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Students’ perceptions of and attitudes to drama in English language education
– An investigation among pupils in a vocational upper secondary school

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore vocational upper secondary students’ perceptions of and attitudes to using drama activities as a part of English language education. Data collection for this project was performed during a teaching practice period at a vocational school in the south of Sweden with the exception of interviews that took place afterwards.

The participating students perceived the use of drama activities as something positive. Significant factors in the analysis were mainly the effects of role play, the importance of beneficial group dynamics and the influence of the school setting. A key point that emerges from this dissertation is the benefit of varying lessons and working towards reducing students’ anxiety to speak.

Keywords and concepts:
Drama activities, English, vocational school, alternative teaching methods, communication, anxiety
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Introduction

In the following section I will give a background to this investigation, define key concepts and state the purpose of the dissertation.

Background

In the last two decades there has been significant change in the Swedish educational system, especially in the upper secondary level. Prior to this period, there was a clear boundary between vocational types of education and theoretical types of education. The students who attended the vocational programs were taught only core theoretical knowledge in addition to the vocational subjects. They were supposed to be taking a job after leaving school where the knowledge skills provided by their education were sufficient. This group of students was not expected to go further in the educational system. Students attending theoretical education were, on the other hand, expected to continue to higher education as well as make use of the purely theoretical subjects in their future jobs. This changed with the political decision to make every upper secondary education last for at least three years and contain at least a common, basic set of theoretical subjects, English being one of those subjects.

How does this affect the vocational education programs given today and what are the challenges for teachers in these programs? Teachers of theoretical subjects in vocational education programs face a new type of student compared to those teaching in theoretical programs. Many students in vocational education programs perceive the theoretical subjects as being a distraction from their more practical subjects. Lack of motivation is of course not something new and not merely associated with students in vocational schools, but the degree is commonly much higher than in a group of theoretical students. One consequence is that teachers who work under such circumstances must strive to find strategies that are suited for this kind of environment. Traditional teaching can for example be mixed with alternative approaches depending on the situation at hand to hopefully increase the chance that the goals
of the curriculum are achieved. Once again, mixing different forms of teaching to get better learning results is of course nothing solely practiced by teachers at vocational schools, it just seems that it is especially appropriate when teaching the kind of students in that type of school.

As my practical training place was a vocational school, I experienced the situation described above first hand and it caught my interest. In addition, my secondary subject is educational drama, which can be made use of in teaching in a lot of different subjects. Hence, I found that I wanted to try and apply my drama experience to the students I taught during my practical training and see how the pupils responded to that and to what extent they perceived it could be of use in their language learning.

**Drama in language education**

The background literature that I will be referring to make claims about the usefulness of role play and other drama activities in the classroom. I like to refer to drama activities as a teaching and learning tool that provides learners with the opportunity to use spoken English in a comfortable way. As I was acting as a teacher at my practical training school, I decided to use drama activities as a major part of my classes. Because of this, I also needed guidance on pedagogical ways to teach the students the English language through different kinds of drama exercises. For that, I used literature from my secondary subject, educational drama. Two books that were particularly useful were *Rollspel i teori och praktik* (Nilsson & Waldemarsson, 1996) and *The practice of English language teaching* by Harmer (2002).

The usefulness of creative educational exercises has been discussed by Ulas (2008) who sets the scope of educational drama to the following points:

- A student learns meaningful content better than other content.
- Learning occurs as a result of a student’s interaction with his environment.
- The more sensory organs a student uses while learning, the greater the retention of the lessons.
- A student learns best by doing and experiencing.
- Effective participation is important in learning emotional conduct.
• Learning becomes easier and more permanent in educational environments where there is more than one stimulus.

His study was conducted on primary school children but the above principles are broad and applicable to the context of this study as well. Further, Ulas presents facts from a number of studies that has been performed by other researchers on the subject of using drama activities in language learning which I will summarize below. It should be noted that there are a number of ways to vary the exact method depending on the context, for example learner level and group size. To begin with, dramatic and role play activities are effective means to make students actively participate in their education as well as creating a supportive and enjoyable teaching environment. It has been proven to help language learning by making the learning experience more enjoyable, setting realistic targets for the students and linking the learning to the students’ own experience. Drama activities can also create a need to learn by introducing situations to require urgent solutions, forcing the students to be creative or by making them more responsible for their own learning. In addition, a good way to make knowledge permanent is to convert the learning into an experience, making use of multiple sense organs. Creative/educational drama does this very well. Finally, drama exercises have a positive effect on oral abilities of learners. Here there are multiple aspects that benefit from creative/educational drama: the obvious such as pronunciation and fluency but also social aspects such as co-operative learning, confidence-building and intercultural awareness are improved by introducing drama activities in language teaching. Ulas’ own investigation in combination with his summary of other scientific studies on the subject made me interested in how students at my teaching practice school would experience drama as part of their education.

I was also inspired by Snick och snack (Eskild & Hambro, 2005) that states “If the students are allowed to play with the language in unconventional story telling activities they feel braver and it is not perceived as something scary to speak for example English. This is a good way to increase the students’ vocabulary.” (my translation). This view is also considered by Harmer: “Many students derive great benefit from simulation and role-play. Students ‘simulate’ a real-life encounter […] as if they were doing so in the real world, […], or taking on the role of a character different from themselves or with thoughts and feelings they do not necessarily share. Simulation and role-play can be used to encourage general oral fluency or to train students for specific situations especially if they are studying ESP (English for
Specific Purposes).” Thus, there were dual motives for me to use drama as part of my teaching method: to make the students feel comfortable when learning common English and, in addition, to make them feel that at least some of the lessons learned in English class were directly related to their future profession. My aim was on the one hand to provide the pupils with relevant topics which could become useful for their specific vocation through drama activities and at the same time open for a more communicative atmosphere in the classroom with perspectives in educational drama.

During my previous teaching practice at the same private vocational school, I spent many hours observing, teaching, assessing and interacting with the pupils. One of my main concerns was the reluctance to activities related to speaking English. A common outburst from some pupils was for example “Why should we learn English if we live in Sweden and are going to work with xxxx?” My response was that they might need the language in the near future when working with their occupation. The four groups I taught took vocational studies that were supposed to lead to jobs within different sectors of the service business. Thus, this answer seemed to be more satisfactory to them than any other answer that I had given them before. With that in mind I tried to develop some of the drama activities, such as dialogue writing and role-playing, so that it would be closer connected to their vocational subject.

**Purpose and research questions**

My purpose with this investigation was to increase my understanding of how pupils attending a vocational school experienced drama as a part of English lessons. By making use of drama activities, I would vary the lessons and then collect the students’ feedback in the form of written reflections which became tasks in themselves. After my teaching practice period, I would return to the school and interview a selected number of students to acquire a deeper insight of their perceptions to complement the feedback from the reflections. These two feedback mechanisms would then provide the basis for answering the following research questions:

To what extent do the students in this vocational school perceive the drama pedagogy as a useful method to be used in the English language education?
What are the attitudes to using drama in English language education of upper secondary level students in a vocational school?

Definitions

In *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* the word drama has three definitions:

1. A drama is a serious play for the theatre, television or radio.
2. You use drama to refer to plays in general or to work that is connected with plays and the theatre, such as acting or producing.
3. You can refer to a real situation which is exciting or distressing as drama.

Of course, these are generic definitions of the word from a dictionary and these kinds of statements are by their very nature short and narrow. During my studies over the years I have been in contact with drama in many different ways which leads me to believe that a wider definition of the word is more appropriate to describe what this investigation is about. Perhaps the oldest and most basic definition of the word is the most suitable here. The word *drama* can be derived from an old Greek word meaning *to act or to do* (Erberth & Rasmusson, 1996: 7). To make the definition of drama even more clear it can be divided into three areas (Hägglund & Fredin, 2001: 9).
The first category is *Theatre* where the word drama is merely another word for a play. *Everyday life* can refer to a violent event or have to do with a person’s exaggerated feelings in which it is an adjective, dramatic. The third type and the one most fitting to describe how drama is used in this text is *Pedagogy*. Under this category, the word drama is connected to activities within schools and as a method in many subjects. The latter definition better matches the intention of this investigation. Thus, the basic thought was not primarily to let the students assume the role of actors in a play bound to be shown as a performance. Instead, the playful process of finding characters and bringing the students to engage in the teaching material was the goal. In conjunction with this line of thought, Riksförbundet Auktoriserade Dramapedagoger (RAD) describes the word drama as being “The experiencing pedagogy which takes the whole person in a teaching process.” Further they say that “Drama derives from every group’s and its participant’s assumptions, interests and social reality” (My translation).

Since I am investigating perceptions and attitudes, I also need to define these concepts. Perception in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* is defined as “1 (U) ability to see, hear or understand. 2 (U) quality of understanding; insight.” A more sophisticated explanation of perception is stated as follows: “Making “sense” of what our senses tell us-is the active process of organizing this stimulus input and giving it meaning” (Passer & Smiths, 2007)
Attitude is described as “way of thinking or behaving”. *Psychology, The Science of Mind and Behaviour* (Passer & Smiths, 2007) gives a more elaborate explanation: “An attitude is a positive or negative evaluative reaction toward a stimulus, such as a person, action, object, or concept.”
Method

During my entire education I spent the practitioner periods at the same school in the south of Sweden. It is a small upper secondary vocational school with educational programs for becoming electricians, horse keepers, plumbers, mechanics or nail technicians. The groups are small compared to other types of programs, up to fifteen people per group. Due to the fact that many of the professions that the programs are aimed at are heavily dominated by one of the sexes, the same distribution among the sexes can be seen at my school. Another observation that I made while I was teaching different classes during a period of a few years was that the motivation of the students in theoretical subjects such as English tended to be low.

The material for this investigation was primarily collected during my last sojourn at the school although I of course used my experience from previous stays when deciding on a strategy. I found it appropriate to divide the collection of data into two different parts. The first would be carried out during class with continuous student feedback. The second one would be a follow up where I returned to the school to evaluate the reactions to the first part. My initial plan for the first part was to do an action research, using a clear focus of what I wanted to achieve combined with close observation of results to analyze the findings during lessons. However, the constraint of time made it hard for me to get this strategy done in time since it required a lot of preparations while I at the same time had to develop material for several lessons a week. Because of this, I realized that I would not be able to perform true action research. Hence, I decided to change my focus to qualitative interviews instead as it better suited the situation with a mix between teaching at the school and writing this dissertation.

Drama exercises

I used drama exercises that I found especially suited to the group at hand. I had four groups with different vocation studies. These groups were asked to write a short evaluation and reflection after each session. This is what Hatch (2002) refers to as “supplementary data
source”. The reason for choosing this research method is the straightforwardness and the pupils’ immediate response to the activities. Furthermore, the pupils have the time to think through what to write which would provide me with a deeper understanding of their perceptions. On the subject of written reflections Hatch states that “The act of writing things down encourages individuals to process and reflect on experiences in different ways than thinking about them or discussing them with others.” Further on, Hatch comments that “Qualitative researchers are especially interested in how individuals understand the social circumstances in which they operate, and asking them to make written reflections on their experiences can be a powerful way to get another take on participant perspectives” (Hatch, 2002: 140) Although I’m aware that journal writing has its drawbacks like “pupils’ trying to meet the expectations of the researcher” (Hatch, 2002: 142), I decided to proceed with it on the premise that a genuine relationship was established between us. I clearly stated that their opinion mattered whether it was positive or negative and that I was interested in their truthfulness.

In my teaching plan I incorporated role-plays to bring life to texts. I planned short projects in which the participants would write scripts in the form of dialogues that would result in acting. When using drama activities, my main focus was to make it relevant and purposeful for them by using their future vocation as a framework. After each session I wrote a reflective journal and asked them to write down reflections of their feelings about the activities. Based on these short writings, I selected interviewees that I thought would provide me with the variety of opinions needed for this type of investigation. To accomplish this, I selected both male and female participants with an even distribution of negative and positive opinions. I will also summarize the reflections for a wider insight of the perceptions of all participants in both groups.

Examples of lesson plans

Here are a few examples of lesson plans that I used during my teaching practice.

Role-play the Interview

- Sit in pairs; one is the journalist and the other a celebrity of your own choice.
• The journalist prepares questions to ask the celebrity, come up with at least 10 questions.
• The celebrity answers
• The journalist gives a résumé of what the celebrity has said in front of a live studio audience.
• The celebrity gets the chance to oppose on the journalist if she/he thinks the journalist has given the wrong picture.

Two Truths and a Lie
• Each of you must give us three statements about yourself. One is a lie. The rest of the class will guess which one is the lie. Be as convincing as possible!

Dialogues
• Association exercises in connection to your future professions. Afterwards, write about your future firm (warm up exercise).
• Sit in pairs.
• Write directions on what is to be said, at least ten sentences each. The environment is in your future occupation (ex. At the car mechanics or the locksmiths, depending on the group).
• Give the directions to your neighbour couples and let them act out your script.

Dramatizing a novel
• Groups of two to three.
• Choose a passage that you find is important in Berlie Doherty’s *Dear Nobody* and which provides us with the gist of a conflict.
• Write a script and dramatize the story for the rest of the class.

Collection of data

During the development of this investigation, the following methods were used to collect the data to analyze.
Student reflections

Whenever I used drama, I let the student write reflections about their experience of these activities as a writing assignment. The purpose of this was twofold: to let the students practice writing and at the same time collect data for this dissertation. The assignments were comprised of a few simple questions/tasks every time. I used the following questions:

- How did you feel about these activities?
- What was easy to understand? What was hard?
- Did you find the exercise useful? If so, in what way? If not, why?

I wanted the students to focus on the writing, not thinking too hard on complicated questions. When instructing the pupils, I emphasized that it was a reflective exercise and that they should strive for volume rather than getting the English perfect. My previous experience at this school told me that it was not uncommon that students did not come up with more than one or two lines when asked to perform a writing task. Hence, I found it appropriate to encourage them to try and write more. I also found it important to get their spontaneous reactions and therefore decided to let them write the reflections during the same lessons as the drama activities were introduced.

When analyzing the student reflections I found it sufficient to divide the comments in two groups: negative and positive. The broad nature of the questions did not allow for deep analysis. Instead I used the material as a complement to the interviews and the two combined meant I could get an image composed of the results on several levels.

Student interviews

After my teaching practice there had ended, I went back to the school and interviewed six pupils individually. The selection of students was made from two different classes. The reason these groups were selected out of the four classes I taught during my teaching practice was related to the amount of drama I used when teaching them compared to the other groups. A high percentage of drama activities relative to my total teaching time increased the likelihood of getting meaningful answers in the interviews. I selected three girls and three boys in each group. Except from the obligatory participation during my classes, the individuals where picked randomly. Since the classes in this school followed the same gender pattern as the occupations that the programs led to, each of the classes represented the view of a relatively
homogenous group of male and female students. This made it possible to analyze gender as one parameter.

Further, my interview subject selection strategy – picking students to interview based on their memberships of classes in my teaching practice school - was that of convenience samples because the individuals were easy to access (Hatch, 2002: 98). Convenience samples can be regarded as undesirable since such a sample strategy implies that the researcher has not made the effort to collect samples based on other, more relevant scientific parameters. However, with respect to the limited time and resources available to me during this assignment I found it appropriate to carry out some of my investigation during the teaching practice. I even found that the combination of these two elements might prove to be beneficial, I would be inspired to create interesting lessons, get to use my secondary subject while teaching English and at the same time get good material for the investigation as part of the essay. The scope of the investigation was such that my teaching practice school was a typical example of the type of setting that I was looking to examine students in. In addition, the interviewees were who I tried my method on and it was their perceptions that were of the greatest interest to me.

The interviews were conducted one day in November, starting with the female students. Before the interviews took place I made sure that an empty and available room was set for us. I informed the classes’ English teacher about the day I wished to visit the school, which students I would like to involve and also asked for these students’ home numbers so the parents could be contacted for their approval. The language of the interview was Swedish since I valued the higher degree of expressiveness. In addition, the interviewees articulated a wish to speak in Swedish. When quoting the students in the results section, I translated their responses into English.

At the time of the interviews, I started by letting the interviewees know about the purpose of the interview and by informing them that their participation was completely voluntary; they could leave the interview at any time if they wanted to. I also informed them why they were chosen as interviewees. The interview format I used was semi structured because although I had certain guiding questions I was still open to the pupils directing me into other areas in connection to the research. I recorded the interviews using a tape recorder and also took notes. Each of the six interviews took forty to sixty minutes to perform.
Data collection summary

The basis for the data collection was lessons I performed at my teaching practice school. My position as a teacher at this school provided me with an opportunity to investigate my research questions. The groups that I taught in were all comprised of upper secondary vocational students which aligned well with the focus group of this dissertation. As data collection methods, I used a combination of written student reflections and student interviews. I found this data collection strategy appropriate since my questions revolved around the perceptions of and attitudes to drama used in English language education. The two methods both brought different perspectives on the attitudes of students.

Student reflections allowed the students to think through my questions before answering compared to an interview setting. The nature of the questions the students received before writing the reflections were open and in line with aim of using reflections: to get a broad view of the entire group to contrast and combine with the deeper view obtained from a few students in qualitative interviews.

Individual student interviews brought the possibility to investigate the perceptions of a few, selected students in more depth. I am aware that focus group interviews could be an alternative approach. However, my experience of the individuals that were to participate in the interviews, led me to believe that some, more dominant, participants might take up a lot of space, rendering the more quiet participants without the possibility to voice their perceptions fully. Because of this, I chose the individual interview format as it would be the most appropriate in relation to the purpose of the investigation.
Results and Discussion

This section summarises the reflective notes and the results of the interviews. The six interviewees were all between the age of fifteen and seventeen. In the discussion below they have all been given fictitious names for the sake of anonymity.

Student reflections

The reflections were written during a few different lessons. I have chosen to divide the results into two main parts: negative and positive comments. The reflections were not as deep as the interviews but on the other hand the feedback they supplied came from approximately fifty pupils (divided into four groups). They also provided each student with enough time to reflect on one or two questions which make them an interesting complement to the interviews when compiling the result.

Negative comments

A boy named Richard wrote “I don’t like English, so I don’t like this either. However, I did think that the dialogue was fun because we got to know each other better and we could open up quicker. For those who are tired of reading all the time I think this was a good pause from it”. He went on stating that he gets easily bored on occasions, has a lack of concentration and how drama made him “wake up”. In his opinion a good self confidence is required for taking part in drama, but he concluded that it was not so bad because the group was small.

Even though the students expressed different negative opinions, they often found one or more positive angles. For example, a girl wrote about how she thought it was difficult to have to speak in English all the time, and added that if somebody does not understand, she/he should have the right to have the instructions explained in Swedish, a thought that she shared with a couple of her peers. She went on stating that she liked the collaborative parts in drama.

There were also some students who totally rejected drama as a method. Joakim thought it was boring because he had done things like this before and stated that “I didn’t like it then, I don’t like it now.”
Another negative aspect was stated by a boy who drew a parallel between drama and acting. According to him, drama is an independent subject in itself which should not be mixed in English language learning. However, he also mentioned that he considered the writing part fun and that creative writing should be given a larger space in English teaching. A variation of this opinion was voiced by another boy who claimed that he found it difficult to write plays, expressed a dislike for plays altogether and therefore found most of the drama activities boring. A girl in the same class explained why she thought it was boring and how she “hated” talking in front of people. She went on expressing that the tasks were simple and that it was the “speaking out loud” that was the hard part.

Positive comments

There were also several positive comments. A few different themes could be distinguished. Irfan wrote that he enjoyed the interview because he could come up with imaginary stories and provide the others with a bit of fun. Another boy liked that he was allowed to express his own values in connection to the association exercises, concretizing them and letting everybody see his words on the board. A third boy wrote that he was more motivated to write good dialogues because they were to be read in front of everyone. He also mentioned that he liked to get the opportunity to co-operate. The students mentioned the importance of the group in several contexts. The effects of positive peer pressure were revealed in several comments.

Sonja perceived drama as a tool to practice pronunciation. Lukas mentioned that inventiveness was the best part of the drama experience and that he enjoyed making use of situations experienced outside of school. A girl exclaimed that she wanted more drama as part of other subjects in the future. Anna wrote that learning was made “funnier” if it was not reduced to sitting down and studying from a book. A combination of drama and games was what she sought. In total, the logs revealed an impressive number of positive - and a few negative – comments on using drama activities in English teaching.
Student interviews

The results will be grouped into different typologies where aspects of all the interviews are categorized into four aspects to enable analysis. I used the following typologies:

- Interest/Engagement
- Feelings
- Usefulness
- Attitudes/Beliefs

I did not choose the typologies beforehand but rather extracted them when going through the results trying to find common patterns. The typologies also felt natural since they reflect the research questions and purpose of the dissertation.

Below is a brief portrait of the participants. This is to bring forth the variety of each individual both as students and persons outside of school.

- Felicia is devoted to horses and likes spending time with her friends. She is a low-level achiever in English with strong self-confidence and verbally active.
- Sofie is also committed to attending her horse in her leisure time and watch movies with her boyfriend. She belongs to the average level achieving pupils with extrinsic motivation for carrying out tasks.
- Ella likes to read magazines, is fashion conscious and would like to travel a lot in the future. In class she is a quiet girl who is just above the average level pupil and speaks English fluently.
- Elias is also a very quiet boy but follows and does instructions efficiently and properly. I perceive him as a theoretically and analytically skilled person. He enjoys video games and movies.
- Julian practices martial arts in his spare time. He has the highest grades in his class which is just above average. According to himself, he speaks only when it is “necessary”.
- Robin is a low-level achiever with little motivation to studying English. He loves rap music, writes his own lyrics (in English) and produces melodies with the help of his computer. He loves spending time with his family.
Interest/Engagement

The investigation of the students’ interest and engagement is about the interviewees’ view of how the use of drama activities was experienced in relation to the aforementioned concepts. Starting out, Felicia presented her previous experiences of drama activities in English teaching.

We didn’t have drama activities in school at the lower levels. It was, as I remember it, monotonous. What I mean is that we always had glossaries to go with a chapter to read from a textbook. I went to a support group….we should have used more drama there I think. I was bored because I wasn’t engaged. Despite that, the grade pass was given to me.

The view that varying the lessons was a key benefit of using drama in English teaching was shared by the entire group. The need for variation was further expressed by the fact that a larger part of the group wanted drama activities as an alternative to traditional teaching, not replacing it. For example, on the question “to what extent would you like to have drama activities as part of English class one student answered: “Every other week, otherwise it can become too much. I like to write and read a lot, but I’m open for anything that can be developing to me, as long as you learn, right?” A negative aspect of using drama activities was also expressed: “If we have it too often, doing anything too often can become tedious. A whole ninety minute lesson with these activities would be too much.”

Sofie emphasized that if you use drama activities it is necessary to explain that they are part of the basis for assessment.

We had some of these exercises before, but the teacher never highlighted the usefulness of drama. I think it should be made more important. I mean we know that writing a report is something we are being assessed by, so if we were to be assessed on drama I would perform it better. I need some kind of reward when doing something. But I think that since these exercises were somewhat unusual and fun to do, I felt that I didn’t need to be rewarded.

On the question of perceived positive effects of using drama activities the most common points were increased creativity and more fluent language. Julian, 16, expressed it like this:
It is nice to have the opportunity to improvise. That’s something I would like to do more often. We get to use the language more this way, otherwise it’s easy to hide and you don’t need to speak; now we had to speak!

Less common but still mentioned were that acting out dialogues and role playing enables students to get to know the rest of the class better and that it raises an awareness of others ability to speak. Elias stated: “It was a good way to see were I stood language wise in comparison to the others.

Feelings

My initial question about their feelings about the drama activities received positive answers. When I asked them to explain themselves, Julian, responded that it was a fun way to practice being in front of other people. This view was shared by approximately half the group while the other half stated that they came to enjoy the activities but that it took some time before they felt that way:

We had many of these exercises in secondary school and that is why I think its fun. But I became better the more I did it. The language became smoother. More of the language became involved. It should be regarded as oral competence when we are being assessed. It took a couple of times for me to be able to enjoy it; I didn’t care much for this method in the beginning.

The students, especially those that expressed uncertainty about performing in front of the class, had suggestions about how to make drama feel safer for them. This can be exemplified by Elias:

When we had the role-play I felt that my speech was more relaxed and fluent. However, the words could at times be difficult to find. It’s easier to sit down on the usual place when performing the dialogues that we wrote, it felt safer.

Another factor that was touched on by several of the interviewees was that the way the students were allowed to prepare for the task influenced their feelings for it. This is explained by Robin as follows:
I think I managed better when we were asked to write down what we were going to say in order to say things right, it’s helpful to scribble down what you’re going to say before you say it out loud.

**Usefulness**

In what way could drama activities in English class be beneficial in the students’ eyes? This aspect seemed to have two clear themes: increasing language fluency and training students to speak in front of others. These concepts were summarized by Ella when commenting on the benefits of drama: “To have the courage to talk more…stand in the centre…speak more fluently and that we dare have a dialogue in English.” Further thoughts on the ability of drama to enhance the oral skills of English students were expressed like this:

Using drama as a method helps me getting started; because I’m a little shy…I think I would dare to talk more with native speakers outside school. I think it can prevent insecurity and build confidence in our speech because we get to use more everyday language.

Generally these points were made by the majority of the interviewees. It was also made clear that it was important from the interviewees’ perspective that if somebody did not feel confident enough to stand in front of the class they should not be forced to do so. A few students expressed that they thought it was tiresome if somebody was complaining about having to perform in front of the class: Elias made the comment: “They should get used to it just like I did. It would be a pity if we would be divided into different groups because of this.”

A visible concern of a few interviewees seemed to be uncertainty about to what extent more drama activities would affect the traditional teaching. Felicia expressed that she would like to have drama activities in all classes on the condition that the grammar should somehow be integrated into the activities.

Otherwise half of the lessons should be dedicated to grammar and half for the drama. I don’t know if we have the time to practice on grammar if we only have drama activities.

The main concern seemed to be a general feeling that grammar is not in focus when performing drama activities. On the other hand, a few comments were also made about
potential positive effects of drama on grammar skills, for example Julian expressed it as follows: “Drama is a good way of practicing oral communication; it enables you to hear if the language sounds wrong. I like to watch and hear others in this way.”

Several interviewees articulated that they experienced an increased interest in individual words when using them in a drama context as can be seen in the following quote by Ella:

> When we wrote our dialogues for the play, we were more interested to look up new words in the dictionary. I think the activities are useful because I think I’ll remember the words better. You gain a better understanding of whatever it is you try to learn about. How to say the sentences becomes clearer.

Another perspective on this that was put forth was that since the students were allowed to use their whole body it might be that they remember the sentences and words used in the different scenarios better. Finally, Robin summed up the usefulness of drama activities by saying that in order to be able to relax more and thus communicate easier, it is important having fun.

**Attitudes/Beliefs**

When searching for the attitudes and beliefs of the interviewees there was some overlap with the other three typologies, perhaps because attitudes are the underlying framework throughout which every other opinion is filtered. For example, the discussion of drama and grammar sharing the time of English classes showed up again but with a slightly different variation. A common attitude among the students concerned the image of drama as representing something fun versus the dislike many pupils feel against grammar. Julian made a comment on this:

> Half of all the English classes should be devoted to drama exercises. I love games, dialogues and competitions. Grammar is too dull. Writing small stories is fun. Otherwise there is too little variation.

When searching deeper into these opinions I found that a reason for this was the perception of grammar as representing rigid structures while drama represented flexibility. Elias thoughts on this were stated in this way: “Everybody should get a chance to show his or her best side.
With drama it’s not too structured; I mean there’s not exactly a right or wrong answer.” To discuss this in a nuanced manner, it should be said that another view on this matter was verbalised by Robin who said: “I don’t think it’s the drama per se that’s fun…it’s rather the variety of the lessons that makes me more interested.” Finally, as described in the typology earlier, a few students were also concerned about getting too little focus on the grammar side if drama was given a larger portion of the English lessons.

I expected more aversion against acting or pretending, especially since I was dealing with teenagers. In reality I did not get many negative attitudes along these lines. Instead, most interviewees seemed to perceive drama activities not as something embarrassing but rather as a shield against embarrassment: Felicia’s beliefs are expressed as follows:

I think that I’m braver when I’m pretending to be somebody else. You don’t want to tell someone about yourself, it’s too private, and I’m afraid to make a fool out of myself. You get to hide behind another person (laughter). When you’re presenting an assignment for instance, you run the risk of speaking less fluently as opposed to doing it through a role-play or something.

There were a few opinions that leaned towards the negative direction but they often concluded in a positive tone. For example, Robin’s attitude on this was that he found it a bit difficult to stand in front of everyone but that he eventually thought it was a good way to practice speaking in front of a crowd, especially if he did not have to account for himself but rather pretending to be somebody else.” However, Sofie stated that she did not think drama activities made a difference in this aspect:

I don’t think that it is easier to speak as somebody else because it depends on how much you know about your topic anyway. I have no problem speaking as myself or about myself.
Analysis

Before starting the analysis of the result I want to recapitulate the definition of the word *drama* that I am using and its connection to the purpose of this dissertation. The aim of my teaching scheme was not primarily to build up the students self esteem as this would take a significantly extended amount of time to achieve and see noteworthy results from. I also want to make clear that using drama with a therapeutic purpose was not the intention. There are various elaborated exercises which can be used when the goals are to get to know each other better, build up trust, confidence and raise the self awareness. The intention of my teaching method was to use extracts found under a drama category which entails providing a more creative tone to reading and writing. Thus, this dissertation is an attempt to see how drama activities intertwined in English teaching, in classes where the students have little or no experience of drama, is perceived as a method connected to language education.

Using drama as a part of teaching seems to be most commonly used in the lower level grades as a method to build a safer environment and to strengthen the self confidence for pupils. At the higher levels it is to the most part used exclusively for the students that show an interest for it and attend programs in which drama is studied as a separate subject. For some reason, drama as a teaching method is often neglected at the higher levels. Only a few students in my practice could say that they on occasion got to use drama in their regular classes. Drama exists as an independent subject within the aesthetic programmes and it is also available as a subsidiary subject in other programmes with certificated drama pedagogues. However, it is perhaps incorrect to make the conclusion that drama is not used at all by the majority of teachers at the higher levels as the scope and definition of drama may differ depending on who you talk to. Some have indeed used it but called it by different names such as “communicative exercises”, “games” or “creative learning” in which music, evaluation exercises and poetry is included. On the other hand, it is the practices that are important and not the wording; I have chosen to use a wide definition of drama. I find it important to mention that using drama activities in the way used in this dissertation does not require specialized drama teachers. What I will analyze in this section is therefore mainly the use of drama activities in language learning no matter what they are called.
Role play

As can be seen in the result section the students in my teaching practice school made several remarks that can be linked to acting as a character in different ways. A view that seemed widely spread among the students was that they felt safer when they were acting as someone other than themselves. When using a fictitious character the feeling of being on display as a person lessened, enabling the students to express themselves better. What might be the reason for this feeling? From the students’ perspective there are multiple risks performing in front of the class which can cause anxiety. One of these is doing something that might feel embarrassing and at the same time put oneself on display. By introducing role play and thereby reducing the number of potential risks the student has a better chance of doing herself justice.

Ladousse (1987) describes the term role play as: “When students assume a” role” in which they play a part either their own or somebody else’s in a specific situation. “Play” means that the role is taken on in a safe environment in which students are as inventive and playful as possible.” The safe environment part seems especially important in a classroom full of teenagers. At this age students tend to be very self aware and are easily embarrassed in front of their peers. Once you get the students feeling comfortable with role play it may - on the contrary - lead to increased openness. One of the reasons for using role play according to Ladousse is “that it helps many shy students by providing them with a mask. Some more reticent members of a group may have a great deal of difficulty participating in conversations about themselves, and in other activities based on their direct experience. These students are liberated by role play as they no longer feel that their own personality is implicated. (Ladousse, 1987: 7)” It seems paradoxical that the role play may both seem threatening and at the same time fosters a spirit of openness. Harmer promotes the role play and simulation in language learning simply because he believes having fun is a motivational factor. Further he states “They allow hesitant students to be more forthright in their opinions and behaviour than they might be when speaking for themselves, since they do not have to take the same responsibility for what they are saying. Also, by broadening the world of the classroom to include the world outside, they allow students to use a much wider range of language than some more task-centred activities may do.” (Harmer, 2001)
I would like to exemplify the use of role play by describing an event that took place during one of my lessons. A boy, who we will call Nessim, was one of the most disruptive students in his group and refused to carry out any instruction given by me in a proper way. He loudly expressed his reluctance in front of the others and did not want to speak in English. His friends told me later that this behaviour was a common pattern for him. On one occasion I instructed the pupils to write dialogues which they should then perform as role play. I gave them a setting for the dialogue: their future work place. The dialogue should revolve around a meeting between a customer and an employee. Nessim took an interest in this role play and forgot about his negative attitude towards speaking for a while. He actually performed the exercise better than anyone else in the group, using a different voice, character and a language that was far more fluent than I had thought him capable of. Obviously, this particular exercise suited Nessim well.

**Group dynamics**

In the interviews there were many comments about talking in front of the group apart from those in the role play section. When analyzing the material I concluded that addressing the group was deemed mostly positive. The previously mentioned risk of anxiety obviously means different things to different people. Those with a positive perspective claimed that acting in front of the group presented them with positive peer pressure. To them, the paramount feeling was not that of risk. Instead, it was primarily a driving force to make a good performance in front of their peers. You could speculate that this might be a more imminent motivation than the more long term, abstract demands from the grown up world such as “learning English well to get a good job in the future”. At the same time, most interviewees agreed that you should not be forced to stand up and perform if you do not want to. As has been mentioned before, drama activities are not analogous with acting so it is still possible to do drama activities in a group were many pupils are negative to the theatrical aspect of drama. When analyzing this inhibition we must separate two disparate fears that the students might have: fear of performing and fear of speaking. To the students these inhibitions might seem one and the same. Nevertheless, in my teaching I experienced that the basic anxiety to speak in English was greater, and thus more important to focus on as a teacher, than the apprehension to present something in front of the group.
The quality of the group dynamics is very important for the result of drama activities. Conflicts outside the classroom might affect the climate in the drama exercises, especially since drama in itself fosters communication (Erberth & Rasmusson, 1996: 54). Note that as discussed above, most students in this school were reluctant to speak at all in English class from the beginning. In the reflective logs, complaints were also articulated that some students were destroying the focus of the rest of the group by complaining about having to perform in front of the others. The primary complaint was that it took time which disturbed the focus of the group. Fear of talking in front of the group can be a real problem for the teacher and it is important that he/she deals with this as the leader of the group; it is important to take these fears seriously (Hägglund & Fredin, 2006: 135).

In the case of the students at my teaching practice school, the ones that hesitated about performing in front of the class were allowed to observe the first time. This allowed them to see their classmates perform, which made them feel more secure and resulted in that most of them tried to take part the following lessons. Some students felt safer when they were allowed to remain in their chair while participating in exercises. A third comment about this was that writing down the dialogue beforehand made it feel better. Depending on the exercise, it is clear that various methods can be used to make students comfortable enough to benefit from drama activities. On this subject Michael Theodoru exclaims that “Drama is about instilling the desire to communicate. It is about losing inhibitions. It is about feeling the confidence to express your own point of view.” (1989: 2) This quote is clearly in line with the experience of my students.

**Environment**

As this dissertation is about the perceptions of students in a particular school, the environment that this school represents is a relevant factor when analyzing these perceptions. The size of the group is a key element when using drama exercises, especially when it comes to selecting the type of activity to use. Some are more appropriate with large groups and some in small groups. The group size in my school was rather small. No class in this school was larger than fifteen pupils which made it possible to execute actions that are hard to make use of in larger
group settings. This group size is also in line with the recommendation of Erberth and Rasmusson (1996: 58) in their book “Undervisa i pedagogiskt drama”. Several student comments also referenced the group size as a significant element in making drama work as a teaching methodology, especially in relation to feelings of emotional security.

The age of the students affects the result of the teaching as well as the inclination of students to embrace drama as a teaching methodology. At the school discussed here, the ages fifteen through nineteen were the most prevalent since the level was upper secondary school. My groups were in their first year and thus aged fifteen to sixteen years old with one exception, which was a girl who changed programmes. The teenage years are considered to be a time of big change for any young person. Finding your true self sometimes collide with the demands of the grown up world and the expected behaviour in a number of teenage group constellations, the school class being one of them. As discussed earlier, several of the teenage characteristics play a role in their perception of the use of drama in English teaching. Positive peer pressure, reluctance to speak English in front of the group and loud complaints about tasks are of course not reserved for teenagers, but compared to other ages these characteristics are more commonly present in the state of psychological development that a large percentage of teenagers are part of.

The type of school presents another significant part of the equation. My teaching practice school was of the vocational type. Students in this school were generally less positive to theoretical subjects such as English compared to their peers in theoretical type schools according to my experience. The general reason for this which was apparent during my time at the school is that students in vocational programmes were focused on practical knowledge that was in line with the main theme of the educational programme, for example electrician. Theoretical subjects were seen as a distraction by many students. In addition, individuals that are used to a more practical form of education may not feel at home in a subject that is based purely on a theoretical foundation. When I introduced drama activities into the English subject, the reactions were mainly positive as can be seen in the results section. I deduce a degree of these reactions to the more practical nature of the drama activities and the possibility to connect English teaching to the primary subjects of the students by letting them use their creativity.
The groups that I taught and evaluated as basis for this dissertation were mainly homogenous when it came to sex. Of course, this can be attributed to the vocational nature of the school. Since the programmes were tightly linked to specific vocations, the gender profile of these vocations was generally reflected in the male versus female ratio of the groups. I did not find any significant difference in how the respective groups perceived the drama activities. Nonetheless, I did find the fact that the groups were homogenous to be of importance for the way the students experienced the activities. The groups were of a similar size, the participants were of the same sex with just a few exceptions and they shared a common interest in the main subject of the educational program. Hence, the groups were alike in a lot of ways despite the fact that they consisted of males and females respectively. This showed to be of a higher importance than gender for the results of this dissertation.

**Variation**

That a teacher needs to vary her lessons goes without saying, yet in many of the reflections and in some interviews the pupils expressed a lack of it. The positive reactions to drama activities that could be seen could in part be connected to this. One student used the expression “wake up” with regard to how the drama activities made him start to pay attention because there was a change in the usual lesson pattern. There were also comments that too much focus on drama would feel excessive as well. Clearly the students were instinctively looking for a balance. In Skolverket’s *Engelska - samtalsguide*, (2008) the pupils’ answers based on NU 03-questionnaires in year nine indicates that the lessons need to vary more because the content and character of the lessons cause a problem for many pupils. This could depend on the fact that many of them are weak in abstract thinking or lack analytical skills. “Thus, they do not benefit from lessons which include language structure compared to their more analytical peers.” (My translation). Since the drama activities used in my school presented alternative language learning to complement the traditional teaching methodology, they provided the students with this variation.

What I could see from the journals was that the words “fun” and “boring” were mentioned by the students on many occasions. The majority of them expected the lesson activities to be fun. Whether this had to do with me being a temporary teacher providing them with novel
exercises or that they connoted the word drama with exciting events is hard to discern. To the students, drama represented unstructured creativity in contrast to the structured exercises in traditional language learning such as grammar. A significant finding that I made, both from the reflective notes and the interviews, was that a number of students expressed a fear about grammar being downplayed due to the introduction of drama. They clearly stated that they liked to have drama exercises as long as it did not happen at the expense of grammar teaching. According to the students, drama provided them with creativity and language fluency training in addition to the traditional grammar exercises. There was no sign of understanding about drama being able to enhance grammar skills as well as the previously mentioned properties of drama. The reason for this was that their experience of drama exercises was limited to the lessons that I organized and during these lessons the drama and grammar slots were separated parts of the whole. Of course, it would be possible to combine them into coherent tasks, but this was not the main goal of this investigation.
Conclusion

When I began to think about a topic for this dissertation, drama pedagogy as a methodology for English teaching came to me as a natural blending of my various interests. It combined my two major subjects, English and drama, with my teaching practice that was going to take place during the writing of the dissertation. I started to ask myself whether my students at this particular school would find the alternative teaching method useful and how they would feel about it. Developing a good teaching plan for several classes in parallel while at the same time thinking about how to get relevant data for this investigation proved to be a challenge, but also a very useful experience for myself as teacher to be. After my teaching practice ended I performed interviews with selected students and analyzed them together with reflective notes that I collected during that time.

From these data I could interpret that the overall response from the students was positive. Naturally, individual tasks were perceived in different ways by different persons, but for the most part everyone could find exercises that appealed to them. Group dynamics turned out to be a major factor for how students perceived the drama activities they were exposed to. Finally, an important finding from this dissertation is the benefit of varying the lessons. At least a part of the positive feedback that I received about drama can be attributed to the variation introduced by including it as a part of the teaching strategy. Conducting this investigation has further confirmed my belief that using drama activities in the classroom creates a good learning environment which is appreciated by the majority of the students.
List of References

Literature


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Interview with “Elias” 2008-11-11
Interview with “Robin” 2008-11-11
Appendix 1 – Student interview questions

1. What words would you use to describe what you felt about the drama exercises?
2. What do you think was the purpose of these activities?
3. To what extent would you like to have drama activities as a part of English class?
4. In what way do you think it suits you like to have drama activities as a part of English class?
5. How did you think you managed to speak English while playing someone else?
6. To what extent did you get to use drama activities as part of English class during your previous school years, for example role play, writing dialogues or acting out texts?
7. How would you like to describe the advantages of using drama in English teaching?
8. How would you like to describe the disadvantages of using drama in English teaching?