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Classroom activities to enhance skills in the dramatization of short stories

言語教育における短編小説を脚本化する試みの効果

KOVÁCS, Renáta

Abstract

The use of literary texts in the foreign language classroom has several benefits for foreign language acquisition. First, it offers non-native readers a broad representation of the target language in terms of vocabulary, grammar in discourse and cultural content. Second, it involves extended reading, which means closer and longer contact with the text. Longer exposure to the target language enhances vocabulary learning and fixes grammatical forms more effectively. The dramatization of short novels is a special method of literature instruction in the language classroom, whereby students create an other text by converting prose to dialogues. As the reading and dramatization task requires a considerable cognitive effort by students the process must be coupled with supporting activities. The activities applied in the classroom can be divided into three groups. The first group contains general activities related to the literary text, targeting learners' overall connection and interaction with the text in question. The second group includes activities focusing specially on the dramatization of short novels. The third group of activities are intended to draw students' attention to the grammar's function in discourse. The present practice pays special attention to the first two groups.

Keywords: Foreign language education, Literature in foreign language, Dramatization

Introduction

The importance of literary texts in foreign language education has been highlighted by several authors (Collie & Slater 1987, Lazar 1993, among others) because of its significant benefits for language learning. Literature in foreign language education exposes students to authentic texts written in the target language for native speakers and allows them to use target language in a creative and imaginative way and to acquire information about the target culture. Reading literature involves extensive reading, which is beneficial to language learners' cognitive development in the target language. Literature also offers a wide range of topics, universal as well as local ones, motivating learners to express their thoughts, emotions, and points of view. Authentic texts also

offer a wider representation of the functions of grammatical forms, which gives learners the opportunity to observe grammar in communication (Kovács 2019).

Every spring term, an optional subject titled *Short novel dramatization* is offered by the Hungarian Department of the Graduate School of Language and Culture (Osaka University). During this course, participants convert a short novel into a theatre play, a difficult procedure which must be smoothed by related activities. The main objective of the dramatization task is to prepare the script for the annual theatre festival of the faculty, generally held in November. However, the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar and their use in discourse along with cultural information play the same important role.

My aim in the present educational practice report is to focus on the description of classroom activities that I use in the dramatization subject to help students fulfil all the objectives. The description of some activities is completed with real examples I myself used during the sessions. All the examples are presented in their original form i.e. in Hungarian.

1. From short novel to theatre play

There are three groups of activities that play a constructive role in easing the challenges students face during dramatization. The first group contains general activities related to the literary text, targeting learners' overall connection and interaction with the text in question. These activities are intended (1) to catch learners' interest and facilitate the first contact with the text; (2) to maintain students' motivation and (3) to exploit the key events of the story and (4) the ending.

The second group includes activities focusing on the dramatization of short novels. As dramatization is a procedure which involves several objectives including (1) learners' familiarity with the vocabulary and its functional, cultural and pragmatic value; (2) the proper, overall understanding of the literary text, and (3) the dramatization itself, the activities vary widely.

The third group of activities are intended to draw students' attention to the grammar's function in discourse. In the present practice report I do not aim to pay particular attention to this point given that the functions of grammar vary widely across languages and require a specific approach for each language.

1.1. Familiarising learners with vocabulary

To familiarise learners with the literary text's vocabulary and its use, there are a broad range of standard activities, such as binding words in the text with their synonyms or definitions. The easy method involves giving both the word and the synonym or definition, while the more complicated version involves asking students to look for the proper answer in the text. Another way is to replace

the highlighted forms with synonymous expressions (Example 1).

Example 1

gyorsan felállt, mozgássérült, tetszett/működött, volt valami enni- és innivaló, nem jöhet be, odaállt, nem mozdult, bement, mérges lett, dokumentumot, jól nevelt nő, a saját szabálya, (azt) mondta, bement

Amikor megtudta, hogy a néni egyszerűen a pogácsakommandó egyik tagja, dühbe gurult és kijelentette, hogy soha többé nem teheti be náluk a lábát egyetlen fogadásra sem. Csakhogy Pogi néninek volt ám mindenféle igazolványa: újságíró-igazolványa, rokkant-igazolványa, sőt, egy régi, megsárgult szakszervezeti tagkönyve is, ami a külföldieknél mindig bejött. Őt nem lehetett csak úgy kitiltani valahonnan, mert felmutatta valamelyik papírt és sértett arccal bevonult.

Végigülte a kamarakonzerteket, végignézte a kiállítások képeit, végighallgatta a legunalmasabb felolvasásokat is. Aztán felpattant és szorosan odaállt a terített asztalhoz. Az volt az elve, hogy úrino nem tolakszik, ezért lecövekelt, és el se mozdult onnan, amíg volt valami terítéken.

(Tóth Krisztina: Pogi néni)

A good exercise for helping students understand the cultural connotations of a term involves asking them to draw what they think the meaning is. This activity brings out the issue of how meaning or cultural value varies in different societies. My personal example was when students had to draw (based on one of the characters in a short story) an elderly person wearing sweatpants. Japanese students typically sketched a person walking in a park or doing tai-chi, which is a well-known and not at all negative image in Japan. However, unfortunately, the image of an elderly person wearing sweatpants evokes a retired person of low income, with an air of abandonment. It was important to shed light on this difference for students to be able to imagine the character (and better understand his role in the storyline) and create a way of communication that described him.

Another good practice is to show students images related to the text and ask them to look for the expression or paragraph to which they think it is related.

To familiarise students with the contexts and connotations of a certain term, asking them to search for sentences on the Internet containing the term can be useful. Later on, they can share the information, discuss it, and compare it with the actual use in the short novel.

Another useful practice which works for both general comprehension and vocabulary use involves asking students to choose a newly learnt term from the short novel and to write a sentence

with it in a way that it fits the plot. A possible extension of the task is that students are also asked to use a particular grammar point, for example, the conditional sentence. Once the sentences are created, students can conduct a peer review.

Adapted to the classroom, the board games *Activity* and *Taboo* can cheer up the lesson and help learners to acquire vocabulary in a playful way.

The controlled role-play and conversation about a topic related or treated in the short novel can enhance the use of vocabulary. “Controlled” in this sense means that students are required to use certain words while performing the activity. My method is generally to prepare and distribute cards containing the vocabulary students are supposed to use. Then, students must use them all in a limited time, normally measured by an hourglass.

1.2. Enhancing comprehension of the plot

More is better: this is valid for activities that enhance the comprehension of the plot, as without a comprehensive understanding of the storyline, students will not be able to recreate it in the form of dialogue.

The most simple and common tasks are comprehension questions or true or false statements. A slightly more difficult version involves a task in which students are required to complete sentences according to the short novel’s story. In this task, the teacher pushes the students to use targeted vocabulary, on the one hand, and specific grammar, on the other. The exercise is shown in Example 2 with some explanation in English.

Example 2

Az anya nem szeretett sütni, mert (*use of because*)

Ha az anya nem olvasta volna a receptet a Nők Lapjában, akkor ... (*use of conditional*)

Anya azért akarta kipróbálni a süteményt, hogy ... (*to express a purpose*)

A locsolkodó helyett, hogy (*to express „instead of doing sthg”*)

During the so-called (by me) ‘*funnelling*’ activity, students prepare several increasingly brief summaries of the plot. In the first round, the students are asked to wrap up the story in eight sentences. In the next step, they must sum it up in four sentences, then two, then eight words, then five words, and so on, until reaching a one-word synopsis, which is the essence of the story.

A related activity involves asking students to place the keywords of the text (proposed by

the teacher) in chronological order. The ‘*When — happened...*’ activity also helps students to understand the event sequence of the story. In this game, the teacher mentions one event from the story, and the students must explain ‘when’, i.e. what happened before and after the event. The activity can be carried out in groups as well without the teacher’s active interference.

When reading literary texts, it is not enough to just understand the literal meaning; students must interpret what is really happening and what is motivating the characters to do what they do and say what they say. A good task to discover the hidden meaning behind the literal level is to prepare a ‘*This was said, but this was meant*’ chart. I consider it more useful if the teacher selects ‘*what is said*’, although in more motivated and advanced groups, students can even do it themselves as part of the task. Then, once the utterances are chosen, students can discuss and complete the ‘*meant*’ part of the chart in pairs. This activity is also intended to lead students to create characters and attribute qualities to them.

When focusing on the features of the characters, a good task is the ‘*recommendation letter*’ which relies on students’ creativity. The students are asked to imagine they have been requested to write a recommendation letter for the character in question. In the letter, the students highlight the character’s features based on his acts and utterances in the short novel.

Another activity that utilises characters is the ‘*Who could have said it?*’ task, in which the teacher prepares some utterances, and students decide which of the characters the sentence could be attributed to. The students must justify their decision based on events in the short story.

Students specially enjoy the time capsule activity which consists of making predictions about future events in the story or even about the fate of the figures. Written or recorded predictions, the ‘*time capsules*’, are stowed by the teacher until the last lesson of the term, when they are opened again. Then, students can comment on the differences between what they imagined would happen and what really took place in the story.

2. Activities focusing on the dramatization

The aim of these activities is to make it easier for students to convert prose to dialogue. To avoid future complications, it is recommended to begin with some shorter dramatization activities. A good choice is to convert the text of indirect written speech into a dialogue and vice versa.

Later, when working with the target text, the first and most important rule is that students need smaller units to work with (a maximum of 1–2 paragraphs). In my experience, students get lost in longer texts and feel anxious simply because they feel they lack the time to deal with them. Units should be determined by the teacher. To determine the contents of each paragraph, summarising activities are useful. It is also helpful to look for the key sentences of each paragraph and use them

as a starting point for the conversion.

Role-plays based on the paragraph also help students to imagine the situation and what might be said.

3. Resume

In the present educational practice report, I focused on the description of classroom activities that I use specially in the dramatization subject to help students understand and interpret a literary text; to become familiar with its vocabulary from the point of view of discourse, context, and connotation; and to enhance the dramatization itself. The activities were divided into three groups according to their target: lexicon, text interpretation, or dramatization.

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