Theater as a safe environment to start productive skills development in an EFL classroom

El teatro como un lugar seguro para desarrollar habilidades comunicativas productivas en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera

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ABSTRAC

This article describes a pedagogical proposal based on theater as a safe space to develop productive skills in an EFL classroom. Thirty-six eleven graders from a public school in Tunja participated in the theater sessions. In each session, we collected data through recordings, interviews, and field notes to understand the impact of the pedagogical intervention. The findings suggested that theater could help create a safe environment that decreased students' anxiety levels while exploring the language. As a result, the students' productive skills started to emerge. We argue the need to change classroom dynamics, organization, and time management in order to create transformative places that foster safe environments in the EFL classroom.

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RESÚMEN

Este artículo describe una propuesta pedagógica con base en el teatro como un espacio seguro para desarrollar las habilidades productivas en las clases de EFL. Treinta y seis estudiantes de grado once de un colegio público de la ciudad de Tunja participaron en las sesiones de teatro. En cada una de las sesiones, recolectamos la información a través de grabaciones, entrevistas, y notas de campo para comprender el impacto de la presente intervención pedagógica. Los hallazgos sugirieron que el teatro podría ayudar a crear espacios seguros los cuales reducen el nivel de ansiedad de los estudiantes mientras practican el uso de la lengua extranjera. Como resultado, las habilidades productivas empezaron emerger. Proponemos redirigir las dinámicas de clase, la organización, el manejo del tiempo con el propósito de crear espacios trasformativos para impulsar ambientes seguros dentro de las clases de EFL.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Ambientes seguros, teatro, habilidades productivas

INTRODUCTION

Golkova and Hubackova (2014) stated that writing and speaking were productive language skills. The same authors further asserted that "More energy is needed to produce any outcome of those types" (p. 478). In fact, most EFL students face issues when learning to speak or to write. Brown and Yule (1983) mentioned that learning productive skills is one of the most difficult aspects of foreign language teaching and learning. In this sense, productive skills can be considered as one of the most challenging tasks to teach.

When students have to speak or write in another language, they can feel shy, anxious, or uninterested in the topics. Creating an environment that reduces these factors is a necessity for teachers. In fact, Dornyei (2001) suggested that building safe and supportive environments helps students feel comfortable with taking risks because they know that they will not feel embarrassed or criticized if they make a mistake. Therefore, safe environments can contribute to enhancing students' productive skills.

Theater is often used to monitor and strengthen teaching and learning processes in many knowledge areas. For this pedagogical proposal, we considered the use of theater to help eleventh graders feel safer and more confident in the EFL classroom and, as Maslow (1943) stated, meet their potential in terms of their productive skills. Theater also promotes reflection, sensitization, consciousness, expression, creativity, innovativeness, and collaboration. Corporal expression, imagination, ideas, feelings, and intentions are emphasized and create socio-cultural bonds that recognize collective and linguistic identities. In turn, theater can help in developing productive skills.

Based on the previous, this paper accounts for a pedagogical strategy that shows how theater could create a 'safe environment' to initiate productive skills development in an EFL classroom. This proposal was carried out with eleventh graders in a public school in Tunja, Boyacá. It is important to highlight that most of these students come from rural areas, and they usually devote their time to going to school and helping their parents with domestic and agricultural chores.

One outstanding characteristic of students from Boyacá, has to do with the level of interaction and participation in conversations. In fact, in their own native language, Spanish, they are not very talkative. On average, students in a classroom

do not overpass the limits of instructions for a speaking exercise. Even though they are capable of being engaged in longer conversations they do not risk themselves to continue talking for the benefit of building a conversation to exchange information, opinions, and positions about any kind of speaking topic. This shy behavior is transferred into EFL courses, too. Usually, students that come from other regions of the country, different from Boyacá, tend to be more opinionated when it is the time for practicing speaking in an EFL classroom.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Productive skills.

Productive skills, as stated by Golkova and Hubackova (2014), are also called active skills, which refers to the information a user produces in a written or spoken form. It is of paramount importance to highlight that productive skills would be nonexistent without receptive skills (listening and reading). According to Golkova and Hubackova (2014), "Passive knowledge - such as listening and reading - symbolises a springboard to active implementation of grammar structures, passive vocabulary lists, heard and repeated sounds of a foreign language" (p. 478) Because of this, reading and listening are considered receptive skills. When we listen or read, we receive the language, understand it, and decode the meaning. Speaking and writing are called productive skills because we use the language to produce a written or spoken message.

Speaking.

Speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney & Burk, 1998). Brown (1994) also stated that speaking is a dynamic and interesting process that includes producing, receiving and communicating information. Terefore, speaking is a process in which the speaker orally and coherently communicates his/her thoughts. Other aspects of speaking have been defined, such as being a face to face action, happening in real time, and being interactive (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001).

Writing.

The act of writing is far beyond putting well organized words and structures on paper. Rather, it is the act of giving meaning and substance to our written thoughts. Mitchell (1996) put it as follows: "writing is a process of discovering and creating meaning" (p. 39). Writing implies more than selecting the correct structures, words, and general language conventions. It is a mental process that uses and arranges formal structures in such a way that the text creates meaning and conveys what the writer wants to express. Thus, effective writing is an extension of clear thinking, and writing competence is how the writer makes meaning (Mitchell, 1996).

THEATER IN EDUCATION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING.

For every culture and language, the term "theater" has had different definitions and connotations. Nevertheless, bodily expression, vocal power, written creation, literary reflection, and auditory awareness have all contributed to defining theater and its artistic abilities. Through drama, the communicative process can be encouraged.

Theater is also a representation of human actions based on reality. It can emphasize social, religious, political, and cultural aspects and situations. The language, with all of its expressions, serves as a vehicle for giving and receiving meaningful and co-constructed messages through individual and collective work.

Nowadays, theater has become a frequently practiced educational strategy to monitor and strengthen the learning process regardless of

the subject. Núñez-Cubero and Navarro (2007) mentioned that,

The potentials that theater presents in the last years is more present and relevant in the programs and training plans of the school curriculum for educational purposes, the importance of personal and social formation in relation to dramatic techniques is becoming increasingly important (p. 227)

Because of this, theater has had a positive effect on education, such as encouraging students to be more active in learning a new language. Performances can also help students immerse themselves in a new context where the target language is spoken, thus, understanding the sociocultural aspects surrounding the language (Maimone, 2016). For this reason, theater in foreign language learning and teaching is one of the most used strategies to practice and develop communicative processes in writing, reading, speaking, and listening.

Furthermore, theater promotes additional skills that enrich and complement the language learning process. For example, students are required to use their cognitive, physical, and affective skills. Memory reinforcement, body language management and/or consciousness, motivation, socio-cultural competence, collaborative work, self-esteem, creativity, and active participation are among the many skills needed to perform and communicate. Thus, theater, as a pedagogical resource, can be a dynamic learning and teaching element, in addition to providing a space for learners' emotions and interests that ensures their success.

Through theater, the English classroom can become an enjoyable and comfortable space that encourages students and teachers to build the confidence needed to develop communicative skills. Consequently, students and teachers become the protagonists of their own learning and teaching processes. Maimone (2016) explained,

Through dramatic exploration, participants are invited into creative spaces of intercultural dialogue, negotiation and interaction that inspired thinking beyond the walls of the classroom. These activities give the student an opportunity to use his/her own personality in creating the material on which part of the language class is to be based on. (p. 25)

Finally, theater can foster cultural learning and understanding. Foreign language learners can engage with new cultures while shaping their own cultural identity through dramatic play. They can receive and interpret cultural information during their performances. In order to perform in a meaningful way, students are also required to learn and appreciate other cultures. In this way, language becomes less of a foreign concept and more of a familiar means of communication. Meanwhile, "otherness" felt from encountering a different culture diminishes as students try to understand and integrate it in the play (Murphy, 2011).

SAFE ENVIRONMENTS.

A safe environment is a space that favors students' identities, voices, and hopes. Safe environments also honor aspects related to students' home culture and background knowledge. If students feel represented and able to share, they may also feel more engaged to learn a foreign language. Additionally, teachers can connect students' prior knowledge and content to encourage communicative skills development. For example, a safe speaking environment is one that builds knowledge from students' experiences and home cultures and, little by little, moves toward more complex and unfamiliar concepts.

A safe environment also means that the people who inhabit or coexist in the space are cherished resources. Through immersive tasks, students' identities, hopes, and dream are activated. Furthermore, a safe environment is responsive to students' agency by honoring topics that are close to their worlds, and it upholds human relationships that are central to all communication. Finally, a safe environment is a space where feedback, either on linguistic features or meaning, supports and acknowledges students' communicative accomplishments.

Chaux and Velásquez (2009) stated that schools needed to become safe and peaceful environments that foster students' growth and development. As such, schools can become places that encourage students to voice their opinions, make decisions, and feel empowered.

THE PEDAGOGICAL PROPOSAL

Context of the experience. This study took place in a public institution in Boyacá, Colombia. The school and its teaching and learning processes are required to follow the national government and Ministry of Education guidelines. Students must take local and national standardized exams, of which teachers are expected to prepare their students to do well on these tests. Because of this, rigorous standards and training are associated with English language learning and teaching in order to meet the high demands of globalization. In fact, English instruction receives more teaching hours per week.

For this study, we worked with 36 students from the group 11-01 in secondary school. The group consisted of 20 girls and 16 boys. The students were adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. They had different personalities and attitudes toward learning a new language. The students lived in rural areas close to the city and school. For the most part, they felt that learning English was unnecessary in their immediate rural contexts. At the beginning of the pedagogical proposal, we asked the students to take an English language diagnostic test. The group we worked with fell into the A2 (Basic) category according to the Common European Framework of References (2001). After the diagnostic test, we approached students' needs regarding the English language and we implemented the proposal in six sessions. During the academic school period, students received twenty hours of English class, which is equivalent to two class sessions a week.

OBJECTIVE OF THE PEDAGOGICAL PROPOSAL.

The main objective of the pedagogical proposal was to use theater to create a safe environment and, thereby, enhance eleventh graders' productive skills at a public institution in Tunja, Boyacá.

CONDITIONS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION.

We used theater as a pedagogical strategy to create a safe environment to enhance the students' productive skills. In terms of theater and performance, we recognize that other forms of communication are present, such as words, voices, gestures, and body movement. Dramatization, whether it is through written or spoken production, offers numerous possibilities to explore discursive and sociolinguistic competences.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL PHASES THAT WE FOLLOWED WERE AS FOLLOWS:

Students' needs regarding English language skills. In order to understand the students' needs regarding their language skills, we applied a diagnostic questionnaire. We found that the English class was primarily focused on completing the course book, translating texts, and practicing grammar. Reading, writing, and listening skills had to be practiced at home. Meanwhile, speaking was neither practiced at home or school. The students' main weaknesses,

according to the Englisah diagnostic test and the questionnaire for the needs analysis, were in their writing and speaking skills followed by reading and listening.

Class organization. Before implementing the proposal, the students were asked to make teams. Each team had eight members for a total of four teams and four drama plays. To ensure that each member participated, a leader was assigned to each group. The leader had to make sure everyone on the team participated and followed the rules and guidelines. In this way, the students actively communicated with each other, shared responsibilities, and were respectful with all of the members of the group.

Skills selected for the English sessions. The topics selected for the lessons applied were related to theater. We also considered the students' English level, as well as their receptive and productive skills. Additionally, we took into account Golkova and Hubackova (2014), who stated that "both types of skills are inseparable and one cannot exist without the other". In most cases, receptive skills support productive skills, which is why we organized the English language lessons as seen below:

> *(i) Let's focus:* listening as the initial step to process drama stories in the foreign language.

> *(ii) Let's comprehend:* reading comprehension in order to understand the drama plot.

> *(iii) Let's solve:* writing, speaking, and corporal stimulation are needed to solve two enigmas close to the drama's ending.

> *(iv) Let´s construct:* writing and speaking practice through images.

> *(v) Let's create:* creative writing in the collective drama invention, in which

coherence, cohesion, grammar rules, and expressions are reinforced.

> *(vi) Let's present:* speaking, listening, and corporal expression are used to perform on stage.

Initially, we introduced the students to four plays to gain their interest and help with listening comprehension. By talking about the content of the play and asking question before listening to it, the students were motivated to discover the stories. Then, we handed out scripts to each team. We read the plays out loud through a three-moment reading process with the students. The students had literal and inferential reading skills as seen in a true/false game and two enigma activities at the end of each play. Afterwards, the students created and drafted a short story in the third, fourth, and fifth sessions as a means of practicing creative writing. Once the short story was completed, the students performed the play in the last session. Additionally, the students practiced their speaking skills in the last four sessions through individual or collective oral reports of their progress.

To conclude this section, it is worth noting that each session attempted to integrate several skills. For instance, students had to write down ideas and keywords when listening to the stories. Also, they had to write a draft to narrate the synopsis of the stories, as well as jotting down their own interventions on cards to perform later on. The students also participated in an intonation and pronunciation game, which was evaluated in the third reading moment. Meanwhile, the individual or collective performances went hand in hand with their creative writing.

FINDINGS

For the data analysis, we used aspects of the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1978) to account for the impact of theater as a safe environment to promote productive skills

among eleventh graders. Based on the data, two categories emerged: *Theater as a way to decrease students' anxiety* and *Theater as a guide to explore language*. Both categories detail the way theater acknowledged students' voices through curiosity and creativity.

Theater as a way to decrease students' anxiety. The first category describes how students' anxiety decreased during the pedagogical intervention. Anxiety in the foreign language classroom has been extensively researched (Mak, 2011; Grant, Huang, & Pasfield-Neofitou, 2013; Baran-Lucarz, 2014; Atas, 2015). Liu and Huang (2011) explained that "foreign language anxiety was responsible for students' negative emotional reactions to language learning since they had to deal with a totally foreign language" (p. 1). Liu (2006) identified that anxiety in EFL classrooms is associated with making errors in pronunciation and communicating in front of peers.

During the pedagogical intervention, we noticed how the students started to feel more comfortable. From the very beginning, we chose to introduce the plays before asking students to perform, which sparked their curiosity. It seems that curiosity and anxiety are inversely related to each other. If a student feels curious about what they will learn, their motivation will also increase while their anxiety decreases.

As mentioned previously, we carried out six sessions in order to meet the objective of this study. The following is an excerpt from our field notes, in which we described the students' attitudes toward the first workshop,

> At the beginning of the activity, the students showed curiosity and intrigue for the plays. We observed an initial interest and motivation from the students as they concentrated to listen to the plays and discover what they were about. Later, in giving out the play scripts in written

form to each team, the students were anxious to know and discover the drama play that they had initially heard. This aroused curiosity in them as well. Also, there was a moment of nervousness but also of enthusiasm when each team had to read the play scripts aloud in front of the class. The other teams paid attention and listened attentively to their partners. (Field notes, Session 1)

As part of an interview, one of the students mentioned how curiosity influenced him and his performance during this first session,

> Student 1: At the beginning of the course I felt intimidated by my classmates. I did not understand much but later on I noticed we all wanted to know about the play and start reading without feeling stress. Now that I have been practicing in front of them, I can read to them without feeling nervous or anxious. (Interview, Transcript 1)

In the excerpts above, we noticed a key concept that connected the field notes and interview: curiosity. According to Kashdan (2007), curiosity is defined as a positive emotional-motivational system associated with new experiences and challenges. Thus, curiosity encourages exposure to new experiences and risk taking as precursors to personal learning and growth. In that sense, curious people tend to grow and learn from new experiences, regardless of the outcome. In addition, Erlam (2016) noted that curiosity and new experiences gave learners a sense of confidence and expanded self spaces. Self space can refer to a physical place, as well as a mental willingness and freedom, to explore the language without being afraid of making mistakes.

When students had the possibility to create their own ending to the play, they were very enthusiastic because it was a new experience for

them. In this sense, Lamata (2005) mentioned that curiosity and creativity are two linked concepts. Creativity related to the ability to question, review, and create through exploration. Lamata (2005) concluded that curiosity is usually the first step to being creative. The next excerpt, taken from one of the sessions, supports the previous explanation. Also, we can notice that students were committed to create and explore new possibilities for the story. In doing so, they were eager to know how to communicate their ideas in English.

S2   Teacher how do you say medios de transporte? Transportation media?

T   means of transportation

S3   Entonces pongamos que ellos iban en los means of transportation y crash

S5   *Yes* crash in a car

S6   Pero eso es muy irreal o no?

S3   *Nooo. Esa es la idea.hagamos algo loco*.

S2   Busque como se dice que nadie se murió

S5   No die

S4   Teacher how do you say que no se murieron?

[Audio transcription, Session 3]

In an interview related to the session, student 5 mentioned that the plays were useful as they were the starting point to continue creating the story. He also mentioned that the play helped him be very creative.

> Student 5: I like the idea of having plays to follow because I just finish them. I think this activity was nice because we could invent different ends and it was very funny. The only thing that we had to do

was to continue with the topic presented. **(Interview transcript, Session 3)**

THEATER AS A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS TO EXPLORE LANGUAGE.

Theater, as a pedagogical strategy, can help students explore the language they are trying to learn. Drama can improve students' cognitive growth, while developing their thinking, oral expression, listening comprehension, reading, and writing reflection skills. Additionally, creative writing and oral and corporal expression through drama can encourage and engage students in exploring new ways of learning and producing the target language in a contextualized and positive environment (Degirmenci & Yavuz, 2015).

Producing a play requires written, spoken, and corporal expression organization and planning. In the sessions, the students had to use all of their creativity to produce their own stories. Thanks to theater, the students were able to explore their capabilities as learners while practicing a new language. Moreover, listening and reading comprehension was paired and practiced with written and oral expression.

In order to reach the goal of language exploration, the students went through a process of receptivity as an initial step. First, they listened and read the plays, thereby, concentrating, understanding, and reflecting. Due to this process, productive skills began to emerge in a more practical sense. We attempted this process every time we organized the sessions. For example, the students began the session by listening and reading the play, followed by writing their drafts. All three of these skills were intertwined and needed to produce the final oral production of the play.

Below, we mentioned the students' attitudes toward the sessions, especially as they related to exploring the language. First, we present our field notes in terms of writing. In the second

excerpt, we asked a student how he/she coped with writing the play. The excerpt of the students' reaction is displayed below.

> The writing process was seen in the creation of their own creative play script, especially in the product of a collective drama. The students planned out a sequence and order of ideas for the development of a beginning, a node, and a conclusion, as well as highlighting the plot, space-time, and characters' roles. The use of grammar rules, verbal tenses, vocabulary, punctuation marks, and different expressions used in English as a foreign language show their potential in the comprehension of written texts. A good textual organization in which cohesion and coherence are explicit in their play script show evidence of the students' writing improvement. (Field notes, Session 5)

> Student 10: Not knowing how to put everything together in the written document was a bit frustrating because my classmates couldn't understand me. That's why I told them to start analysing each part and start writing little by little. I told them to use simple sentences and to check the examples provided and use those expressions for our play. We followed the models provided and changed some words and expressions. **(Interview, Transcript 2)**

In the final students' performance, most of the students did their best to express themselves in a meaningful way, despite being nervous. In the excerpt below, we highlighted the key aspects in the oral production of their plays.

> Student 8: I had a great time representing my play. I felt like an actress. I think it was important to understand that theater was not only dialogue, but I was allowed

to use gestures and expressions. I saw language the way the teachers told us: language is not only words. **(Interview, Transcript 2)**

> We noticed that the students used corporal language to transmit meaning in the play ending, which they had developed through their creative writing and imagination. Here, the students demonstrated their first acting skills in which the awareness of their movements, expressions, and actions helped others discover the ending of their play. (Field notes – video recording, Session 3)

Using drama as a foreign language learning tool favors the enrichment of expressive and communicative skills (Moreno, 1999; Motos 1992; Winston & Stinson, 2014; Carter, 2003, as cited in Torres, 2017). Students are able to improve their speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills in different contexts and through performance. Furthermore, fluency, linguistic expression, vocabulary, and grammatical structures were developed efficiently in different communicative situations. It is crucial to note that learning a foreign language requires more than focusing on grammatical rules. Instead, we need to reflect and understand what the most efficient ways for our students are to learn a language. In this case, drama helped students create situations in which they could deduce and apply language rules by themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

For this study, we attempted to see how a pedagogical proposal, based on theater as a safe space, guided eleventh graders to start developing productive skills in an EFL classroom. We found that theater could be used as a safe space to initiate productive skills. In fact, theater helped the students decrease their anxiety, so that they could explore the language.

On the one hand, using theater in this EFL classroom became a good alternative to creating a safe environment because the eleventh graders decreased their anxiety levels. This happened because theater gave them the possibility to be curious without feeling judged. Curiosity is related to creativity and aids in language exploration, such as when the students guessed and predicted language in use. When the students used their creativity and corporal expression to produce oral and written texts, they were exploring the language. The students discovered and reflected on their hidden qualities, such as acting in front of others, personifying a character, reflecting on their emotions through bodily expression, and making up scenarios. Likewise, the students became more sociable and expressive during the sessions. Dramatic expression is a complete language that aims at explaining reality in a conscious and expressive way through the body and word. In this way, appropriating a foreign language through theater helps students enter into the language, get to know it, explore it, and transform it.

This pedagogical experience intended to be a part of a student-centered pedagogy. As such, students were active participants in the learning process rather than receivers of knowledge (Bayram & Hayirsever, 2016). In this case, the teachers created a positive learning atmosphere, where they could make decisions, manage groups, and help with incomplete tasks in the classroom.

We also think it takes time, patience, and careful organization to transform EFL classrooms into safe environments. Creating such spaces in the classroom requires a conscious effort from language teachers to unlearn preconceived ways of teaching and re-learn. In other words, this implies changing the roles we, as English teachers, have usually assumed. Therefore, the role of the teacher becomes more flexible and constructive. Theater also allows the teacher

to have a more sensitive and holistic vision of human development within the teaching-learning process due to an empowering dialogical interaction between teachers and learners (Cervantes, 2019; McLaren, 2003; Freire & Shor, 1987).

In addition to changing the role of teachers and students, the classroom needs to be a judgement free zone in order to help students develop their productive skills in another language (Kubanyiova, 2006). Thus, teachers need to be committed to creating spaces for conversation and supportive feedback. In opposition to Ur's (2006) statement that feedback cannot be given without judgement, we believe that teachers can make an effort to support their students' productive skills to encourage their self-confidence.

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