THE PLAY WITHIN: ON IMMERSION AND DRAMA IN THE STUDY OF EFL

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Abstract: The present paper is an exploration of immersive practices in the study of EFL, based on empirical observations and available literature. While drama activities and game-based learning have been components of language teaching for various decades, it is argued here that Romanian programmes ought to place more emphasis on the importance of employing such techniques and on having English as the main language of instruction, regardless of the proficiency of a group of students.

Keywords: EFL, teaching, Romanian students, immersion, drama and game-based learning

1. Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to highlight the importance of including drama and game-based activities in the process of teaching English as a foreign language. To support this view, examples are provided both from the literature as well as personal experience in working with university students majoring in engineering and foreign languages.

Before delving into the benefits of game-based learning and of employing English, rather than the students' L1, as the main language of instruction in EFL settings, some working definitions must be provided. First of all, the term *immersion* has been used in the literature to refer to various situations. Cummins (2009) highlights two of these that are relevant for the educational context: on the one hand, *immersion* has been associated with cases in which the aim of the process is for students to become proficient in two languages (see Cummins 2009 for a discussion of Canadian French immersion programmes); on the other hand, the term has been used for cases involving children of immigrant families or children from minority communities, situations in which the end-goal of the programme is for the learners to become proficient only in their L2, the language of instruction.

The definitions of the term provided in *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam Webster* are slightly more general, as can be observed below:

a. "A method or system of teaching (or learning) a foreign language in an environment where all communication is conducted in the language, esp. at a school, etc., run for this purpose." (Oxford English Dictionary)
b. "instruction based on extensive exposure to surroundings or conditions that are native or pertinent to the object of study; *especially* **:** foreign language instruction in which only the language being taught is used" (Merriam Webster)

For the purpose of this paper, the term *immersion* is used to refer to EFL scenarios which are characterised by two important aspects: i. the instruction is done mostly if not only in English regardless of the amount of knowledge that students come equipped with; ii. the teaching process includes both traditional grammar exercises as well as drama-inspired and general game-based activities.

Before moving on to the benefits of immersive practices for language learning and providing examples of such activities, one more term must be discussed, namely *drama*. The definition employed here is the one given by Holden (1981): *drama* refers to "any activity which asks the student to portray a) himself in an imaginary situation or b) another person in

an imaginary situation" (Holden 1981:1 in Giebert 2014: 139), as exemplified in section 3 below. We are thus ready to proceed to the advantages of employing immersive techniques in teaching EFL.

2. The benefits of immersive practices for students of EFL

As already argued for, irrespective of the level of fluency, students of English as a foreign language should be in contact to it as much as possible. Increased exposure to a target language via immersive techniques has been documented to result in better overall performance (see for example Cummins 2009, Giebert 2014, Vijayadasan and Tomy 2020, Porter and Castillo 2023, Dakhalan and Tanucan 2024).

This can be achieved not only through exercises characteristic of traditional approaches to language learning (e.g. grammar and translation), but also through activities meant to engage the students and increase their confidence and motivation. More often than not, these activities, some of which are inspired by drama performances and exercises, resemble real life situations that the students might encounter in an English-speaking country. This is precisely the function of controlled immersive environments (such as language classes in a university/high school/etc. which, of course, include an instructor who oversees the setting), i.e. to expose students to natural scenarios (see Giebert 2014).

Simulating real life situations by using only the target language, both for instruction and student interactions makes learning English (as a foreign language) mirror the process of children acquiring their native language. Even if some of the students begin such an immersive course with little knowledge of English, they must be accommodated through the use of simple instructions and visual demonstrations. The fact that students are only allowed to use the target language to express themselves and interact with others fosters authentic communication and has two main implications: first of all, the evaluation is constant in such settings which means that so is the feedback; secondly, students might experience a boost in motivation due to their feeling more engaged and challenged, leading to a greater sense of accomplishment. One other result would be an enhancement of the students' cognitive flexibility, which is important for developing critical thinking as well as problem-solving skills (see for example Vijayadasan and Tomy 2020, Porter and Castillo 2023).

Before turning to examples of immersive practices, one last observation must be made in connection with the consequences of using drama-based activities in language classes.

If one were to read "Hamlet" from a teacher's perspective, they might notice that the last lines in Act 2 Scene 2 could be used to illustrate the advantages of integrating drama inspired activities in the process of teaching a foreign language. Hamlet ends one of his soliloquies by saying that "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." (Shakespeare 2.2). At a first glance the connection might seem far-fetched, since in the context of Shakespeare's text, the lines refer to Hamlet's plan of having a troupe of actors put on a play (within the play) with the aim of triggering an emotional response in Claudius and thus revealing his murderous nature. However, upon closer inspection and extension of meaning, the lines could be understood as follows: drama inspired activities are bound to and have been proven to trigger strong feelings in both active (the actors) and passive (the audience) participants. In a general sense,

> "Drama activities encourage learners to explore topics of identity, as students can literally experience 'walking in somebody else's shoes' when they take fictional identities. This can be beneficial for exploring professional roles, both linguistically (register, jargon) as well as on a more personal level, and help young graduates to negotiate their own eventual future professional identity. "(Giebert 2014: 142)

Therefore, drama and game-based learning are beneficial not only for improving linguistic skills, but also for the emotional development of the students, with respect to empathy, support and connection. It must be stressed, however, that traditional exercises should also be included in EFL classes since activities based on the students' imagination and creative skills do not always cater for the learning needs of all individuals in a group.
In the following section, we look at examples of immersive practices, all of which I have employed during my EFL classes with first year university students in Romania.

3. Examples of immersive, drama and game-based learning practices

Irrespective of the time and form, i.e. during classes, breaks, email exchanges, etc., it is beneficial for students of EFL that the communication should be done only in the target language. Romanian, or any other native language of a given group students, may be used in cases of translation exercises, which can be introduced after a set number of seminars conducted only in English. As argued above, this helps create an environment in which students are encouraged to expand their knowledge and communicate naturally, as if they were in an English-speaking country. Below are provided several examples of exercises conducted strictly in the target language.

3.1. Stories and art-related essays

The practice of writing stories does not merely help students in honing their grammar and vocabulary skills, but also provides them with a space for illustrating their imagination and creativity. Simple stories and essays may be used in connection to a wide range of EFL learning aspects such as the following:

i. Story tasks may be assigned for practising the use of specific vocabulary or tenses

In this case, the task may be either a purely written exercise, having the students work individually or in small groups, or it may be oral, involving every person in the class. In the written form, the student(s) may be required to: use certain words or expressions which they have chosen from a pile of cards provided by the instructor, continue a text they have discussed, practice a certain genre, etc. In the oral form, the story could be started by the instructor and then told collectively by the students taking turns either at the teacher's signal or by each passing a small object to the following person whenever they desire to switch.

ii. Essay writing with advanced learners

One task which I have designed for former groups of students has been for them to write an essay starting from a short story we had studied together (e.g. *Winter Break* by Hilary Mantel, *Separating* by John Updike, *Hills like White Elephants* by Ernest Hemingway). The students were required to discuss the selected text or an element from said text in connection to two ither items of their choice, which could be songs, films, paintings, books, sculptures, or related to architecture, design, graffiti work, video games, etc. For example, the taxi driver in *Winter break* could be discussed together with Robert De Niro's character in the film *Taxi Driver* and to a song like *Mr. Cab Driver* by Lenny Kravitz. Even the most sceptical or reluctant students produced beautiful examples of how the arts can offer rich material for discussion.

3.2. Simulations of interviews

Engineering students may benefit greatly from simulations of how one may come to occupy a position in a company. Such activities include several steps, from students writing their curriculum vitae and cover letter to having groups perform the roles of interviewers and candidates. Such tasks may be performed by either modelling hypothetical companies or employing actual ones, each with their relevant job advertisements. Real companies may be selected from those operating in English-speaking countries.

3.3. News (newspapers or other media)

In addition to in-class activity and home assignments, the following weekly task may be introduced in EFL classes: students must consult newspapers (available online) from the British Isles or other English-speaking countries in search of two types of texts. On the one hand, articles of a technical, political or socio-economic nature, on the other hand news that relate to the lives of ordinary people. Each seminar, students are randomly chosen to briefly talk about the texts that caught their attention. An example for a piece of news regarding daily life would be the following: the owner of a public house in Loughshinny, Dublin organized an event dedicated to the pets of his patrons. Students may also listen to the news on the radio (stations available online via websites such as Radio Garden) or watch television channels such as BBC News which is available in Romania along with BBC Earth and BBC First.

3.4. Mystery games

As the name suggests, mystery games, in both their physical and digital versions, involve elements of storytelling, detective work and exploration. They generally require the players to navigate through twists and turns in the storyline looking for information and clues with the end goal of solving a mystery, which could involve the circumstances surrounding a character's disappearance, its death or merely a certain character's identity. The narratives may be created by the EFL instructor, or they may be chosen from the long list available on dedicated websites. One such example could be *Mystery at Mr Grim's Mansion*. In this mystery game, each student assumes the role of a character who attended a party at Mr. Grim's Mansion. Each character possesses a unique set of objects which are relevant for the narrative. Following the butler's announcement of Mr. Grim's untimely demise, a police officer interviews all participants regarding their possessions and whereabouts before and during the supposed time of death. The collective goal is to unravel the mystery surrounding the circumstances of the fatal event. Such an activity, during which students can be divided into two or more groups, is beneficial because it fosters critical thinking and teamwork skills.

3.5. Using digital game-based tools

There are various studies detailing the benefits of integrating digital games or platforms in the educational process, especially with respect to student engagement (see for example Serrano's 2019 literature review). One digital resource that has been successfully implemented in teaching English as a foreign language is *Kahoot!* This game-based learning platform offers English instructors the possibility of testing things like vocabulary and grammar in a fun and competitive way, and as a result, it is a student favourite.

4. Conclusions

It was shown above that employing immersive practices in the study of English as a foreign language represents a way of providing the students with an environment similar not only to the way in which children acquire their native language, but also to real-life situations they might encounter in English speaking countries.

By having English as the main language of instruction and simulating real-world use, immersive activities have been proven to significantly enhance both the linguistic competence and the cognitive abilities of students. Drama inspired and game-based exercises equip learners with better communication and critical thinking skills, empowering them to become confident and fluent speakers of English.

While section 1 was dedicated to an introduction into the topic and a discussion of the terms used throughout the paper, section 2 focused on the advantages of using immersive techniques in EFL classes. Section 3 served to illustrate several drama and game-based

activities that English instructors could make use of along with the more traditional practices of grammar and translation tasks.

Plenty of studies have been conducted on subjects relating to interactive language teaching, but further research needs to be done in order for teachers to adapt to the evolving needs of the future generations of students. This would lead to a refinement of instruction techniques that would not only benefit the learners, but also the teachers.

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