

Theatre in the Classroom

Michelle Sommers interviews Mireille Mimoun who teaches at Collège Pierre Ronsard Paris 17^{ème}

What made you decide to include drama in your classes?

Seven years ago, the ACT Company came to our school and put on a theatrical production. When the actors asked pupils to participate, I saw that most of them, even the weaker ones, were so enthusiastic that they forgot they were speaking English. That gave me the idea of starting a theatre workshop, which I hoped would give pupils pleasure in learning, so I contacted Kester Lovelace and Drama Ties. At first, we put on plays that we developed in the weekly workshop. Three years ago, we became more ambitious and decided to incorporate our work into an exchange programme with a school in Corydon.

What were your objectives?

I chose a quatrième class because the pupils are at a difficult age, where they are not sure of themselves and need to become more confident. They are not the best students. I wanted to create a group dynamic where pupils would not be aware that they were learning. The workshop is not a club; it's a class project in which everyone must participate, speaking in English only, even amongst themselves. I was quite strict at the beginning. Students were "reprimanded" if they spoke French, but they were told that it didn't matter if they made mistakes in English. I never interrupt or correct while they are acting, but go over their mistakes afterwards during class sessions. And the more they speak the more they learn.

How has doing theatre changed your attitudes towards yourself as a teacher?

When I started doing theatre I began to realise that a teacher must be a guide, not someone who is there just to impart "knowledge". Before I was more directive. Now I try not to talk very much, and, when I do, it's often to introduce a grammatical point, which I try to get them to figure out themselves. I also have begun to understand to what degree teaching is an exchange and that I can learn as much from my students as they can from me.

How has theatre changed the atmosphere in your classroom?

You know, during lessons in a classroom students often don't listen to one another, they rarely look at one another, and they don't speak loudly enough. All of these changes when they're acting. For example, when I give them a new dialogue to listen to, I ask them to close their eyes. This teaches them how to concentrate. But when they are listening to someone, I insist that they look at the person who is speaking. I tell them that participation is listening, and point out that the anagram of "listen" is "silent". Also their attitude towards me has changed. They told me, "We don't see you as a teacher." So I asked, "Does that mean I have less authority?" and they answered, "No, you have more because we don't want to disappoint you. You keep on saying that you are here to learn and so we trust you and we are happy to learn."

What about your students? How has the experience enriched them?

What have they learned?

First of all, friendship and a sense of solidarity instead of competition. They get organised and work together, without even being asked to. They understand drama better because they have realised how difficult and demanding it is. Now when they see a play in French or in English they appreciate it even more. They are more curious about things and are definitely more confident and less afraid of making mistakes.

One student told me that doing theatre in English was easier than in French, and I can understand that. When you act in another language, you can feel it much more than by reading books, because you have to become a character - an English character. The language becomes a part of you, and you are able to transmit emotions, not just words. Every year, students forget lines or cues and they manage to improvise - in English! One student said to me last year after our performance in Corydon, "You know, when I got home, I thought in English!" For them, and for me, it's like magic.