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## **The Drama of Language Learning: Using English Literature with a Polish Teenage Youth Theatre**

**Abstract:** The positive effects of using drama in ELT have long been recognized, however this has often been explored from the context of the classroom. The article retroactively examines the activities of an English language youth theatre club for Polish teenagers as a social event organized in addition to their academic studies of the language. Special attention is paid to the use of classic texts (albeit adapted) by authors such as Shakespeare, and particularly the World War One poetry of Wilfred Owen. The article examines the techniques of using and performing the texts, the importance of gesture and intonation as well as the necessity to explore cultural and historical aspects of the material. The students' opinions of the work and the effect on their language learning were submitted in a questionnaire and are presented towards the end of the article.

**Keywords:** drama in ELT, Wilfred Owen, Shakespeare, performing texts, gesture

### **1. Introduction**

In her 1980 article *Drama in Second Language from a Psychological Perspective*, Susan L. Stern presents a theoretical examination of the use of drama exercises in language learning. As Stern shows, the use and efficacy of drama and theatre in learning foreign language is well documented and has also been noted in other fields, such as children's education, speech therapy and psychology. This inter-disciplinary approach allows Stern to focus on potential benefits of drama and dramatic exercises in language learning which perhaps fall outside of what many may consider traditional or mainstream language instruction (grammar, exercises, etc.), benefits of a more psychological nature and as relevant to personal character as they are to language development.

In addition to the verbal and linguistic aspects utilized in dramatic exercises (listening, learning of texts, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc.), Stern outlines a number of areas where drama may be beneficial, often promoting or reinforcing positive behaviour (Stern 1980: 78–81). These are: *motivation*, where the production of a dramatic performance generates targets (e.g. writing a script, discussing aspects of the work) and motivation to integrate, learn aspects of culture etc.; *self-esteem*, built through production of material, awareness of the development of one’s skills, completion of tasks etc.; sensitivity to rejection and breaking down inhibition; empathy to others, partly through a form of detachment involved in acting and creating a character which may neutralize the actor’s ego. Stern goes on to include spontaneity in the section about psychodrama, being an important aspect of play and “free-flowing creativity” (Stern 1980: 85).

Other authors, such as Murray et al. (2017), demonstrate how drama might help stimulate practices such as reading amongst challenged students, whilst Maley and Duff highlight drama as a means of both linguistic and personal improvement. These authors have produced collections of exercises for teachers to use in class, often based on actor technique and training (Maley/Duff 2005). Several of Stern’s benefits may be seen to influence Maley and Duff’s own list of reasons to use drama in the classroom (Maley/Duff 2005: 1–2). As well as more educationally focused points, such as supplying context to materials, being a low-resource activity and having a good effect on classroom dynamics, the list claims drama-based work “fosters self-awareness and awareness of others” (Maley/Duff 2005: 1), “encourages an open, explanatory style of learning where creativity and imagination are given scope to develop”, leading to, “risk-taking”, which the authors claim is vital for good language learning (Maley/Duff 2005: 2).

This article will examine whether these alleged benefits of dramatic practice were evident in the experience of several (rarely more than a dozen) teenage Polish L2 students involved in an English language theatre club over a three-year period (2005–2008). The text will explore the group’s activities as well as some of the performance materials utilised, which ranged from adaptations of Shakespearean texts to classic poetry. Special attention will be paid to the latter.

## 2. Methodology

The article examines the activities of a youth theatre club made up of Polish teenagers as part of their extra-curricular involvement with a private English school. The activities are reviewed and analysed through the application of academic research on the subject of drama in English Language Teaching (hereafter ELT). In addition, it should be noted that the examination of the club activities also highlights contextual aspects which, whilst not directly ELT-related, may have had an influence upon the development and outcome of the theatre work and the linguistic development of the students. It is also necessary to outline my own status within the work (as a teacher of English, theatre practitioner and British Native Speaker), as this had significant impact on the Development of the club and its work. However, it is necessary to introduce some caveats.

As the above dates show, the examination and analysis is a retrospective one. The youth theatre project was not undertaken as research, rather to provide a fun activity for the students. There were, however, a number of notes made about the process and several students completed a questionnaire about a year after the club finished. Obviously, this means the overall picture is incomplete but, I feel, the observations and comments of the students, as well as my own notes and recollections will provide interesting material for future researchers, especially concerning the benefits of using poetry.

The theatre activity took place at a time when I was relatively new to ELT, having started work in Poland in October 2002 and taken my Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) in 2003. Prior to this I had undertaken a joint degree in Theatre Studies and English Language at the University of Glasgow as well as Social Anthropology at Queen's Belfast and Edinburgh University. My post-graduate research at Edinburgh involved fieldwork with a theatre company in Poland (2000–2001). Being fairly new to ELT, I had yet to combine my theatre background with English teaching from a theoretical background; theatre activities were done from my theatrical knowledge and experience, not from any training in the use of drama in ELT. Coupled to this was a lack of experience of working with children and teenagers prior to starting work as a teacher. For these above reasons, the theatre club was not run according to academic theories about drama in ELT. This is why the application and analysis of the club's activities is retrospectively carried out using academic texts which I encountered sometime after the cessation of the club. This analysis is then compared with notes and observations taken at the

time and the comments of the students and their own feelings about the theatre work, recorded on post-project questionnaires.

The research examines several aspects of the drama club with regards to ELT. The first part involves the application of a number of academic texts (e.g. Stern 1980; Malley/Duff 2005; Brauer 2002) to consider the initial benefits which might be obtained through using drama in ELT. These texts illustrate certain effects which may be generated through drama work, as noted in the introduction to this article (e.g. self-esteem, motivation). While these may have been effects I was aware of as a theatrical practitioner, at the time I may not have linked them to ELT. For example, discussion the characters and context of a play (Murray et al. 2017: 11) is common practice amongst theatre practitioners to give the actor greater insight into the characters and the scenarios of the text, yet arguably few non-ELT practitioners would consider it from the perspective of generating vocabulary, enhancing speaking and discursive technique in an L2 and giving students of a language “ownership” over the material and their own language development. The use of the aforementioned academic texts enables the ELT elements to be noted and observed more clearly. The text of Murray et al. (2017) was particularly useful in giving suggestions concerning how the structure of rehearsals and accompanying activities (e.g. discussions, exploration of historical contexts of the text) might generate external work by the students, such as extra reading, which was reinforced by observations made at the time of the theatre projects, as shall be seen.

A second point of analysis is the use of certain theatre techniques, including mime-show, and how they might be useful in an ELT situation. Again, whilst I may have originally utilized such techniques for largely theatrical reasons, the work of researchers such as Culham (2002), Schewe (2002) as well as Malley and Duff’s book on practical techniques (2005) (which contains a number of widely known drama exercises presented from an ELT perspective) were useful for reappraising my work with the teenage students.

A third, although relatively minor aspect of the methodology involves recognizing and partly analysing the (inter)cultural nature of my own relationship with the members of the theatre club and whether it may have had an influence on their ELT development. While greater focus is limited due to space as well as the length of time since the examined events some points of interest are raised<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading on the subject of drama in intercultural education, see: Crutchfield/Schewe 2017.

### 3. The youth theatre

The youth theatre project ran from 2005–2008 under the auspices of an Olsztyn-based private language school where I worked as a teacher. The club operated as part of the school's extra-curricular cultural program and began at my suggestion due to an awareness that numerous young students would like the chance “to do something with my English” outside the usual classroom learning. A further aim of the club was to use well-known English language plays to attract audiences (and potential students for the school) and to promote English language culture. The club was open to upper-primary to early lyceum-aged students (around 12–17) with at least A2 level English (because they would be required to learn lines and direction would be in English). The productions over the three year period were: *Romeo and Juliet* (May 2005), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (May 2006) (both using Longman's modern adaptations), *The Poetry is in the Pity* (a devised piece using the poems of Wilfred Owen – Nov. 2006), an evening of Robert Burns poetry (February 2007), *Macbeth* (adapted into modern English by myself – June 2007) and T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (April 2008). Additionally, the students took part in summer theatre projects in Bavaria and Warmia-Mazury with teenagers from Denmark, Germany and Estonia (July 2006 and August 2007<sup>2</sup>).

The first performance was *Romeo and Juliet*, chosen partly because of an adapted text in A2 Modern English (Shakespeare 2002). Additionally, it is a famous play and frequently adapted, so the performance could be shaped to how the students might desire it. This was demonstrated when the students themselves asked whether the Montagues and Capulets could be played as “Metals versus Hip-Hops” (useful, as the students could supply their own costumes).

This approach from the students highlighted potential differences in running the project as a drama club, rather than a classroom activity. A major factor was the status of the actors and the different relationship between the teacher/director and the actor/students, something I would suggest helps to highlight one item on Stern's list, motivation (Stern 1980: 78). Having previously run drama projects in a village primary school, it was possible to note several differences between the two different groups, the main one being the “student” status of the participants. In the primary school, children were restricted to some extent because they were at school, therefore participation was mandatory. While the children, at least in the

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<sup>2</sup> Only three members of the main group and one girl who had been to Bavaria took part in the 2007 project in Poland.

older classes, were eager to participate, in lower years, especially in groups with weaker English, I occasionally wondered whether the participation was a willing one or an enforced one. In contrast, the theatre club was entirely made up of volunteers, hence there was more often a greater sense of investment and active participation in the creation of the piece (such as requesting the Metal vs Hip Hop imagery or introducing dance routines). In addition, the time constraints of fitting rehearsals into a school period were largely absent in the club as rehearsals took place in the students' (and teacher's) free time, something which demanded a certain amount of self-sacrifice and discipline. Conversely, being outside the school curriculum meant rehearsals had to be held outside of lessons, which meant negotiating each student's different timetable and free-time schedule. The lack of contact in-between rehearsals (these were not all my own students) meant that the student-actors had to dedicate themselves to learning and practising lines at home alone or with friends.

Further influencing factors were the students' age, social situation and linguistic levels. The primary students were largely from rural communities and generally had less access to English outside of school; very often, their parents had limited, if any, English<sup>3</sup>. The theatre club members were mostly from middle-class families and were attending private lessons at one of the top language schools in the city. Consequently, their exposure to English was generally greater (mostly B1 upwards) and their locality to the school made it more convenient<sup>4</sup>. The age of the students was generally higher (13+).

#### 4. Rehearsals and challenges

The cast was decided through open audition, although nobody would be refused, and roles were awarded based on language skill, acting ability, physical appearance and build (so taller students were more likely to have "adult" roles). As there was a higher ratio of female to male students, girls were sometimes given male roles and a certain amount of doubling-up (playing multiple roles) was necessary.

The rehearsals took place either in classrooms of the school or the function room of a local bowling alley, where the performance would eventually take place.

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<sup>3</sup> This is not meant to suggest all the primary children were of low level English. A number of the Year 4–5 were at least A2+ and very motivated students.

<sup>4</sup> The higher language levels meant that there were more pre-written texts available (the exception being *Macbeth*, which I adapted into contemporary English at around B1 level, subsequently shortening it for the students' use).

They often lasted around two hours. During breaks students would either chat with each other, practise lines or chat with me in English. The environment was much more relaxed than a formal school, with the student-actors and teacher-director on first name terms (something not common in ordinary schools where Polish social-linguistic conventions meant addressing adults by their title). The style of rehearsals varied between readings, group rehearsals and more intense, short scenes, individual or pairs. In the case of group rehearsals, a physical warm-up took place. This fulfilled two major functions; training the students to control their bodies and move in ways required for the theatrical style; creating a team identity through group practice. The physical warm-up moved to a vocal warm-up, practising pronunciation and projection. This meant constant use and exposure to oral and aural English, something several of the students later commented on favourably in their questionnaires. Actors with larger roles occasionally had one-on-one (or two) rehearsals which involved repetition of lines and variations on delivery, examining context and response of a partner. This type of rehearsal emphasized such speech aspects as intonation or physicality of the speaker, relating the posture of the speaker to the meaning of the lines and the style of delivery.

In each case, the director suggested ways of saying the lines and moving on the stage, working on the physical characterization and vocal style of the roles. For example, in the scene where Juliet's mother speaks to her about marrying Paris, the physical and vocal delivery of Lady Capulet needed to express a warm, friendly nature as she explains about the match, but then to progress through shock, anger and eventually bullying threats when Juliet refuses. To help the actress negotiate the changes I used substitution exercises. Assuming that a fourteen-year-old girl had no experience of preparing her own daughter for marriage, I suggested she say the lines as if she was encouraging a friend over an exciting event, such as a date with a special boy or attending a concert. This, I hoped, would allow her to think about and express friendly enthusiasm and being pleased for the friend (in a way that Lady Capulet might be for Juliet). The change involved her expressing immense displeasure, leading to threats. For this I once more chose familiar scenarios. Perhaps she might think of an angry teacher when no homework appears, or an angry mother when a chore had not been done. This worked even better than I had hoped, especially when the actress asked for clarification, "Well which one? I mean an angry teacher is just a teacher but an angry mother is an *ANGRY MOTHER!*" Once the emotion was found, the scene would be repeated and suggestions made upon such elements as stress patterns and emphasis.

The script itself sometimes proved to be problematic in several ways. The benefits of it being a Pre-Intermediate version made it readily accessible to the students linguistically, it could also be understood by the majority of the audience, who were mostly presumed to be fellow students, friends and family of the cast<sup>5</sup>. However, the simplicity of the text was also a drawback for those student-actors with higher levels of English. An illustration of this was the opening exchange between servants of the Montagues and Capulets which provokes a fight.

SAMPSON: I'll make a rude face at them and make them angry.

ABRAM: Are you making a rude face at us, sir?

SAMPSON [to Gregory]: Is the law on our side if I say "yes"?

GREGORY: No, it isn't.

SAMPSON: [to Abram]: No, I'm not making a rude face at you, sir. But... I am making a rude face.

[...]

SAMPSON: Take out your swords! Let's fight them Gregory!

BENVOLIO: Stop fighting, you stupid men! Put your swords away. You don't know what you're doing.

TYBALT [getting out his sword]: So you're in this fight too Benvolio? Turn and prepare to die!

BENVOLIO: I'm only trying to keep the peace. Put your sword away. Or use it to stop these men fighting.

TYBALT: Your sword is out, but you talk about peace? I hate that word as I hate all Montagues, [attacking him] Take this! (Shakespeare 2002: 1)

Although the aim of the text is to simplify the Shakespearean language for readers with lower levels of English, some of the students felt it sounded over-simplified, particularly with the constant repetition of the words "rude face" and "sword"<sup>6</sup>. The students chose alternative lines and words in some cases. Sampson's initial line about swords was removed and he simply said, more explosively, "Let's fight!". Likewise, Tybalt's "Your sword is out" was changed to "Yours is drawn", which was closer to the Shakespearean original, allowing the actors to use and demonstrate a greater variety of vocabulary. This editing process continued throughout the rehearsal period when the speaker or director found lines problematic. In some cases the script was edited to remove superfluous lines and/or make it easier to learn.

<sup>5</sup> This was a problem I had encountered working with the village school where the parents eventually complained that while they liked their children being able to perform in English, they themselves couldn't understand anything.

<sup>6</sup> Some of this repetition does appear in the original.



One of the challenges to the actors was learning large amounts of text in a second language, something new for some even in their L1. One particular situation caused some tension as the actors were of differing levels of English and experience. This highlighted Stern's points about motivation and self-esteem in different ways.

The boy playing Romeo was around thirteen years old. While his English was of a sufficient level (approximately B1), he obviously had a lot of lines and was unable to learn them all. Although he had done very well with most of the scenes, he had difficulty learning the scene, following Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment, where Romeo has a long conversation with Friar Lawrence. I decided to cut it but the girl playing the Friar (around sixteen, very competent in English – B2/C1 – and performing) protested; she had learned it and it was her favourite scene. Keeping the scene would put a lot of stress on "Romeo", who already had the strain of being one of the title characters. While it might have been possible to appeal to his notion of self-motivation and self-esteem, there was the chance that if he was pushed too far then the scene, or Romeo, might collapse in performance. Alternatively, cutting the scene might offend and de-motivate the actress. Ultimately, the scene was changed so that rather than having a face-to-face conversation, Romeo would be seen leaning against a wall (where the curtains were) having a cell-phone conversation with the Friar. The text was stuck to the wall behind the curtain, invisible to the audience.

While the show was a success and largely a positive experience for the students, it did raise questions about having performers of different experience and linguistic ability<sup>7</sup>. This was particularly in light of those members of the cast with greater linguistic and/or theatrical experience wanting to be challenged more with the texts and performance. I began to consider an "elite" group within the club which would work with poetry and more devised pieces rather than traditional texts. This occurred a year later.

## 5. Clowning around with Shakespeare

Prior to working with the poetry, the group did a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with a new girl joining the group who had around B2 English. This performance used more stylized acting and movement. Due to the comic

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<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the problem was self-solving in that no other students auditioned for the next play (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and a number of the *Romeo and Juliet* cast (including Romeo) did not continue. No explanations were sought or forthcoming.

scenes and the relation of Shakespeare's comedies to Italian theatre, I decided to train the actors in elements of *Commedia dell'arte*.

The form of the piece very much dictated the style of theatre needed. Whereas *Romeo and Juliet* had involved fairly naturalistic acting, this work would require a lot of focus on the fast delivery of lines, fluidity and a more physical form of performance using gesture and mime. Although this was more of a theatrical necessity than being connected to ELT, it is worth noting that a number of researchers and authors have stressed the importance of gesture and non-verbal communication in the study of second languages. In his work *Coping with Obstacles in Drama-Based ESL Teaching: A Nonverbal Approach* (2002: 96–112) Cameron R. Culham writes of his interest in nonverbal theatrical techniques, particularly clowning, as a tool for language teaching. Culham highlights the multiple roles of gesture in communication by quoting Bavelas et al., “[gestures are] referential acts [that] convey meaning, depict events, and represent ideas. They specify and often clarify verbal references and they can denote meanings that may not be in the accompanying words” (Culham 2002: 97)<sup>8</sup>.

Elsewhere, Manfred L. Schewe highlights the benefits of mime (pantomime)<sup>9</sup>: “Pantomime work in the classroom sensitizes learners to nonverbal aspects of communication. They train the ability to recognize nonverbal signs, including culturally embedded gestures, and learn to communicate despite lacking certain language skills” (Schewe 2002: 77). Such forms were subsequently utilized in the following theatre projects and the relationship with the rhythm of speech became more central to the actors’ work.

The smaller, more tightly working group was able to present a more technically advanced performance than *Romeo and Juliet*, although it was stretched by the smaller number of actors, necessitating doubling-up. Additionally, it was only the second show in a year and, as noted, some of the group commented that they would like to try different things and use more advanced language. This was the starting point for the poetry-based performances done by the group working under the name of Cutty Sark (after the young witch in Robert Burns’s poem *Tam O’Shanter*).

<sup>8</sup> The original quote is from Bavelas et al. (1992: 470).

<sup>9</sup> The terms “mime” and “pantomime” are used to refer to silent, movement-based performance. However, for a British person, the term “pantomime” usually evokes a form of seasonal comic theatre which is anything but nonverbal. For this reason, I use the term “mime” although cited/quoted works may not.

## 6. Cutty Sark: theatre with poetry

The first performance of Cutty Sark was around fifteen minutes long and involved eight veterans of the original theatre group. The choice of the theme and the poems was based on my desire to do a public lecture about British World War One poetry. I felt that a short performance after the presentation would be interesting for the audience as well as a chance to try something new with the theatre club. It would use the war poetry of Wilfred Owen and be entitled *The Poetry is in the Pity*<sup>10</sup>.

Whereas *Romeo and Juliet* was a straightforward play, the new piece was constructed around five poems, four of which were chosen as they are arguably Owen's most famous works. The fifth, *The Last Laugh*, was chosen partly because it is a lesser known work but also because the lyric gave scope for a particular theatrical dynamic.

The sequence of the poems created the narrative structure. *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (Owen 1985: 76) is a sonnet utilizing imagery of funerals, mourning and the battlefield. *Spring Offensive* (Owen 1985: 169) tells of a battle charge, *The Last Laugh* (Owen 1985: 145) portrays the different weapons and reactions of dying soldiers, *Dulce et Decorum* (Owen 1985: 117) depicts a gas attack, while *Strange Meeting* (Owen 1985: 125) has a soldier meeting a stranger in an underground cavern which turns out to be Hades.

The poems were unknown to the students and required a lot of close language work, including drilling in the pronunciation, stress and rhythm. Three of the poems were divided up amongst the actors, with each saying certain lines either in unison or individually. The remaining two poems were given to individual actors to recite (or read if they were unable to learn them). *Dulce et Decorum* was recited by one girl, perhaps the most advanced of the group. *Strange Meeting* was shared between two girls, playing the Narrator and the Stranger. The meetings yielded intense work and the students continued outside of the group meetings. At one point one actress commented, "Do you realize what you have achieved? A group of teenage girls sitting in their bedrooms talking about war poetry instead of clothes and boys!" This comment and the related activity reinforces two points; the assertion in Murray et al. (2017: 2) which suggests one benefit of Applied Theatre is that it encourages reading and research amongst the students/actors; the importance of the role of the teacher/director in exposing students to new experiences and thus

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<sup>10</sup> The title comes from Owen's own preface to a planned collection (unpublished due to his death): "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity" (Andrews 2014).

bringing them into contact with new vocabulary etc. (some of which they might find through their own research)<sup>11</sup>.

The use of World War One poetry was introduced because of my own interest in it, partly due to my being British. The new direction and material created further challenges, in that whereas World War One poetry has long been a part of secondary education in the United Kingdom, the young Polish students were (understandably) unaware of the works of such poets as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves. They also had very little knowledge of World War One, particularly the Western Front. Images which are familiar to many Britons, such as that of gas-blinded soldiers walking in a line, were unknown to the students, as were many other cultural references in the poems. This necessitated some education and familiarization with history, images and themes with which we would be dealing. Amongst other activities, we studied material from the Imperial War Museum (London) and watched a movie set on the Western Front. Vocabulary from the poems included such items as military and historical war terms (Five-nines, a kind of gas shell) as well as funerary terminology in *Anthem for Doomed Youth*.

The setting of the performance also reinforced the educational aspect for both the students and audience (something else which Murray et al. consider). As well as my presentation about the poets and poetry, the staff of MOK Olsztyn (Municipal Culture Centre in Olsztyn where the piece was performed) had decorated the room with pictures of poppies (symbols of Remembrance and the Flanders battlefields) and photographs of the period, including one of my own grandfather in uniform. Similar images appeared on the publicity poster (see Figure 1).

For *The Poetry is in the Pity*, the movements had to be stylized and precise but of a different kind to the comic physicality of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At certain points, for instance, the actors had to mime moving across a battlefield with rifles, vague or imprecise hand positions or gestures would have spoiled the effect. By practicing soldier-like moves and positions, the poems sometimes were enacted in corresponding military rhythm (which also influenced the actors' recitation). Elsewhere, the moves would aim to enhance the speed of an event in the lyric, such as the sudden "sound" of a bomb or bullet in *The Last Laugh*. Actors took a position with the front leg bent, rear leg straight and an outstretched arm, emphasizing direction, speed and velocity. Similarly, sharp head movements suddenly directed the focus and the audience's attention in different directions.

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<sup>11</sup> This was also seen to a lesser extent in the work on Robert Burns, where students had to learn some unusual Scottish terms (although the poems were mainly English versions of the Scots poems). Some of the girls even found a Polish translation of *A Red, Red Rose*.

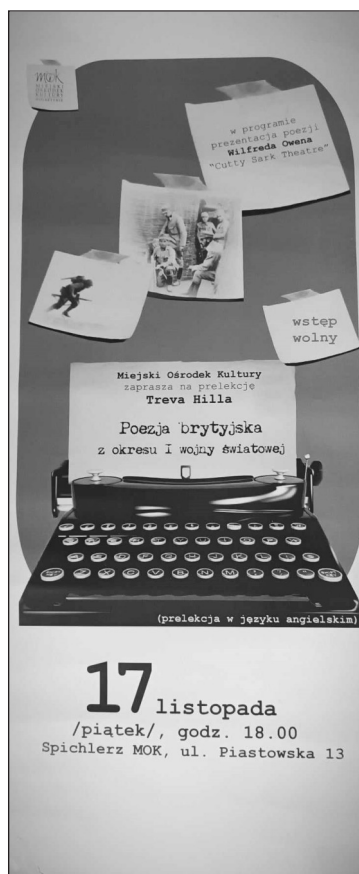


Figure 1. Poster for *The Poetry is in the Pity* designed by MOK Olsztyn

The combination of movement and verbal delivery enhanced the performance of the poems, which were performed in a specific order for dramatic purposes. *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (Owen 1986: 76) opened the performance in a representation of a funeral service or requiem, with the actors standing in two lines facing each other (as if across a church aisle or over a bier), reciting in chorus. As well as the textual references to funeral imagery and the effect of loss on those on the home front, it is also notable for its use of onomatopoeia, assonance and alliteration in such lines as “the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” to suggest gunfire. This particular line was recited in a staccato style to enhance the effect. The previous line “Only the monstrous anger of the guns” was delivered with a stretching of certain vowels and a stress on consonants, “MONstrous Aaaaaaanger of the GUNS”, in the hope of suggesting shell fire (the stress in “monstrous” representing the firing of the

shell; the long “anger”, the whine of the incoming ordinance and the stressed “guns”, the impacting of the shell).

The group then formed two ranks across the stage, one behind the other and knelt, as if resting, to reflect the opening lines of the poem *Spring Offensive* (Figures 2 and 3)<sup>12</sup>.

Halted against the shade of a last hill,  
They fed, and, lying easy, were at ease  
And, finding comfortable chests and knees  
Carelessly slept. (Owen 1985:169)

While the first section of the poem was recited in unison, as the text progresses to the depiction of the advance the lines were recited by specific actors as the “soldiers” slowly rose and began moving forward, gaining speed as the advance progressed. The first line was recited as the rear rank moved forward through the first rank until they were in front of them, whereupon they knelt down. The action was repeated with the (now) rear rank moving forward. Due to the small size of the stage, the front rank now began moving backwards as the lines were recited and the rear rank came forwards. This aimed to suggest not only the distance covered in the advance of the infantrymen but also the assault style of advance where a section supports the advancing one with covering fire before exchanging roles<sup>13</sup>.



Figure 2. Opening positions for *Spring Offensive*  
(Photos: MOK Olsztyn)



Figure 3. Preparing to “advance”  
(Photos: MOK Olsztyn)

<sup>12</sup> All pictures of the performance are published courtesy of MOK Olsztyn and previously appeared on the organisation’s website.

<sup>13</sup> Conversation with some of the audience after the show suggested the overall effect had been successful.

At line 28, “So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together” the pace of delivery increased to suggest the charge and the movement of the ranks increased slightly. For this delivery the volume increased to reinforce the idea of noise and chaos.

The end of the poem, saw the soldiers slow down and break from their ranks, eventually sitting around the stage, resting after the battle.

The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,  
 And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames  
 With superhuman inhumanities,  
 Long-famous glories, immemorial shames –  
 And crawling slowly back, have by degrees  
 Regained cool peaceful air in wonder –  
 Why speak they not of comrades that went under? (Owen 1986: 170)

While sitting resting, there was a moment of silence before the sudden cry of ““O Jesus Christ! I’m hit,’ he said; and died” as *The Last Laugh* began. The actors stood in a line and once again recited lines as either small groups or individuals. Lines were sometimes split into a kind of response, with one group saying the first half and the other replying with the onomatopoeia in a particular voice (e.g. high-pitched for the bullets or gruff for the big gun),

The Bullets chirped – In vain, vain, vain!  
 Machine-guns chuckled – Tut-tut! Tut-tut!  
 And the Big Gun Guffawed. (Owen 1986: 145)

The final line, “And the Gas hissed” was spoken in a hissing stage-whisper with wavy, floating “gas-like” hand movements. The line announced *Dulce et Decorum*, a poem about a gas attack.

The narrator sat to the side to recite the poem, as if reading a letter<sup>14</sup>. The other actors moved into two parallel lines again and began marching on the spot, although in a sluggish way to reflect the opening lines,

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

The actors continued in mime to walk on the spot in a zombie-like fashion until the line heralding the gas attack,

<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning that, like the actresses performing *Strange Meeting*, the girl (aged 15) learned the entire poem by heart, something I, as a long time Owen admirer, had never done.



Gas, GAS! Quick boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. (Owen 1986: 117)

At this point the “gassed soldier” mimed drowning (as the poem describes it) whilst the others formed a half circle around him, swaying to suggest the “green sea” of gas. As the soldier succumbed to the gas, they moved towards him, kneeling and standing, and began clutching at him, until he was overcome (Figure 4). They then formed two lines, like coffin bearers and joined hands so the actor could fall backwards into their arms. This depicted the soldier being carried “in the wagon that we flung him in”. The soldier was carried a few steps and then his feet were lowered and he was lifted, his arms stretched out either side, supported by the other



Figure 4. *Dulce et Decorum*: The gassing scene  
 (Photos: MOK Olsztyn)



Figure 5. Gas blinded soldiers  
 (Photos: MOK Olsztyn)



Figure 6. *Strange Meeting*: The meeting  
 (Photos: MOK Olsztyn)



Figure 7. Approaching the audience  
 (Photos: MOK Olsztyn)



actors, to form an image of The Crucifixion, this was enhanced by the other actors being at the foot of the cruciform figure<sup>15</sup>.

The actors then disbanded in the form of the line of gassed soldiers (Figure 5) and all but one lay on the floor. One actress walked around the stage, looking as if she was lost, eventually beginning the final poem, *Strange Meeting*, “It seemed that out of battle I’d escaped”. The narrator wandered around the sleeping figures on the floor until “one sprang up and stared, With piteous recognition in fixed eyes” (Figure 6). The two characters then discussed (via the poem) the horrors of war, moving forward as the third section of the poem progressed (Figure 7). As they moved the other figures arose and stood behind them. Eventually the second character declared, “I am the enemy you killed, my friend” (Owen 1986: 126) and the two characters knelt down to symbolize going to sleep, with the other soldiers standing behind, facing the audience. This was the end of the performance and the actors rose to take a bow.

## 7. The effect of working with the poetry

Although the group went on to work with poetry twice more (Robert Burns and T.S. Eliot) and perform two more plays, it was the work undertaken with *The Poetry is in the Pity* which was the most influential on the following projects, particularly in *Macbeth*. That said, the use of gesture and movement started in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was continued in a mimed version of *Tam O’Shanter* during the Burns presentation (the other poems being more like traditional recitals) and used to much comic effect in the production of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, where the students/actors had a much greater input into their dramatized performances of the poems’ characters.

Although *Practical Cats* was a success and produced some excellent scenes with individual poems, there were some weaknesses, not least with some of the longer poems where a new member was less able to maintain the necessary speed and rhythm (something I felt was my fault as a director for giving the student too difficult and too long a text rather than a failing of the actor). In addition, there were inter-personal tensions within the group amongst the students which had become obvious during *Macbeth*. As a result, one of the strongest members of the group dropped out and the dynamic changed. I decided to finish the theatre

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<sup>15</sup> When this was first rehearsed the narrator suddenly exclaimed, “Oh my God! It looks like a Christ!”

group on a happy note with *Practical Cats*. The final show comprised fragments performed at an event in the local teacher-training college for English teachers, some of whom expressed amazement (and a little fear) at the high level of English displayed by the teenagers (often rivalling theirs).

## 8. Discussion: Students' thoughts on the theatre club

While the theatre club was not run as a research project, I decided to ask former members to complete a questionnaire about their experiences. The questionnaire asked about their thoughts and experiences with regards to the drama projects themselves and how the students felt the experience benefitted their English (or not). Of around twelve students, seven replied, these being ones connected to the Cutty Sark and the language school club(s). Only one of the members from the external projects responded, but she was also involved in the Munich project and one of the earlier village school performances. While this is a very small number, it represents the main participants in the language school/Cutty Sark projects and may be seen as reflecting some of Stern's aforementioned suggestions about the benefits of drama in language learning (1980: 77–81).

Before examining the responses to the questionnaire, it is important to point out that only one of the participants was a student in my English class, therefore it was not really possible to measure any improvements in the English skills of other students (obviously, a more serious study would have made provision for this). Secondly, the students were all previously motivated in their studies and very good students. For these reasons, the questionnaire focussed on their own assessment of if/how the drama experience had benefitted them.

All the students felt the theatre projects had helped their English (Question 6), the majority felt it had helped "a little bit" whereas three felt it had helped "a lot". Interestingly, one of these was perhaps the most advanced of the students, who linked her advancement through the levels of English with the theatre club:

When we started *Romeo and Juliet* I was doing my intermediate course in English and I've been learning the language since the beginning of the primary school. That was probably 7<sup>th</sup> year of learning, but practically, you can count only the [English school] years, so – one year of the serious English course. Then, year by year, I ended with Elliott's cats, and it was after my CAE exam. So – the theatre projects accompanied me through my whole [English school] English education.

None of the students felt that the experience had harmed their English learning, indeed, one respondee commented, "I have no idea if there is any way in which playing in English can hurt someone's skill of speaking in that language". A second commented that perhaps the only drawback was the time spent learning lines left less time for doing English homework.

As to how it helped their English, a unanimous response was the amount of new vocabulary, especially that which might not appear in typical course books of their level, "I learnt a lot of new words, especially those less common in everyday language". Another pointed out the potential difference between a classroom environment and the drama club: "reading the texts, maybe not in the strict original, but close to original – it always meant learning some new words in an easy and not abusing way".

The poetry in particular was noted in this respect. The use of the words in the play meant that correct pronunciation was emphasized a lot, which was also found to be extremely beneficial; "I had fun and finally found out how to pronounce some really tricky words". Yet another answered Question 7 (about particular things the participants found useful), "the poetry, which is full of new vocabulary". A third found, "Preparing poems was a good exercise for pronunciation. All projects enabled me to improve my vocabulary". The student also declared:

While working on the poetry, then you're obsessive with the rhythm and stress things. I made a major step in my pronunciation as well – you don't control it, you just get natural while working on stage... Working on the expression, extremely in poetry projects, was sometimes painful, but made the accent and way of speaking sound perfect.

Some of the students felt that the theatre experience had helped them "sound more English". The effect on their listening ability was also favourably commented upon by all students, from the need to listen to fellow-actors on stage, but also the need to listen to and understand the director, who was a Native Speaker. This latter point had a broader effect in that the students were exposed to practical and social English in their communications with the director (who had limited Polish). Similarly, the discussions about how to play the pieces and the explanations of the cultural aspects of the texts meant students were, "Speaking English in 'normal life' situations, not only discussions on topics that we were asked to talk about during English classes". At least three students mentioned it improving their English outside the classroom, "It helped me in normal situations on holidays, because listening some conversations on tape is one thing and listening to other person, who might have a strange accent is much harder".

For several students, speaking casually with a Native Speaker was useful in building their confidence, perhaps demystifying the Native Speaker image, “It gave me a confidence of speaking English and communicating with a person, whose native language is English”. This was reflected in several other responses which stressed how the projects gave confidence in using English but also in helping the student cross some kind of barrier in their English learning, “When you’re a kid, hardly speaking the foreign language, not bad at writing and understanding, still – you need a lot of effort to cross the line and start talking. For me, the first project was the starting point of speaking English”.

All students found the social side of the club important, particularly with meeting new friends and sharing experiences. This was especially strong when speaking of the Munich project, where they had had to work in groups of mixed nationalities to create performances, using English as a *Lingua Franca*. The student’s reflection on this is visible in the following argument:

Our visit in Munich influenced my English in many ways. Firstly we had to create our own play, so we had to write it in English using the vocabulary we know. Secondly, we had to communicate in English with people from different countries. It made me speak more fluently.

Another noted element of the projects which around half the students commented upon was the exposure to aspects of British/English Language culture through the material, especially being introduced to writers such as Burns, Owen and Eliot, of whom most were previously unaware.

## **9. Conclusion**

Comparing the students’ feedback to the above mentioned benefits of drama in ELT as cited by Stern, Maley and Duff, and Murray et al., it can be seen that a number of these may be seen to lie outside of “traditional” schooling in language but may also influence the students’ approach to and reception of English language teaching.

Stern’s suggestion that motivation is a key factor is borne out in that the student/actors involved in the projects were prepared to learn long sections of text and rehearse them intensely, moving out of their personal comfort zone (particularly in the case of pronunciation for poetry). The “clothes and boys” comment cited above, illustrates that a group goal motivated the teenagers to practice and perfect in their free time. Similarly, the courage to perform in a second language in front of peers

and parents suggests an enhancement of self-esteem brought to the fore through a group identity and also through the increased confidence in using the language with Native Speakers and other users of English who were (initially) strangers.

That so many of the members commented on the latter point, suggests that the social aspect of the theatre work, which arguably enhanced the individuals' self-esteem, was extremely beneficial to not only the learning process but the advancement of communicative abilities. This might reinforce Maley and Duff's statement that the use of drama can lead to greater willingness to take risks. One student commented that she enjoyed the chance to perform in English even though, or perhaps because, it was a "challenge" to her. Similarly, the desire to take part in projects and make friends (especially in the international projects) meant the teenagers had to overcome any reservations about their own language skills and take risks (Maley/Duff 2005: 2).

Despite these evident reinforcements of the benefits of drama as stated by the aforementioned authors, there are two interesting aspects which appear through the responses to the questionnaires. In none of the responses does a student mention physical and non-verbal language. This may, of course, be that the students did not find the physical training as being specifically useful or noteworthy; alternatively, it might be that they were not aware of it having an effect. Likewise, while many of the students felt that the theatre only helped their English "a little bit", they were very specific about how much it helped their vocabulary awareness, listening, pronunciation and speaking. It might be that the students felt "improvement" was something to be measured on an academic level (tests etc.) and they did not seem to appreciate how their enriched self-esteem and adventurousness, leading to greater usage in social and theatrical situations, was itself a major source of improvement. While they may not have felt it, they might have been unaware of how much they had improved under the influence of the theatre (as noted, this is very hard to demonstrate now).

This article has examined a small theatre project with a small group of teenage Polish students of English. It has examined the motivations of both the organizer (myself) and the members of the group, as well as the latter's thoughts on the experience from theatrical, social and educational points of view. The materials and practices of the theatre work, whilst initially carried out as a drama club rather than an ELT project, have been examined and analysed from the viewpoint of ELT theory, as well as certain cultural and ethnographic factors which may have been relevant to the linguistic development of the students either directly or indirectly.

As noted, it is an incomplete piece of work. The lack of space has restricted how much of the project could be examined in this work and the retrospective nature of the research leaves many holes. However, it is hoped that some of the findings and observations may be of use in later research into similar projects.

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