Freie Universität Berlin

Fachdidaktik Englisch

SoSe 2014

A Meta-Cognitive Strategy

for Role Plays in the English Language Classroom

Designed by

Claudia Dittrich

Silvia Helfensteller

Alexander Bishop Kendzia

Yusuf Kilic

1. Definition and Noteworthy Information

There are two layers of problem solving: applying a strategy to the problem and selecting and monitoring that strategy (Newell 1990 in Hattie 2009: 188). The second layer, the selecting and monitoring, is often labelled as "meta-cognitive", which means something like "about understanding," as it involves thinking about the process of understanding or decision-making itself in order to pursue this process more efficiently. Hattie (2009: 188f.) lists various studies (Haller, Child & Walberg 1988; Chiu 1998) that underline the effectiveness of the conscious application of meta-cognitive strategies in a learning environment (effect sizes of d = 0,69 and 0,71). These meta-cognitive strategies include a wide variety of mental and verbal activities from the more basic planning of the intended work via more sophisticated self-verbalization and aptitude-treatment interactions to the general enhancement and application of study skills (cf. Hattie 2009: ibid).

Hence, it is consistent to assume that meta-cognitive strategies can and should indeed be applied to the EFL-classroom as well as to other subjects. The drama-based EFL-classroom is no exception. There too, meta-cognitive strategies can be used and trained. In this chapter, we would like to present an example of meta-cognitive strategies being applied to role plays in the EFL-classroom.

2. Understanding a Role Play as a Process

Role plays are an effective tool for language learning in the EFL classroom; however, they may turn out to be difficult if students perform them without much guidance. The current state of research understands major language skills such as writing or reading as processes that have to be trained as such. We argue that this idea is also applicable to role plays and the corresponding phases (pre-, while- and post-acting).

In order to allow students to work out their own role plays successfully, a meta-cognitive strategy can be introduced that enables students to monitor their role plays throughout the process and even to understand it as such. This strategy consists of three parts: firstly the set-an-objective-phase, secondly the rehearsing phase and thirdly the reflection phase. Obviously, the idea is that students start the process again after the reflection phase to implement their ideas from the reflection in another

rehearsal. The process may be repeated as often as necessary until students feel comfortable enough to present their role plays to the class.
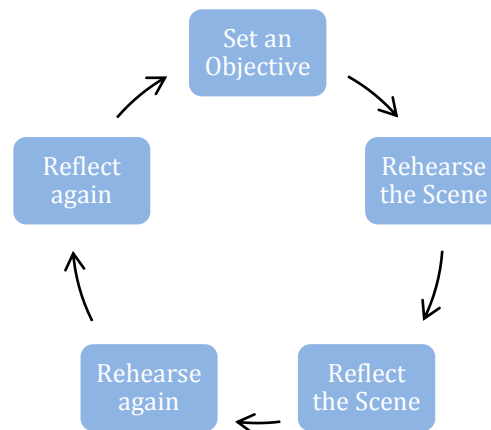
Step 1: Set an Objective

Students use the checklist *before* they rehearse the scene for the first time. They agree on the content and the message they want to convey, the atmosphere they want to create etc. They tick off the checklist to make sure not to forget anything important. Thinking about what the scene is supposed to be like beforehand helps to reflect afterwards, whether the rehearsal met their expectations.

Step 2: Rehearse the Scene

The second step is to perform and practice the scene according to the aims and ideas collected during phase 1. Reflecting the scene afterwards from memory is possible; however, we suggest the use of more objective methods of observation (cf. *4. Material* and the material itself).

Step 3: Reflecting on the Scene

The reflection phase consists of two reflections: the personal and the group reflection. For students to feel comfortable about what they do and how they appear to an audience they need to reflect on their performances individually. They should take some time to think about how they felt during the rehearsal and how they would rate their performance. The teacher may want to put emphasis on the fact that this is still a part of the practicing phase. Students should not have the

feeling of being evaluated at such an early point. It should also be made clear that the reflection serves as a tool.

The group reflection should focus on the points specified on the checklist (see appendix, step 1). It helps the group to identify strengths and weaknesses of their first rehearsal. Suggestions and praise should be given in another round. Perhaps students want to change some of their initial objectives and then, rehearse again.

Ideally, students additionally monitor the whole role play process by keeping a portfolio or a diary. It can be helpful for the reflection and planning of the drama process, but also when it comes to explaining why specific decisions have been made, such as the setting of the scene or the choice of props.

3. What is Meta-Cognitive About this Approach?

With regard to the theoretical input on meta-cognitive strategies, it becomes fairly obvious why this approach could be meaningful for students in the EFL-classroom: The strategy helps students to get organized nearly in a professional manner. It breaks the process down into clear steps allowing students to monitor the process of their drama activity. It gives students a clear manual of how to organize and manage their work. Therefore, it is a classic example of a meta-cognitive strategy, since it contains the aspects of planning, anticipating, and reflecting.

4. Material

The primary material used in this approach to implement meta-cognitive strategies in drama activities consists of a checklist and questionnaires. Video recordings could be used in addition. It is the checklist's purpose to help organizing and structuring the process. Another function is the encouragement of decision-making (What is of importance while performing the scene as a group? Etc.).

The two questionnaires are used for (a) an individual, personal and rather emotional reflection on the impressions of the performance by the different participants, and (b) as a tool for the group, so to speak as a facilitator of collaborative reflection on the performance. In addition, video recording could be used to trigger the reflection and discussion. Additionally, someone neutral, an

outside eye, could take on the role of a director evaluating the performance independently and giving advice on possible changes.

5. Appendix

How to do Role Plays

Step 1: Set an Objective

Checklist

For a successful dramatization, please make sure that in your group you have thought about the following aspects:

☐ We know/ agreed on where the scene is set (time and place).
☐ We know what happens in the scene.
☐ We developed the characters./ We analyzed the character traits.
☐ We know that body language can influence our role play and has an impact on the audience.
☐ We have talked about the atmosphere we want to create.
☐ We are aware of the message of our role play.
☐ We have ideas on how to convey this message.
☐ We agreed on props.
☐ We know who will act out which character.

Step 2: Rehearse the Scene

Now it is time for acting. Keep in mind the aspects you agreed on in your group (cf. checklist).

Option 1: Record your rehearsal on video to have a basis for your reflection afterwards. Don't worry, the recording is meant as a help for you. You don't have to show it to anyone else.

Option 2: Ask a neutral person (a so-called *outside eye*) or a group member to monitor your rehearsal. After the rehearsal, it is this person's task to offer his/her perspective and to contribute to the reflection of your first acting experience. You may want to ask this person to set an observation focus, like your voice use, movements, use of props (for further examples cf. checklist above).

Step 3: Reflecting on the Scene

To make your role play successful, it is necessary to reflect on the rehearsal. The reflection consists of two parts: an individual, emotional reflection and a group evaluation.

Individual Reflection

Questionnaire for Individual Reflection

How did you feel during the rehearsal?

How would you rate your own performance today? ☆☆☆☆☆

What did you like best about it?

What would you like to improve next time?

Group Reflection

Questionnaire for Group Reflection

Are all members of the group involved in the process and presentation?

What went well?

Which aspects do we want to improve next time?

What can we do to improve these aspects?

6. For the sources see:

Hattie, John (2009): *Visible Learning. A Synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses.* London   [u.a.]: Routledge.