reliable test procedure. Due to the format of the workbooks recommended for learning language tenses in Year 4, the exercises used by the comparison group had tenses mixed up within them. The intervention class focused on a different language tense each week. However, the test used in the pretest-posttest is also presented in a mixed tense format so it is difficult to ascertain in what way this difference of emphasis affected the results.

Throughout this study the researcher made observations using note taking, audio recording, simple surveys, personal reflections and informal interviews with teachers and students to allow for a greater understanding of the results when the research was concluded. During the process, several things were noted which the researcher feels ought to be recorded in this study.

Firstly, the excitement generated by drama was infectious. Both the teacher implementing the intervention and the researcher noted an increase in enthusiasm for the language/drama class which resulted in increased attention and sense of purpose. The group activities spurred the class on to become more involved in the learning process as they were asked to criticise each other's use of language tenses within the group. The implementer noted a heightened sense of perception with the children mentally correcting the performers and then recalling the mistakes they had noted during the course of the performances.

Secondly, the implementing teacher noted how using drama revealed the inadequacies of language skills which had somehow remained hidden from more traditional methods of assessment. As mentioned above, the time constraints placed on a dual language curriculum school do not always allow thorough investigation of all aspects of language skills. The implementer felt that drama provided an excellent platform for assessing students' general language skills and for teaching language tenses. Research by Cunningham and Hall (2002) supports this view that students learn high frequency words with a variety of experiences and activities.

Thirdly, a supplementary Likert test was administered to assess the students' perception of how they had improved over the course of the research (Appendix A). The results revealed students' perceptions of how they felt about their level of improvement (see figure 3). Students were given four statements regarding their perceptions of how they felt they had improved and rated these statements on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

This test, while not providing statistically reliable evidence of improvement, at least points to a sense of achievement felt by the intervention group. What was also revealing was the percentage of students from the comparison group who actually disagreed with the

statements that they had improved in reading, writing, speaking and use of language tenses.

And finally, the intervention group teacher noted that the students corrected themselves and each other in other classes and continued to do so up to the writing of this study.

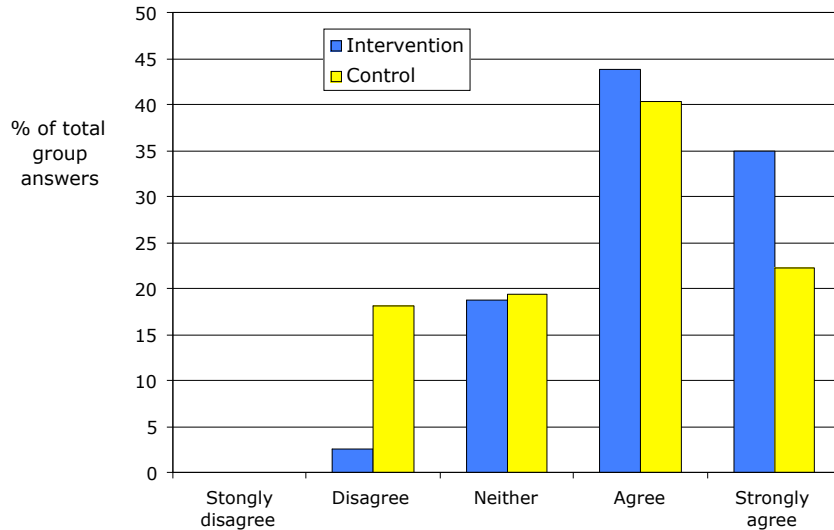


Figure 3: Percentage of total group responses to the Likert scale survey

Conclusions

Based on the data analysed in this study, the researcher can conclude that learning language tenses through drama is more effective than through traditional methods in this school setting. However, it would be inappropriate to presume the results are transferable due to the limitations of this study. The results produced relate to primary school teaching and therefore drawing conclusion as to its effectiveness at other levels of education would be inadvisable. The researcher can, however, report that learning through drama increased attention levels in the intervention class and created a more enthusiastic learning environment which resulted in increased knowledge retention. The researcher observed that learning through drama fulfilled many of the criteria for active learning through observing, doing and dialogue with self and others and as such can be seen to contribute to an already established learning technique.

Although the researcher does not advocate measuring the importance of a subject solely on quantifiable evidence, a rejection of the null hypothesis in favour of drama helps to strengthen the argument for its use as a teaching tool to teach 'definite knowledge'. This study may contribute to a growing knowledge base supporting the use of drama as a teaching tool. However, there is a large section of the educational community which

disagrees with measuring drama against measurable outcomes. The researcher hopes that the qualitative elements of this study may also lend support to their argument as the researcher supports the use of drama for its inherent educational value as well as its use as an instructional instrument.

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Appendix A – Likert scale survey

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

You have all completed a three week unit on language tenses. Please respond to the following statements about how you **now** feel about using language tenses.

Please tick the box which best describes your feelings on how much you have improved.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My written English has improved					
My spoken English has improved					
My reading ability has improved					
My ability to change verb tenses has improved					

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