

Drama in LCTL Classrooms: Example of an Experiential Learning Project in Modern Standard Arabic

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Abstract

The present article describes an experiential learning drama project in Modern Standard Arabic that took place at a large, public university in the United States, as an effective way of consolidating learners' oral skills both productively and receptively at various sublevels of proficiency. After briefly discussing methods and benefits of employing authentic drama texts in a language classroom, the article moves on to describe how the project was structured and conducted through the various phases of play selection, reading sessions, and abridging process and its implications for the lexical and syntactic aspects of the text. Furthermore, the article discusses CALL tools that were employed with a particular focus placed on components such as pronunciation and intonation, and finally, the rehearsal phase as an opportunity for meaningful interaction between learners. The article aims to provide a detailed model of how drama can be employed in second language classrooms with particular focus on less commonly taught languages.

Keywords: Arabic, drama, authentic texts, CALL, experiential learning, Egyptian, Tawfiq al-Hakim

1. Introduction

Drama is a powerful tool in language classes and is often overlooked by language teachers who traditionally prioritize components of language instruction that are more textbook-grounded. It is generally agreed upon that only through active interaction in the target language with their instructor or peers, and within meaningful contexts, can language learners develop their communicative skills (Canale & Swain, 1980). The argument that native speakers themselves acquire their first language through multiple exercises that involve language use in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978) supports such a statement, and the benefit of replicating these exercises—even if in a controlled environment such as a classroom—is undeniable. In drama-oriented activities, learners are encouraged to take risks with the language, and make connections between thought and action, meaning and words. They have the opportunity to use the language for real purposes, to gain fluency, internalize grammatical structures used by native speakers, and build their confidence when speaking the language.

Drama can be used for virtually any student population with a minimal functional proficiency in the target language¹, and its application can vary from short role-plays conducted over single class periods with various degrees of improvisation, to lengthy workshops centered on an authentic literary piece that would require several class periods and could be offered as an independent course.

In short role-plays, students are often assigned a specific role and a particular task to complete, guided by prompts in a neutral language or in the target language, and the focus is generally placed

¹ According to the ACTFL guidelines on speaking, a minimal functional proficiency in a foreign language can be achieved starting at the novice-high level (ACTFL, 2012). The thought behind this is that learners at the novice-low and mid levels have no real functional ability in the target language as their pronunciation is often unintelligible and they heavily rely on short, stock phrases that do not allow for a meaningful exchange of information.

on activating a vocabulary list, a grammatical structure, or on both. This type of drama activity can prove most useful in lower levels (novice-mid to intermediate-low), which is appropriate for the quantitative and qualitative production that learners are capable of. In longer drama projects, participants are able to take on authentic literary pieces written in the target language, and the work can be structured in a way that allows for a cultural analysis of the literary work in context, and exposure to an authentic language as used by native speakers. The latter directly engages with the debate on the modification of authentic texts in SL classrooms.

This paper describes a drama experiential learning project conducted over a five-week workshop with a group of seven Arabic language learners at a large public university in the United States whose levels vary from intermediate-low to advanced-mid. After examining the existing literature on drama application in language classes, as well as that on the use of authentic materials, the paper attempts to respond to the following questions: how may an authentic text be selected for a drama experiential learning project in a LCTL? What is the optimal way to modify such text in a manner that renders it more accessible to learners while not compromising its authenticity? What kind of classroom practices and technology tools can be utilized to facilitate the understanding and mastery of the text?

2. Literature Review

The majority of empirical, data-driven studies on using drama in second language classrooms have focused on languages other than Arabic, with the exception of one small-scale study, conducted about two decades ago, on a group of Arabic language learners at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC). The purpose of the study was broadly aimed at testing the effectiveness of using drama in second language classrooms (El-Nady 2000). El-Nady conducted his study on a group of 20 beginner students mid-way through their 63-week long language course. He concluded that using drama in Arabic second language classrooms promotes vocabulary retention and creates an environment that supports cooperative learning (El-Nady 2000). As a result, little to no data exists on using drama in Arabic second language classrooms.

On the other hand, there is a substantial number of empirical, descriptive studies that were conducted on Germanic and Romance languages, especially English and French (Belliveau & Kim 2013). These studies can generally be placed into one of the following categories: playwriting (e.g. Early & Yeung 2009; Elga 2002), dramatization of literary pieces (e.g. Lauer 2008), improvisational theatre (Matthias 2007), and full-scale theatrical productions of literary texts (e.g. Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo 2004). The latter, in particular, is considered more conducive to language learning in an interdisciplinary context (Shier, 2002; Schultz and Heingck, 2002) as it addresses and fulfills three important aspects of a successful language instruction: proficiency, culture, and confidence (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo 2004).

This study differs from the majority of similar studies in the sense that it investigates the applicability of drama on a less commonly taught language, such as Arabic, while offering a structured step-by-step approach that illustrates specific technology tools that can be utilized in the process.

On the other hand, the literature on the use of authentic texts - which is another main component of this study - speaks to the central role they play in L2 instruction since the Eighties (Mishan 2005) primarily for their ability to bring 'real life' to the classroom, and to provide an input that is comprehensible and that promotes affective engagement of learners (see also Krashen 1981). However, there still is much debate around the benefits, if any, of modifying these texts particularly for lower level proficiency students. Proponents of the use of authentic texts contend that the modification process defies the same definition of authenticity (e.g. Swaffar, 1985; Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Berardo 2006; Nuttall 1996; Tomlinson, Bao, Masuhara, & Rudby 2001). On the other side, proponents of the use of modified texts argue that non-modified texts, especially for beginning and intermediate L2 learners, can inhibit language acquisition, particularly in the case of reading texts (e.g. Johnson 1981; Shook 1997; Davis 1992; Young 1999). The debate between both sides continues largely due to the lack of empirical evidence that engages directly with the linguistic properties

of the text (Crossley et al.2007). Much of the debate still revolves around how much and which parts of an authentic text can be modified.

3. Methodology

3.1 Recruitment of Participants

The seven workshop participants are former or current students of Arabic who demonstrated an interest in consolidating and practicing their language skills during the summer months. No particular recruitment prerequisite was established. Because the participants were not awarded any academic credit, the recruitment process was lengthy and more problematic than expected. On the other hand, having participants whose levels of proficiency varied notably was helpful in assigning roles based on the level of proficiency of each participant; the more experienced language learners were assigned the lead roles, while the less experienced learners were assigned the smaller roles.

Additionally, an eighth participant was assigned the role of prompter. Given that the prompter had the only responsibility of providing reading prompts during rehearsals and the final performance, the prompter was required to attend all reading sessions and complete the reading-related tasks as illustrated below.

3.2 Text Selection

The selected play for the drama workshop is *مجلس العدل* (*The Council of Justice*) by Egyptian playwright and novelist Tawfiq al-Hakim—a highly prominent writer who is considered by many a pioneer of Arabic drama². Throughout his career, al-Hakim produced

² Arabic stage drama has a short history as it had its earliest start in the mid-nineteenth century by *مارون النقاش*, a well-known Lebanese merchant, who brought stage drama to his hometown in Beirut after a trip to Europe, and started a theater in his own house with a performance of Moliere's *L'Avare*. However, it was only in the early 1900s, when Tawfiq al-Hakim came along with his outstanding playwrighting skills, that Arabic drama was really born (Badawi, 2010).

dozens of plays that can generally be categorized into biographical, objective, and intellectual theater (Allen, 2000). *The Council of Justice* belongs to the category of intellectual theater³; that is, a number of literary pieces that have the general structure of a play, which al-Hakim refused to call “traditional plays” as they were originally intended to be “read” not “acted.”

The Council of Justice is, in fact, a short, one-act play of about 40 pages. The plot of the play takes place in a small town in a judge’s courtroom where several plaintiffs come seeking justice against the town baker, only to passively realize that the judge’s biased rulings in favor of the baker will not bring justice. While there is a clear lack of a traditional play structure⁴, the play itself is a political satire fraught with metaphors that draw a somewhat clear connection between the characters’ actions and some of the international events that took place in the nineteenth century and shaped the politics of the Arab region.⁵

Choosing a play with a relevant cultural component and historic references is considered particularly important as the benefit of exposing learners to a meaningful literary work can go well beyond

³ The term that is generally used to refer to al-Hakim’s intellectual theater is “*théâtre des idées*” (Allen, 2000).

⁴ Unlike a traditional, Aristotelian dramatic structure (Lavandier, 2005), *The Council of Justice* lacks a rising action that leads to a climax and eventually to a denouement. It would appear that the play is based on the exposition of a steady conflict, between the judge and the baker on one hand, and the plaintiffs on the other, which does not get resolved.

⁵ al-Hakim wrote this play in a time when the focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict was gradually shifting from the battlefield to the diplomatic one, and resolutions by international organizations like the UN (and other affiliated bodies) had increased weight on the issue. Such resolutions were often viewed by Arabs as biased and heavily influenced by the US relationship with Israel. This, of course, was capitalized upon by al-Hakim who relies heavily on symbolism in most of his work. Moreover, in his preface to the play, al-Hakim compares his council to “other international councils” before moving toward a more vague context. In that sense, it is the researcher’s belief that there is a powerful resemblance of the judge’s courtroom with his biased rulings on one side, and the UN Security Council on the other side.

the text to offer valuable insights into Egyptian culture and the time period in which the text was written.

3.3 Development of Materials

3.3.1 The Abridging Process

External manipulation of authentic texts with the purpose of enhancing their comprehensibility are generally reductive if they are part of a simplification process. Whether morphological, semantic, or syntactic, simplifications can actually inhibit language acquisition (Yano et al.1994) and, in some cases, even impair comprehension (Krashen 1989). Some traditional simplification strategies range from reducing the length of utterances and clauses to preference for canonical word order, and explicitation of nouns instead of pronouns. However, two general modifications that scholars seem to generally agree on their utility in enhancing the comprehensibility of a text is 1) a slower speech rate (in the case of oral discourse); and 2) elaborative modifications (Yano et al.1994; Krashen 1989).

Instead of taking away from the text through a process of shortening clauses and removing or replacing some vocabulary items, elaborative modifications may actually result in lengthening the text as they often involve repetitions, paraphrasing, expansion of key lexical terms, and additions that clarify the syntactic relationship between clauses. The purpose of these changes is to stimulate language acquisition by mimicking changes that native speakers naturally use in oral and written discourse. An elaborated text is consequently longer than its baseline version, which might be problematic if the text in question is a drama text that needs to be memorized by learners, especially if the baseline version already contains lengthy lines.

While we agree with the validity of the studies supporting elaborative modifications of authentic texts, for the purpose of the workshop in question we have used a mixed textual manipulation process that includes simplifying modifications, dictated - in our opinion - by the diglossic nature of Arabic, in addition to elaborative modifications that further enrich the text and preserve its

authenticity. The modifications discussed in this paper are of semantic nature, and are followed by a brief description of the syntactic features of the text.

3.3.1.1 Lexicon

The play is written in Modern Standard Arabic with a relatively limited influence of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, which is detectable for the most part in the vocabulary component through the employment of nouns⁶ such as (هزار)⁷ instead of (بيت)⁸; (مُزاح);⁸ instead of (سيّدة/امرأة); and (كتكوت)⁹ instead of (صوص), and in certain grammatical structures such as the frequent use of present participles in lieu of verbs to express an action that takes place in the present tense (such as (هل أنت رافض حكم المحكمة؟)¹⁰ instead of (هل أنت ترفض حكم (؟المحكمة).

Another component of the play that reveals such influence is the use of proverbs as in (ما ينوب المخلص إلا تمزيق هدومه)¹¹, which is a slightly standardized form of the colloquial (ما ينوب المخلص غير تقطيع (هدومه).

The conscious choice to not standardize these forms was deemed important to maintain a relevant aspect of al-Hakim's style, and to ground the play's reality to a particular nation, rather than to the broader region where the language is spoken.

On the larger MSA corpus of the play, a limited intervention on some of the vocabulary items took place to cut off items that do not appear to be used frequently by native speakers of Arabic. The frequency of vocabulary items is a factor that needs to be looked at

⁶ All of these examples showcase the preference by the author for colloquial terms as opposed to MSA terms. The English translation, however, offers only the standard equivalent of each example.

⁷ Trans.: Joking; kidding.

⁸ Trans.: woman

⁹ Trans.: chick

¹⁰ Trans.: Do you reject the court's ruling?-- in this example, the present participle 'rejecter' is used to indicate the present continuous in English "are you rejecting".

¹¹ Trans.: He who tries to thwart a fight earns nothing but torn clothes.

closely, particularly for those LCTLs that are characterized by a diglossic state. A frequency listing¹² was utilized for that purpose to prioritize vocabulary items that are more likely to be used by learners outside of the classroom as shown in the following examples¹³.

Example (1):

هل يُرضي الله أن تطير أوزتي وأتضور أنا وأهلي
جوعاً؟! (16.p)

Trans.: would Allah want my goose to fly away and for me and my family to writhe in hunger?!

In the example above, the verb يَتَّضَوِّرُ (*writhe*) was replaced by the following, more frequent verb (*suffer*):

هل يُرضي الله أن تطير أوزتي وأعاني أنا
وأهلي من الجوع؟!

While repetitions and paraphrasing are relatively abundant across the baseline text as an authentic feature, in other instances these have been added as part of elaborative modifications. The following examples showcase the retention lexical items and their collocations in the elaborated text, as well as strategies such as repletion, paraphrasing, and topicalization that were used in the same text to facilitate comprehension.

¹² The Frequency Listing used for the purpose of this article is part of the Routledge Frequency Series (2010); however, the researcher does acknowledge the limitations of this source and the lack of alternatives for frequency dictionaries.

¹³ It should be noted here that the examples reported in the study are accompanied by a translation in English that most closely resembles the language of the baseline text, and that highlights the modifications implemented in the elaborated version. Despite our best efforts, we realize that the English translation may not accurately reflect the modification the baseline text has undergone in Arabic. The English translations are, therefore, to be considered an approximation of the Arabic examples.

Example (2):

(29.p) هذا يُعتبر استهتاراً واستخفافاً بأحكام المحاكم [...]

Trans.: this is considered disparagement and denigration of the courts' rulings

where the underlined nouns are considered synonyms.

Example (3):

أفهمك... أليست زوجتك تحمل شيئاً خفياً غير منظور في بطنها... تجهله أنت كل الجهل؟! (34.p)

Trans.: Let me explain... isn't your wife carrying something hidden, invisible in her belly...that even you do not know of?

where the underlined negative adjective is a synonym of the previous one.

Example (4)

إن من المبادئ المقررة أن "العين بالعين، والسن بالسن" (28.p)

Trans.: It is an affirmed principle that "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth".

Where the underlined noun-adjective phrase has been paraphrased to clarify its meaning:

إن من المبادئ المقررة والأفكار التي يتفق عليها الناس أن "العين بالعين، والسن بالسن"

Trans.: It is an affirmed principle and an idea agreed upon by people that an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.

The same example lends itself well for topicalization, where the subject is fronted to clarify the topic:

"العين بالعين والسن بالسن" هو من المبادئ المقررة ومن الأفكار التي يتفق عليها الناس

Trans.: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" is one of the affirmed principles and one of the beliefs agreed upon by people.

Example (5)

[عليك أن تُسرحني بإحسان... (36.p)

Trans.: [you must] dissolve the marriage on equitable terms.

This particular clause is inspired by a well-known verse from the Quran (2:229)¹⁴ on marriage and divorce, and therefore uses religious terms that require further clarification as follows:

[عليك أن تُسرحني بإحسان وتتركني أذهب بشكل عادل بلا مشاكل... (36.p)

Trans.: [you must] dissolve the marriage on equitable terms, and let me go in fairness and without problems.

Following these limited interventions, a glossary was created containing a list of vocabulary items and their definitions. The glossary contains a total of 90 entries, each of which is explained either through paraphrasing in Arabic or through an image, in addition to details such as the part of speech (noun/verb/adjective, etc.) of each word, its root, and the page number.¹⁵ A visual snippet of the glossary is reported below (see Figure 1) to showcase its structure. Participants were asked to conduct a preliminary reading

¹⁴ The verse reads: 'Divorce is twice. The marriage is then to be held together on equitable terms, or dissolved with kindness'

¹⁵ As a Semitic language, Arabic relies heavily on the root system. Formed by a sequence of consonants and vowels, roots often carry a core meaning, and are placed in different patterns to create a set of words (nouns/adjectives/verbs, etc.) that are related to the core meaning. Knowing the root of newly learned vocabulary items is particularly important for learners in order to improve their guessing skills when encountering unknown lexical items.

outside of class, and to utilize the glossary in order to familiarize themselves with the language of the play.

14	ص.6	حجّة	اسم	ح - ج - ج	سبب ليس حقيقي
15	ص.6	يتفلسف	فعل		يقول كلمات كبيرة ويتكلم مثل الفيلسوف
16	ص.7	مؤمن	اسم	ء - م - ن	شخص يقول إن الله واحد
17	ص.7	قُدرة	اسم	ق - د - ر	إستِطاعة - الشخص القادر هو الشخص الذي يستطيع

Figure (1): glossary appendix.

3.3.1.2 Syntax

Tawfiq al-Hakim is generally known for his relatively accessible language, which is influenced, particularly in his plays, by colloquial structures, and for his short, concise lines that make for an accelerated rhythm in his plays¹⁶ (Allen, 2000). On a syntactic level, al-Hakim's play is generally characterized by short sentences made of two to four clauses¹⁷ mostly with coordinate relationships. Subordination is quite limited, and coordination is often expressed through the use of false suspension points as in the example below:

Example (1)

لم أتدخل في العراك نظراً لوجود حريمي معي... وهي حامل في شهرين ... حمل كنت أنتظره بفارغ الصبر يا سيدي القاضي... لأنني لم أرزق بعد... وهذه أول الخلفة.

Trans.: I did not interfere in the fight considering that I had my wife with me... and she is two-months pregnant... a pregnancy that I had

¹⁶ In his plays, al-Hakim's style often wavers between the use of literary (e.g., Modern Standard Arabic) and colloquial registers in what he referred to as the "third language," which was a mixture of both varieties (Allen, 2000).

¹⁷ This statement was not verified by the researcher through a readability assessment software.

been waiting for impatiently, your honor ... because I have not been blessed with a child yet ... and this is my first successor.

Example (2)

يستطيع أن يقول ما يريد... المحكمة قررت أنك بريء وحكمت عليه بجنيه غرامة. والآن تفضل أيها الفران ... تستطيع أن تعود إلى عملك.

Trans.: He can say whatever he wants... the Court ruled in your favor, and he has to pay a fine of one pound. Now, dear baker, you may return to your work.

These syntactic features make al-Hakim's an exemplary text to use in an experiential drama project where learners are required to memorize all the lines as it does not pose the risk of overloading the learners' memory and allows for the opportunity to focus on linguistic forms.

3.4 Procedure

The workshop met twice weekly for three hours for a total of ten meetings (30 hours). The first three to four meetings were devoted to learning about the playwright, the play, and getting the learners acquainted with the language of the play through intensive reading sessions that focused on components such as rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech as illustrated below. It was also during that stage that roles were assigned to actors based on their personal preference, their availability, and their predisposition toward a particular character. Reading sessions were then followed by rehearsals and character dramatization before putting the final performance on stage.

3.4.1 Reading Sessions

The reading sessions were conducted during the first two weeks with the purpose of familiarizing the participants with the language of the text. Participants were asked to carry out an independent, preliminary reading at home, with the aid of the

glossary, and to identify problematic vocabulary items and syntactic structures; thus building reading stamina.

In class, participants were asked to pick a character and carry out a second reading with another cast member, and to share their findings on some of the problematic language aspects they identified, which fostered a collaborative learning environment. It is also during that phase that the instructor circulated the room to observe and provide feedback.

A third reading was conducted in a roundtable format, where all participants took turns reading lines from several characters, and pronunciation/vocabulary issues that persisted were addressed by the instructor. This student-centered approach ensured consistent practice and exposure to the text at multiple levels.

Following the third reading, CALL tools (Computer Aided Language Learning) were utilized outside of the classroom and were particularly useful in effectively enhancing learners' pronunciation and intonation through non-traditional methods. Two tools, in particular, had a significant impact on the learners' progress, as shown below.

3.4.1.1 Google Doc

The popular Web-based application was utilized for its speech-recognition feature. Drawing on the vocabulary items of the play, several worksheets were created containing vocabulary and sentences featuring these items. Participants were required to practice and "voice-type" each vocabulary item. The same item was then repeated in the same line where it appears on the play, and participants were asked to voice-type the entire line. This exercise was used to focus on the pronunciation of individual morphemes/words. See Figure (2) for an example:



Figure (2): example of how Google Doc was utilized

While speech-recognition technology, particularly in less commonly taught languages, still has a few issues to work through such as its ability to capture variations of pronunciation and to sort through background noise, which often increases the time required to complete such exercises, participants reported this activity to be quite beneficial in improving their pronunciation at the word level.

3.4.1.2 Praat

This is an open-source software for the acoustic analysis of speech¹⁸ that was employed during the workshop for its ability to provide learners with a model intonation for each line that they could use to practice. Participants were asked to observe the exact intonation and reproduce it on their own version of the software by measuring the intonation of their speech, and comparing it to a model provided by the instructor.

Praat was used primarily to focus on intonation at the sentence level, as opposed to individual phonemes/words. Upon identification of a number of lines that each student needed to practice, the instructor used the software to record those lines and

¹⁸ Designed and developed by researchers at the University of Amsterdam, PRAAT has a wide range of applications from measuring pronunciation (vowels length, voice onset time) to measuring intonation and stress.

provide participants with a pitch diagram that guided them through their practice.

Figure (3) shows a sample pitch analysis featuring one sentence recorded by the instructor. The blue line on the lower part of the diagram represents the pitch contour with the highest and lowest values in Hz on the right side of the window. Learners can listen to the entire segment, or zoom in to isolate and listen to a shorter sub-segment, in addition to recording their own sentence and comparing both pitch contours.¹⁹

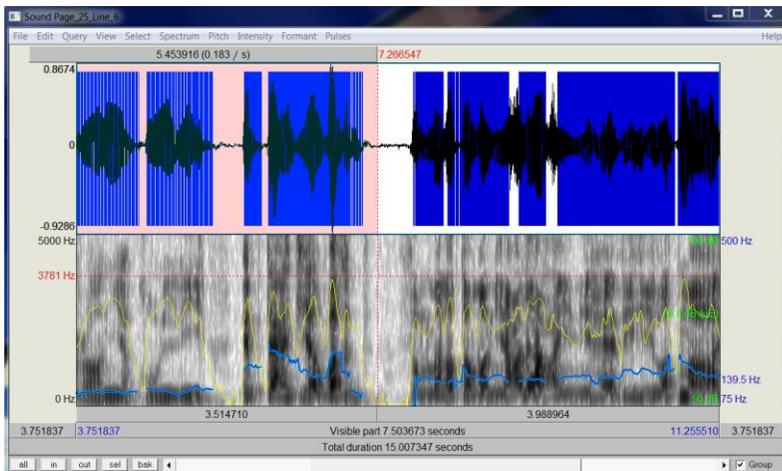


Figure (3): a sample pitch analysis

Working on intonation through Praat, in addition to the more traditional teacher-centered methods like repetition, was particularly helpful in providing a reliable visual component for learners to refer to, and in allowing them to practice at their own pace in a non-classroom setting.

While participants reported that working with Praat helped them feel more confident about their speaking, it is worth

¹⁹ For a look at how PRAAT can be employed in a language classroom, see Wilson (2008) and Gorjian, Hayati, & Pourkhoni (2013).

mentioning that the software is intended primarily for speech analysis researchers and, therefore, lacks a user-friendly interface that participants can intuitively use, which often requires a sophisticated level of understanding by both teachers and learners (Brett, 2004).

An important aspect of the reading sessions consisted of in-depth discussions of the character profile and reactions. Each participant was asked to further explore the character they are performing by bringing to the classroom three adjectives that best describe their character. These adjectives were used as prompts for an in-class discussion of each character and, therefore, a further analysis of the literary text as a whole. The instructor guided the participants in finding clues from the text to make a case for or against the adjectives they selected. Participants were then asked to carry out a reading of their lines that reflects the attributes they identified in their characters, thus offering the opportunity for a purposeful reading practice.

3.5 Rehearsals

The rehearsals phase aimed at combining the participants' ability to produce correctly pronounced and pitched lines with physical actions. An outline of the stage performance was drafted in which the time and mode of major physical actions taking place on stage were determined. Participants were allowed to use the script for the first two rehearsals as they were working through the memorization of their lines. Starting with the third rehearsal, participants were not permitted to use the script, which allowed for more focus on physical actions, while tolerating a margin of modification in the lines as long as the general meaning was preserved.

While often dismissed as irrelevant and not directly related to working on the language, the rehearsal stage is particularly important because it offers learners the opportunity to interact in a meaningful way. In fact, at this stage, the director has numerous instructions involving how the characters should perform a certain scene, which is vital for their character to come to life. These instructions were always given in Arabic, which might have occasionally prolonged the

execution time or required repetition, but they also opened a window for the implementation of the TPR (total physical response) approach in a context that was not viewed by learners as childish or superfluous. Moreover, to take further advantage of the rehearsals phase, two lessons were designed and delivered in tandem with the reading sessions, respectively, on body parts and the imperative mode.

4. Assessment

Following the stage performance, the seven students who participated in the workshop were asked to complete an online survey that aimed at measuring the workshop benefits as perceived by learners. The focus was placed on the basic goals of the workshop, i.e., confidence in speaking in the target language, degree of improvement in pronunciation/intonation, and confidence in taking on authentic readings in Arabic.

All of the respondents reported that participating in the workshop improved their confidence in their speaking abilities, while over 70% of them also reported an improvement in their pronunciation/intonation and in their ability to crack the pragmatic code of their interlocutor based on a statement/question's intonation. Because of occasional memory shortcomings during rehearsals, participants were instructed to complete their lines to the best of their ability while remaining faithful to the general intention of their character; this particular instruction, according to over 70% of the respondents, improved their compensation strategies in Arabic and their ability to improvise on the spot.

Particularly relevant is the fact that over 70% of the respondents believe that participating in the workshop significantly expanded their repertoire of active vocabulary, and that incorporating technology tools like speech-recognition in addition to extensive rehearsing allowed for ample opportunities for practice, and promoted vocabulary retention (figure 4).

The workshop has expanded my repertoire of active vocabulary.

7 responses

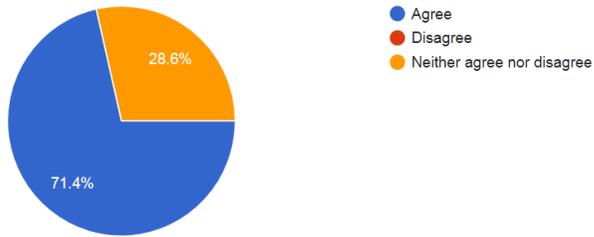


Figure (4): survey results.

Finally, all respondents agreed that the workshop structure and layout allowed for a more personalized and relaxing learning experience that is different from that of a traditional classroom (figure 5).

I feel that the workshop structure and layout allowed for a more personalized and relaxing learning experience that is different from that of a traditional classroom.

7 responses

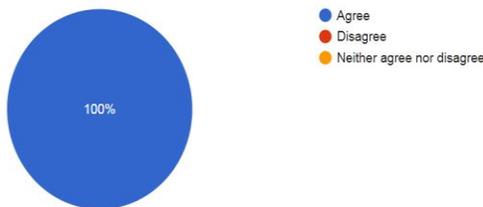


Figure (5): survey results.

The expansion of the participants’ repertoire of active vocabulary can be attributed to the fact that the understanding of many vocabulary items was crucial to the comprehension of the text. Furthermore, the same advanced vocabulary items were repeated throughout the text. The consistency of vocabulary frequency in

lengthy, modified literary texts such as al-Hakim's play is an important aspect that raises the participants' awareness of the relevance of certain vocabulary items and encourages them to incorporate these items in their speech.

After the second week of the workshop, several instances were observed by the author in which participants recycled and spontaneously incorporated either vocabulary items or entire phraseological structures from their lines into their everyday speech during break time at rehearsals. These structures were sometimes used in a humorous way, and in other instances to facilitate a purposeful exchange of information. The author postulates that the full-immersion aspect of the project encouraged participants to use the language in a meaningful, purposeful way, thus positively affecting their confidence and ease of use when speaking the language.

Additionally, an improved knowledge of the socio-political context in which the text was produced was also noted. During a brief Q&A session that was held with audience members after the final performance, participants demonstrated their knowledge of the relevance of al-Hakim's play and were able to share critical comments on the play.

5. Limitations of the study and future research

The main limitation of this study was the small number of participants which, in a way, takes away from the relevance of the numerical data reported in the Assessment section. This study was also conducted in one university; it would be necessary to replicate the project across a number of institutions in order to gather more reliable data and create a more detailed profile of how drama might be used in LCTL classrooms. However, it should also be noted here that the emphasis of the data in the present study is on the qualitative aspect of the responses.

Another limitation is represented by the fact that, at the end of the project, participants self-assessed the progress they made as perceived by them. While it is generally unlikely for language learners

to make substantial progress over a relatively short period of time, it is recommended that a more reliable proficiency test be used at the beginning and end of the project to accurately assess the progress participants made. However, it is also our understanding that aspects such as confidence when speaking the language, which is part of the survey that was administered to the participants, are not easily quantifiable and, to our knowledge, do not constitute part of a traditional language proficiency test.

A specific research recommendation that was made by Belliveau and Kim in their 2013 research synthesis with regard to the necessity of conducting long-term or longitudinal research still stands true. A longitudinal component would in fact offer researchers the opportunity to closely observe the potentials and challenges of using drama in second language instruction. Furthermore, a research line that should be pursued pertains to the employability of drama in second language literature classes. The pilot project carried out by Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo (2004) is certainly an interesting model of how drama can be successfully used in content-based literature courses at the college level, and one that still requires further research.

6. Conclusion

The present article is based on an experiential learning drama project in Modern Standard Arabic that was conducted at a large public university in the United States as an effective way to consolidate learners' receptive and productive oral skills. The article describes the structure and various phases of the five-week project from play selecting to the abridging process and CALL tools that were employed along the way.

Based on this experiential project, it is recommended that the selected literary piece be an authentic work that has a meaningful message in the target culture. While limited modifications on the original script can be permitted to expand the number of frequently used vocabulary items and expand upon certain lexical items through repetition and paraphrasing, such modifications should not alter the style of the writer or compromise the authenticity of the text, and

should be made with the learners' proficiency level in mind. Attention should be paid to the length of elaborated drama texts, keeping in mind that, unlike authentic texts traditionally used in language classes, these texts are meant to be memorized by language learners. Therefore, we recommend choosing a text that is not characterized by lengthy lines.

Reading sessions preceding the rehearsals phase are of the utmost importance and should be accompanied by CALL tools to facilitate the learning process. Speech-recognition technology and speech analysis software such as Google Doc and Praat can be very useful for that purpose; however, they also require training on the part of the learners before they are able to successfully use these tools.

Particular attention should be given to the use of the target language during rehearsals as the only medium of communication. This allows ample opportunity for learners to interact meaningfully in a context where the instructor makes notes on the performance of an individual or the proper use of gestures, which are all elements that would require a real action/task on the part of the learner.

Students who have participated in the project have reported a significant improvement in their confidence when speaking in the target language, as well as an improvement in intonation, pronunciation, repertoire of active vocabulary, and their ability to use compensation strategies and to improvise on the spot.

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