Jonathan Sharp

Drama Techniques in University English Language Teaching
An Action Research Exploration

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by
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Contents

Preface

This doctoral thesis truly was a labour of love: inspired by my enduring passion for and belief in the power of drama, both in and outside of language education; and written in an action-packed seven years, parallel to my duties as a full-time university instructor, husband and father. It is no empty cliché, nor misplaced modesty, to state that without the understanding and full support of my sons Alexander and Cailean, and most especially my wife Feli, completing this thesis would simply not have been feasible. This is as much their achievement as my own.

Mentioning everyone who played a part in inspiring the project would be impossible. That said, on the drama side I must thank the indomitable Marilyn Wallace, Jack Babb and Don Fenner for giving me an unforgettable eight years of practical theatre experience. Gill Woodman at Munich was the best boss imaginable, allowing me to develop my interests in drama-based language education and encouraging me in my research and teaching career. Stu, Shawn and the rest of the gang at Tübingen hired me based on my growing profile in drama-in-education, and have continued to be the most amazing colleagues. Professors Angelika Zirker and Matthias Bauer have been quite wonderful in their continued support of and interest in my work, offering invaluable opportunites for collaboration. Rob McColl has been a true brother-in-arms in the ongoing mission to keep practical approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare at the forefront. Fruitful and insightful discussions with Helga Tschurtschenthaler, Eva Göksel, Stefanie Giebert and John Crutchfield assured me that my furrow was not as lonely as I had imagined; Manfred Schewe gave us all a formal platform to exchange our ideas more widely. Deepest thanks also to Professor Petra Kirchhoff for being a supportive, encouraging and friendly second supervisor.

Finally my greatest thanks are due to Professor Friederike Klippel. I cannot possibly imagine a better doctoral supervisor. In the darkest moments, even when I had lost my belief in the project, she never did. Her support, both academic and practical, has been phenomenal; I'll never forget it.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Dr. John D. Sharp, who instilled in me a love of books, ideas, and the tangible value of philosophy – "the only game in town."

Cuimhnich air na daoine on tàinig thu.

Rottenburg, September 2024   Jonathan Sharp

1 Introduction

This study emerges as the culmination of many strands of my life, both private and professional. In the late 1990's, as a 22-year-old recent English Literature graduate, I boarded a plane for Vienna for an intended gap year, to be spent furthering my interest in classical music, and teaching English at a private language school. The informality and the logistical ease of the whole process seems to hark back to a different age in my memory, as I sit writing this some 24 years later. Living and working in Vienna, language difference aside, was as straightforward in terms of organization and bureaucracy as had I been in Edinburgh or London. The planned gap year was extended. A year's stay turned into 8 years. My life in Austria, then Germany, became more and more established, until it became clear that I would be settled here for at least my professional working life. Music, the original reason for moving in the first place, gradually became a hobby, replaced by a more enduring passion: theatre. Some two weeks after arriving in Vienna, I had auditioned successfully for a small repertory theatre that performed exclusively in English. What started as a single engagement for one production developed into a major, ongoing activity that kept me in the city.

The other occupation that sustained and developed was English language teaching. As I taught English during the day and performed in the theatre at night, the vague idea of somehow combining these two activities started to form. The main desire of most of the students at the private language school where I taught was to practice spoken English – for the majority of them, in order to improve their business communication skills in international contexts. My colleagues and I spent long hours developing exercises and methods to best simulate 'real life' oral communication situations to use in our classes. At the same time, the small theatre company where I worked was run off its feet by school matinées, to which English teachers would bring entire classes in order to offer them exposure to 'authentic', native-speaker-based, oral communication. Surely, I thought, there was potential to combine these worlds – the educational and the performative – to the benefit of students of English, whether younger or older, and for whatever the pedagogical purpose? After two years of theatre work, I began teaching classes at the English department of the University of Vienna, where I finally had the chance to experiment with some of the ideas I'd had about combining drama and ELT (English Language Teaching). The first class was literature based: a play-reading and discussion group, where we would cast each scene and read it aloud, working on pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition alongside the literary analysis. But soon I was using drama-in-education methods and techniques in the regular language classes (see section 1.1), not grounded in literary texts, but in role-play, improvisation, and student-devised work, for the purpose of oral communication practice.

I was happy with the fact that, as far as I could tell, the students enjoyed drama exercises, and seemed to be using their spoken English more than in the non-dramatic classes I taught. After moving to a post at the University of Munich, I continued to use drama activities in my classes, as well as starting to read into the slowly-emerging body of research on drama methods in language teaching. Simultaneously, I spent a lot of time thinking about my particular teaching context: *Sprachpraxis* (or Academic English); that is practical English classes, taught alongside academic courses, for university students of English. A range of abilities (especially at the lower semester levels), large classes, and a variety of degree types were issues faced by all of us *Lektoren* (teachers of Academic English), which we regularly discussed and tried to find solutions to.

When I successfully applied for my current post: a permanent ELT teaching post in the *Sprachpraxis* section of the English department at the University of Tübingen, my professional path had become clear: I was not, after all, going to continue to try to forge a career as an actor. I was committed to, and happy with, my job as a language teacher. But I remained passionately committed to using drama and theatre in my classroom practice. With the regularity and security of my permanent job, I made the decision to try to formally investigate just how effective these drama-based techniques were in my teaching context – thus it was that my doctoral research formally began.

1.1   Background and context of the study

This section briefly describes my teaching context at the University of Tübingen, and the pedagogical issues behind the project design.

At time of writing, the *Sprachpraxis* (Academic English) section of the English department at Tübingen comprises seven permanent-contract language teachers; six on a full-time, and one on a part-time basis. Further adjunct teachers are hired on a semester basis to cover extra classes according to particular numbers of incoming students (for a full discussion of the institutional context, see section 4.1.1). Academic English classes are divided into three main categories: written communication, oral communication, and translation; and into two levels – first level classes tend to be taken by students in their first to fourth semester, while second level classes are taken in the latter half of the degree programmes. There is no standardized curriculum content in the Academic English section – classes are taken alongside other academic seminars in the various areas of study, and aim to provide support for students to improve their practical English skills, for the purposes of their academic study of English. In this regard, the Academic English classes can be seen as the junction at which all other strands of the department meet – all students, regardless of degree programme and level (including even postgraduate) are required to take Academic English courses. Classes in the written communication and translation categories have arguably the most clearly-defined objectives in terms of final output. Written communication classes, regardless of topic or material used, focus on the production of academic essays, with

increased standard expectations at the higher level (level 2 and postgraduate). Translation classes focus on the translation of texts from German into English (at level 1), with difficulty increasing at the second level (longer, more diverse text types and including limited additional translation from English into German). Oral communication classes, in contrast, do not have a consistent specific output aim. Oral communication classes at level 1 tend to be large (typically 20-30 students), and are normally taken by students in their second semester. These classes are mostly assessed on the basis of presentations held in groups of two or three; the issue remains however of involving the whole class in oral communication activities on a regular basis, while maintaining the obligation to conduct assessment. Topics at level 1 are kept general, but ideally focus on a recent issue pertaining to cultural/regional studies (*Landeskunde*) from an English-speaking country. "Oral Communication II" (i.e. level 2) classes are typically smaller (approx. 20 students), and offer a more diverse range of oral communication forms and topics, such as debates, impromptu speeches, film reviews, and poetry recitals among others, depending on the individual teacher. While 'Oral Communication I' classes give students a wider range of topic choice, 'Oral Communication II' classes are commonly focused on a pre-selected topic or theme. As mentioned above, drama has been a main feature of my teaching practice for many years. At Tübingen, I decided that 'Oral Communication II' classes were the best platform for drama-based work. Firstly, the oral nature of dramatic performance was felt to be appropriate to the context and aims of the class, as well as constituting a central theme, as required at level 2. Additionally, level 2 was felt to be more appropriate than level 1, as many drama-based exercises and techniques require a substantial level of language confidence and competence, tested by the pressures of public performance and the 'stepping outside yourself' demanded by role-play work, for example. It was decided that students in their second semester of study, as is the case in 'Oral Communication I' classes, would not necessarily have the required confidence or language level, and that in this case, drama might be more of a hindrance to progress than an aid. Since 2011, then, I offered 'Oral Communication II' classes involving drama. These classes focussed either on the exploration of drama-in-education techniques (particularly aimed at the teacher trainee students), on dramatic performance (culminating in a final, assessed theatre production) or on a piece of dramatic literature (e.g. Shakespeare's Macbeth)[1]. For the present study, these three modes of drama class are combined, in an attempt to ascertain the perceived effectiveness of drama methods in an 'Oral Communication II' class. Specifically, the study focuses on three problem issues of relevance to the context – the typically large class size; the need to offer regular and significant opportunities for all students to practice and improve their English (further impacted by the high numbers of students involved); and the diverse degree types represented in the class, explained further in section 1.3 below, which problematizes relevant topic choice in the level 2 classes.

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1 See Sharp 2015 for a fuller discussion

1.2   Relevant literature and previous research

The study takes place at a theoretical and praxis-oriented intersection between many fields: applied drama (see section 3.1); drama-in-education (section 3.2); drama methods in teaching spoken language (section 3.3.1); in teacher education (section 3.3.2) and in the teaching of literature (section 3.3.3). Despite an increasing body of research into the application of drama-based methods in higher education (section 3.3), the vast majority of research has focused on compulsory educational contexts, and on working primarily with children (see introduction to section 3.3. for a fuller discussion); or else takes the form of practical 'how-to' handbooks of drama techniques applicable in general ELT contexts (see for example Holden 1981; Maley and Duff 1978). Of the research that does exist within the higher educational context, very little focuses on higher education ELT; and the specific context of the present study, that of German university English *Sprachpraxis* (Academic English), remains under-researched in general. A notable exception is the paper by Conor Geiselbrechtinger (2012) which explores issues of content and language integration in *Sprachpraxis* classes in Germany (see section 2.1 for further discussion of this important paper).

A limited amount of other research has investigated areas of direct relevance. Anderson et al (2008) published an important study of the inter-subject relationship between English and drama, with possible interfaces such as textual performance explored, albeit at secondary school level. Manfred Schewe's major study (1993) explored, and was borne out of, his own role as a university German language and literature teacher in Cork, Ireland. Schewe went on to become a founding figure in the then nascent field of drama in language teaching and learning, and in the context of performative educational culture (see section 3.3.1). Eucharia Donnery (2009), dicusses the utilization of drama-based methodology in the ELT curriculum at a university in Japan, arguing for its usefulness as a bridge between the teacher-centred approaches typical of a school context to the more independent learning expected at university. Morgan Koerner (2014) conducted an action research project with university undergraduate students of German, deploying postdramatic[2] theatre techniques in the teaching of the curriculum, which integrated language, literature and culture elements, similar to the context of the present study (see section 4.1.1). Beaven and Alvarez (2014) report on an initial investigation into non-formal drama training for in-service language teachers; this approach has been formalized in a German-speaking context with the increasing offer of *Theaterpädagogik* for in-training and in-service state teachers (see section 3.2.2). A book-length study by Lutzker (2007) also examines the training of in-service language teachers in drama techniques for use in the school classroom, and conceptualizes teach-

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2 Postdramatic theatre is a contested term, but refers generally to avant garde forms of theatre and drama that somehow challenge the previously accepted, linear narrative movement of literary drama, itself based on Aristotelian norms (see Lehmann 2006)

ing itself as a performative, artistic process; this concept is also furthered in Manfred Schewe's (2013) concept of performative pedagogy.

Two initial studies by the present author laid the foundations for the present study. The first (Sharp 2014) problematized the institutional and pedagogical contexts, and identified the main pedagogical challenges dealt with in the present study (see section 4.2). The second (Sharp 2015) described a class on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which drama methods were applied to this specific text in order to bring performative elements to the fore throughout the semesester (see section 3.3.3).

1.3 Research questions and objectives

Based on previous experience of drama-based teaching methods, and on my specific teaching context (section 1.1 above), I wanted to investigate the application of a drama-based approach within the Academic English curriculum at the University of Tübingen. I set out to analyze the issue using an Action Research methodology (see section 4.3.1). As previously stated, the three main pedagogical challenges faced were:

  i.   Large class sizes (up to 30 students)
  ii. Students from various different study programmes in the one class[3]
  iii. The requirement (typical of Academic English classes) to help students develop individual practical language skills

These three areas were identified in the previously published study discussed in section 1.2 (Sharp 2014). This study suggested that the drama approach was indeed well received by the students and viewed as relevant in the Academic English context. This encouraged me to investigate the issue further.

In the 2014 study, the students had been given free choice of presentation topic, within the boundaries of the class focus on applied drama. This had led to an interestingly diverse range of topics, including drama therapy, theatre rehearsal techniques, voice development and intercultural communication. While this made for an interesting semester and did indeed confirm the generally positive acceptance by the students of the drama-based approach, it did not allow (nor was it intended to) a consistent comparison of the pedagogical aspects of the class within the Academic English section. As identified in section 1.1, Academic English classes are at the junction of all other sub-sections of the English department at Tübingen, and thus contain students with a range of interests and pedagogical focuses: literary, linguistic, and educational. And as also previously mentioned, the oral communication classes are those with arguably the least-defined output aims of all curriculum areas (the other areas being written communication and translation). For these reasons, I wanted to develop a design that

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3 These are fully explained in section 4.1.1

focused on the originally identified pedagogical challenges faced in the classes, with a more defined content structure, to ascertain the effectiveness of the methods used to each of the relevant departmental areas (oral communication skills; literary analysis; teacher education). So from a teacher's perspective, the research questions posed were:

1. In which ways do drama-in-education classes at university level foster oral communication skills?
2. In which ways do drama-in-education classes at university level foster career relevant skills (specifically for teacher trainees)?
3. In which ways do drama-in-education classes at university level foster ESAP (English for specific academic purposes) – in the context, the exploration and analysis of literature in English?

Thus the study set out to explore the teaching context using the "self-reflective, critical and systematic approach" situated in an action research methodology (Burns 2010: 2). A final, and crucial, aspect of the study was the point of view of the students themselves (Cf Schön 1983; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991). The final question was thus:

4. In which ways do drama in education classes at university level foster oral communication skills, career-relevant skills (for *Lehramt*) and ESAP (an exploration of literature in English) in the view of the participants?

The data collection instruments were centred around these three pedagogical areas and encompassed both the students' and the teacher's views (see chapter 5).

1.4 Chapter overview

This study comprises eight chapters, which broadly cover four parts: an introduction; an exploration of the theoretical background; the action research project; and a conclusion.

Chapter 1, the introduction, describes the background of the study. This involves a short description of the pedagogical context at the University of Tübingen, a brief overview of the directly relevant literature and previous research, and finally the specific research questions and objectives of the study.

Chapter 2 introduces the aspects of ELT (English Language Teaching) relevant for the context. This includes an exploration of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes), and the question of language and content integration in the adult ELT classroom. Next, the area of oral communication skills in ELT is investigated, introducing concepts of communicative performance and competence, and communicative language teaching (CLT), contextualizing these in the higher education context relevant to the study.

Chapter 3 explores the area of educational drama, starting with a consideration of the terms drama and applied drama in a historical trajectory. Next, the fields of drama-in-education (DiE) and theatre-in education (TiE) are described, as well as the cognate German-language field of *Theaterpädagogik.* The history of the use of drama in education is briefly sketched, followed by a consideration of drama methods in higher educational contexts, focusing particularly on the areas under investigation: oral communication, teacher training, and literary study.

The action research project is described fully in chapter 4. Firstly the *Sprachpraxis* section of the University of Tübingen English department is introduced in detail, then the specific class under investigation. Next the research questions are elucidated, followed by a delineation of the action research methodology on which the study is grounded. The final section of chapter 4 is a session-by-session description of each of the nine classes held throughout the semester, with details of what the students did and my own impressions, as recorded in the teacher diary.

Chapter 5 describes in detail the various data collection instruments employed, together with the reasoning behind the design. These are: a pre-course questionnaire; a weekly feedback questionnaire based on Moodle; a teacher diary in which I recorded my impressions of each session; a post-course questionnaire; and a final informal class discussion which nevertheless was not offered as part of the data analysis.

The data analysis is presented in chapter 6. This is presented in order of completion by the participants, starting with the pre-course questionnaire and ending with the post-course questionnaire. The data was analysed qualitatively using the software programme MAXQDA. Emergent data codes were gathered under the three areas being explored, ready for further discussion in the next chapters.

Chapter 7 discusses the data findings identified and analysed in chapter 6. In chapter 7 the data is re-organized for discussion according to trends that emerged in the analysis. These are intentional and unintentional learning; emotional engagement; role playing; creativity; and group learning.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with a re-statement of the main research questions, and a brief discussion of possible implications for future practice and research.

2 The pedagogical context: ELT classes at a German university English department *(Sprachpraxis)*

This chapter offers a theoretical and contextual grounding for the research context of ELT in German university English departments. The introduction (chapter 1) provides details of the context specific to the present study, i.e. the University of Tübingen; this chapter will begin with a discussion of the more general context applicable to ELT sections in departments across Germany.

ELT provision at university English departments across Germany (known as *Sprachpraxis*) has long been a component of studying for an English degree in that country[4], and has traditionally been the preserve of native-speaking English teachers on short-term contracts responsible for offering students a supposedly authentic take on contemporary language and knowledge of at least one English-speaking country (see Geiselbrechtinger 2012: 13). This integrational aspect – not simply teaching the English language but teaching field-relevant material through the English language – is a key component of *Sprachpraxis* and one of the crucial problematising elements of the present study (see section 1.3). As Kayman et. al. remind us, there is a "fundamental asymmetry" between the university study of English in English-speaking countries, where the focus is on literature and culture; and outside those countries, where the same subject counts as "a foreign-language, not a domestic, discipline" (2006: 2-3). Immersion in the English language, both inside and outside the ELT classroom, is clearly beneficial to students who have committed to studying the language at university level, many of whom indeed plan on becoming English teachers themselves; and *Sprachpraxis* sections have also often functioned as a junction between academic, content-based classes and the need for more informal, immersive experience of the practical language in order to improve fluency (Erling and Bartlett 2006: 14-15).

This chapter will firstly consider *Sprachpraxis* as a form of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), within the specific field of English Studies. Secondly, given the combination of content and language that is often expected of *Sprachpraxis*, integrated pedagogical theories such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and TBL (Task-Based Learning) will be discussed, with a view towards the drama-based models investigated in Chapter 3. Subsequently, as the present study is concerned with an oral communication class, theories of spoken competence will be looked at in a final section.

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4 This provision is mostly catered for within the English departments themselves, but sometimes in intramural language centres (see section 2.2.3)

2.1 English for (Specific) Academic Purposes

2.1.1 EAP and ESAP

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) grew out of a "parent field" (Kostka and Olmstead-Wang 2014: 7), known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In the second half of the 20th century, in the aftermath of World War Two, English had grown exponentially as a lingua franca, and quickly established itself as the principal language of trade and business in the rapidly networked world (Charles and Pecorari 2016: 8). This led to the need for a corresponding pedagogical approach, with one of the main aspects of development being the creation, often from scratch, of field-specific instructional texts and materials (ibid.: 8). Despite this attempt at diversifying individual contextual aims of higher education ELT, Hyland and Shaw (2016) identify the persistent misconception of EAP as a "single literacy", the teaching of which counts merely as "a low-status service activity" at universities (Hyland and Shaw 2016: 2). This leads in turn to the increased marginalization of ELT classes and teachers to the fringes of academic departments rather than full to integration within them: a demotion to what Raimes (1991) has coined "the butler's stance" (quoted in Hyland and Shaw 2016: 4). While perhaps overstated, these complaints would seem to be in accordance with reports of language teachers in higher education already alluded to (see section 1.2). Discipline specificity is one of the key aspects of EAP identified by Hyland and Shaw in response to such dim views of the field (ibid.: 2); and this specificity is the basis of another of the main terminological and pedagogical distinctions in EAP: that between EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes) and ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) (Blue 1988). While the former covers skills common to academic study in any field (e.g. note-taking, academic written register etc.), the latter includes field-specific terminology "together with its disciplinary culture" and "appropriate academic conventions" which may differ from subject to subject (Jordan 1997: 5), giving rise to a focus on "the specific language of a single discipline" (Ennis and Prior 2020: 3). In order to best fit the needs of a particular subject area, it became common to conduct a so-called needs analysis to identify the particular pedagogical requirements: in academic contexts, this was divided into a register analysis (involving verb frequencies etc.); discourse analysis (communicative blocks longer than a single sentence); and genre analysis (specific forms of communicative event, e.g. a research paper, see Swales 1981; 1985; 1990) (Jordan 1997: 228-231). These levels of analysis however tend to focus primarily on the production of written material, as the standard form of academic discourse; and this belies a general relative dearth of research on spoken academic discourse in the EAP field (Jordan 1997: 235).

One approach to oral work in EAP has been to focus on project-based formats, in which the tasks involved are conceived as a "realistic vehicle for fully integrated study skills and language practice" (Jordan 1997: 67). Ideally such a project becomes "all-engrossing" (ibid.: 67), and serves as motivation to learn *per se*, especially in response to