

Review

Helga Tschurtschenthaler: Drama-based foreign language learning. Encounters between self and other.

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Barbara Schmenk

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Helga Tschurtschenthaler's study is one of the most important scholarly contributions in recent years to the field of drama-based foreign language teaching. She conducted her research in an EFL class in an upper secondary school in multilingual South Tyrol and presents a plethora of data that demonstrates the impact of drama in foreign language education on students' sense of self as emerging multilingual subjects (Kramersch 2009). What stands out about this study, besides its detailed presentation and analysis of student data, is the fact that Tschurtschenthaler succeeds in connecting recent theoretical contributions to the fields of language education and identity to more practical considerations. Overcoming the gap between theory and practice in this domain is one of her signal achievements.

"You are not you when you speak Italian. It's as if you become someone else when you change into Italian. You don't only sound different, but you even behave differently. Then, you're not the person I know." (11) These are the opening lines of the book, leading the reader directly to its main subject. Tschurtschenthaler explains that it was a friend of hers who made these comments when she heard her speak Italian on the phone. And it is precisely this connection between language use and identity that lies at the heart of her study: "[W]hat does another language do to the individual who learns and uses it? How is the individual's idea of self affected by the other language?" (15) These two questions, Tschurtschenthaler explains, were the starting point of her project.

The underlying premise of her study is that the presumed nexus between identity and foreign language (FL) learning/use seems to be particularly salient in drama-based FL classrooms. This nexus is intuitively appealing and has often been claimed, yet there are hardly any empirical studies that set out to investigate it more thoroughly. This is why Tschurtschenthaler's study is such a pioneering work; it seeks to "explore and describe the implications of drama-based foreign language learning for the learners' ideas of self and to

establish to what extent drama-based foreign language learning may foster existential competence” (15).

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I introduces “Drama and foreign language learning,” the second part comprises a range of theoretical considerations of “Foreign language learning and the individual’s sense of self,” and part III offers a detailed description and discussion of the actual study, entitled “Drama-based teaching and learning and its implications for the learner’s personal identity and existential competence: a case study at a South Tyrolean upper-secondary school.”

Part I presents a solid overview of the state of the art in drama-based language education, taking the ‘drama versus theatre’ debate as a starting point, followed by a brief historical overview of drama in FL classrooms and a description of classroom activities. Tschurtschenthaler proceeds to identify open questions related to the study of drama in classroom-based FL learning, focusing on the potential links between language learning experience and drama, and experiential learning through drama. At this point her study is geared chiefly towards establishing and exploring those domains of language education that are generally ignored in ‘traditional’ classrooms. She elaborates that “drama should not just be used as a tool for meeting the functions of language teaching”; rather, “acting out [...] a scene or the dramatic representation of a situation” may trigger “active reflection [...] upon the subject matter, the different characters involved in it as well as the relation between oneself and the imaginary other, [which] may lead to a more profound understanding of self” (67) – a notion that Tschurtschenthaler proceeds to theorize in-depth in the second part of her book.

She approaches the nexus between identity and language through a post-structuralist lens and reiterates the view of “the self as [...] heterogeneous, multifaceted and in-progress rather than homogeneous, static and invariable” (70). Subsequently, she turns towards theoretical works on the role of language(s) in identity construction (Kresic 2006; Kristeva 1986) and highlights the connection between multiple languages and multiple identities (Franceschini 2009; Kramersch 2009; Kresic 2006). Finally, she links these theoretical considerations to the world of classroom language learning and carves out two concepts she wishes to focus on in her study of the learners’ selves in the drama-based language classroom: 1. the notion of Existential Competence as promoted in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), and 2. the notion of Symbolic Competence coined by Kramersch (2006). Both ideas, Tschurtschenthaler elaborates, considerably exceed traditional FL learning goals as they are not based on the assumption that efficient communication is the ultimate goal of language learning (112), thus allowing the researcher (and curriculum planner) to consider language learning as an experience that includes linguistic and cultural as well as aesthetic and emotional dimensions.

At this point, Tschurtschenthaler’s theoretical outline has come full circle; she has presented a model that links the domains of language education, drama-based teaching and learning, and theories of identity/selfhood. In

other words, the first two parts of the book can be regarded as an attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the study of drama in language education that is based on a range of readings from the fields of language education, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. As such, Tschurtschenthaler's (interdisciplinary) theoretical outlines may serve as a most helpful basis for future studies that seek to adequately theorize the drama-based language classroom and the role of the individual learner.

The actual study Tschurtschenthaler conducted consists of two different parts; namely, the development of a teaching sequence in collaboration with the EFL teacher who taught the course; and the research project she pursued that combined classroom observations, several questionnaires, video recordings, and stimulated recall sessions. This set-up indicates the complexity of the project, as well as the wealth of data Tschurtschenthaler has collected, which she presents and analyzes in the remainder of her study. While the chapter on her research methodology is notably short (and the notion of "case study" and explanations pertaining to the methods of data analysis, remain vague), the actual data presentation and analysis comprise almost 150 pages and are quite detailed. Starting with a description of the drama sequences (the actual lesson plans are provided in an appendix, which include many practical ideas for drama-based FL classes), Tschurtschenthaler proceeds to present demographics and language biographical data of the 18 student participants. Not only do we get an impression of a multilingual EFL classroom in South Tyrol (where most students speak and/or are exposed to Ladin, German and Italian on a daily basis), but also a glimpse of what the students report about their sense of themselves as multilingual subjects. During the teaching sequences, the students had to complete a set of self-evaluation questionnaires, which included questions regarding the actual subject matter, the use of drama, their attitudes and feelings towards the class, role-taking and role-making. The last part of the teaching sequence required the students to act in scenes from a play, an activity they had prepared prior to the actual performance in class. It was videotaped as well, and the videotapes were used during stimulated recall sessions with individual students and the teacher.

It is impossible to give a full account of the manifold results this study has brought about. However, suffice it to say that the classroom activities allowed all students to take on a variety of different roles and to negotiate their parts with their classmates both within the dramatic space of "as if" and outside of it in the classroom setting. Furthermore, the many reflection-focused elements of the class and the research design (questionnaires and stimulated recall) invited the students to report on their respective struggles and attitudes throughout the sequence. Tschurtschenthaler was thus able to collect a vast amount of data which serves to illustrate the level and complexity of student reflections on learning English through the use of drama; on themselves as English learners and speakers; and as multilingual selves. What parts I and II of the study outlined in theory therefore comes to life in the last part of the book. Tschurtschenthaler gives a detailed account of the results of each of the research instruments

utilized, which may invite many readers to rethink their own teaching and assessment practices when it comes to the use of drama in FL classrooms.

The results clearly suggest that the use of drama leads to a heightened self-awareness of learners as multilingual subjects. This also reveals – even though this was not at all a focus of the study – that in a classroom focused chiefly on improving language proficiency, many teachers' views of their students as persons, as well as their judgments of their respective communicative competence do not adequately acknowledge the learners' reflections and their emerging awareness of themselves as multilingual subjects (200ff).

Turning back to the student data, Tschurtschenthaler concludes:

The dramatic as-if situation provides a safe framework within which learners of a foreign language are confronted with the Other in many ways: the other role, the other reality, the other language, and the other within themselves. It is the space in which learners can experiment with solutions to real and fictitious problems, find out about various subjects, reflect upon who they are, how they are and who they might be [...]. This learning process allows them to experiment with different selves, experience different realities and reflect upon them.“ (244)

The reader is invited to explore this further: Tschurtschenthaler presents myriad ideas that can be implemented in any language classroom. Her focus on the learner's self and how it is impacted in a FL drama classroom in particular, offers many new perspectives and will hopefully inspire practitioners and researchers alike.

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