

Performing Language, Performing Culture: The Ethics of Using Drama in the Classroom

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Theatre, like all of the arts, speaks to people on a number of levels: there is the aesthetic level, wherein the performer and spectator are engaged in the forging of a relationship and the spectator affects the action upon the stage by virtue of her level of engagement in the performance; there is the cultural level, wherein the relationship is more one-sided. That is, the performers are putting forth a certain vision of the world and the spectators are observing and absorbing the ideas ? though always through the lenses of their own cultural backgrounds; and, there is the emotional level where the subtle nuances of language and gesture “speak” to the audience, reminding them of what theatre is ultimately about ? people and passion upon a platform.

Theatre, by its very nature, transcends spoken language. It has power to evoke, provoke and transform. The second language teacher who recognizes this, and uses elements of theatre and drama in her classroom, does the very same. However, there is a danger here and even the simplest of exercises must be considered suspect. While “performing language” the teacher is, after all, also “performing culture” since culture and language cannot be separated; as she uses the power of theatre to affect, the effect it has upon the students, as both performers and spectators, must be queried.

In this lecture, we will examine the ethics that are called into question in the classrooms of teachers who use drama in their teaching. We will examine some of the more common theatrical tools used within second language classrooms and discuss the cultural ramifications of their inclusion.