

Intercultural Communicative Competence through Theatre: *Bonfire Night*

Janice Bland

*The terrorist attack on the London Underground on the 7th July bears several shocking parallels to the attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament exactly 400 years ago. In both cases religious fundamentalists were involved. They believed so blindly in what they were doing that they were prepared to destroy many lives. Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators did not represent the Catholic community in early 17th century Britain any more than the London bombers represent the Islamic community in the present-day UK. Nonetheless, the backlash in the aftermath to 5th November 1605 was tragic for the Catholics of the British Isles. History must not repeat itself regarding the multi-ethnic societies of today. Drama works “by bringing participants closer to the subject through emotional engagement but at the same time preserving a distance by virtue of the fact that the context is make-believe” (Byram and Fleming 1998:143). Participating in theatre can help children make sense of the world through active involvement and active reflection. In the following I explain the background to Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot. Subsequently I briefly sketch a concept of participation in scripted theatre for young learners of English. To do justice to **all** our young learners, including those who “seem to walk to the beat of a different drummer, who have trouble adjusting to the rigidity of the typical classroom situation” (Cranston 1995:7), we should take our lead from the children themselves. When children learn through play and make-believe, those classroom walls just disappear.*

Travel in Britain on the 5th November, and you will see the night sky lit up from dusk to midnight with flashes of colour and bursts of fire from countless gardens and parks across the country. If you have time to stop at a village green or city park, you will see dark figures crowding around an enormous, blazing bonfire for warmth, and gazing into the sky at the exploding fireworks. There may be a mysterious effigy sitting enthroned on top of the bonfire, burning merrily. The children will be dashing about with sparklers in their hands, writing messages with splashes of light – soon to melt into the darkness. But what is it all for?

It happened 400 years ago, in 1605, and the folk memory of Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot has paled against the fiery fun and games, despite the well-known rhyme:

Remember, remember the 5th of November
Gunpowder treason and plot.
We see no reason
Why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot!

What does this traditional saying warn us to remember? The cruelty of indiscriminate terrorism? Treason and plot, and how they endanger the established order of things? How intolerance can sow the seeds of fanaticism and violence?

Here is the tale of Guy Fawkes and friends:

The leader was Robert Catesby, a well-connected Roman Catholic. He hoped to throw Protestant England into a crisis and put a Catholic on the throne. He planned to kill King James together with all the bishops and lords, by blowing up parliament during its state opening. (For fear of just such a plot, Queen Elizabeth I had had Mary Stuart beheaded eighteen years previously.)

Guy Fawkes was chosen to set light to the gunpowder hidden in the cellar under the Palace of Westminster. He had learned how to use it while fighting in the Netherlands as a mercenary in the Spanish army. Soldiers searching the cellars discovered Guy Fawkes with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder, after an anonymous letter had been sent to one of the lords, warning him to stay away from the Opening of Parliament.

Tradition

From that day to this an effigy of Guy Fawkes is traditionally burned on a bonfire each 5th November. Sometimes children construct the guy weeks before Bonfire Night, using old clothes and a grotesque mask. With the words "Penny for the guy!" they ask passers-by for coins. (From this tradition we have the modern meaning of guy: man or fellow.) The conspirators were actually tortured and hung not burned, and some were shot while trying to escape. A thankful Parliament ordered that 5th November should be observed as a holiday, and the festival of Bonfire Night, or Guy Fawkes' Night, has been celebrated ever since.

Let's all meet tonight!
For Bonfire Night?
That's right!

We'll sit the guy up high,
On a throne of autumn leaves.
Flames, dance wildly please...
Shoot sparks across the sky!

Let's all meet tonight!
For Bonfire Night?
That's right!

For the rockets that whiz and crash,
For the colours that splish and splash,
For the lights that fly and flash,
For the magic rainbow rain.

Let's all meet tonight!
For Bonfire Night?
That's right!

For the bonfire burning bright,
For the flowers of fire alight,
For the glittering, sparkling night,
It's firework time again!

(Bland 2004)

Why was Bonfire Night such an immediate success that it is still celebrated with great popularity four centuries later? Any excuse for merriment on cold autumn nights is likely to be welcome, especially when a blazing fire and whizzing fireworks are involved. There is no doubt, however, that the large majority was ecstatic that the Gunpowder Plot had failed. Two years previously the English had lost their most popular monarch ever, Queen Elizabeth I, who had overseen the Reformation in England (and compared to other European countries quite peaceably). When the English fleet defeated the powerful Spanish Armada in 1588, national pride and patriotism was born. Great dramatists and poets were gathering and working in London: William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser and John Donne, to name but a few. The idea that all this success and prosperity had so nearly been destroyed by a small band of religious fanatics brought about a wave of anti-Catholic feeling and patriotic rage.

Past and Present

As usual with terrorist attacks, even unsuccessful ones, the innocent suffered with the guilty: laws forbidding Catholics the right to vote, hold office or attend a British university remained in place for the following two centuries.

Religious conflict, intolerance and fanaticism: sometimes stories from the past can help us begin to understand problems of the present.

Guy Fawkes: We wanted to kill the king and everybody in the parliament!

Rona: Who said that?

Alan: It wasn't me.

Ian: It wasn't me.

Guy Fawkes: It was me!

Lucy: It's your guy!

Cara: He can speak!

Dana: That's magic!

Ann: Wow!

Leo: Hey! Guy Fawkes, Sir. Please tell us about the gunpowder plot.



Everybody sits down around the guy.

Guy Fawkes: It began in 1605.
400 years ago.
Then Shakespeare was alive.
Macbeth was his newest show.

King James was on the throne.
A Protestant and a Scot.
But it was not the King alone
Who should die by our gunpowder plot.



Lucy: But why did you want to kill King James and so many people?

Cara: That was very, very bad.

Guy Fawkes: You are right. The King's men found me in the cellar under the Houses of Parliament. I had lots and lots of gunpowder.

Leo: Why were you so unhappy about King James and Parliament?

Guy Fawkes: There was no religious tolerance for Catholics.

Participation in Theatre

Below I outline the value of theatre for early foreign language teaching. The expression *participation in theatre* refers here to all drama and theatre activities that include:

1. A script.

This may be fairy tale-like and magical, or it may be rhythmical and in rhyme. It could be the staging of authentic materials, such as nursery rhymes and picture books. The poem and play extract above are taken from my mini-play: *Bonfire Night*.

2. Participation on the part of every child.

This is participation in the acting and organising throughout the theatre project. In my three books of mini-plays for 8 – 12 year-old learners of English, each play has a flexible cast so that every child has a speaking role, even in large classes. My following observations on learning hold true only if every child is given a share in the work and the success of the theatre project. Unwilling, painfully shy, apparently dull or disruptive children are usually transformed during rehearsals into creative, constructive and enthusiastic team members. **This is the real magic of theatre.** (It is also true for student teachers. Whenever I hold a seminar on drama methodology, putting on a play to perform to young learners does wonders for the work ethic and team spirit of the student teachers.)

Features of early foreign language teaching, and how these are fulfilled through participation in theatre.

1. Focus on language:

natural, whole language acquisition, but recycling and memory anchors are essential.

Children experience the vitality and creativity of whole language through authentic, idiomatic English. They feel the beat of the language: the rhythm, rhyme and alliteration. They experience delight in speaking and chorusing rhythmically, so learning English pronunciation and intonation while memory and listening comprehension skills are trained. The rehearsals provide intrinsic recycling. They encounter English as a dynamic and expressive medium of communication, shared by speakers from many backgrounds. Classroom discourse – *Stand over there! Learn your lines by heart! Hurry up, we're starting!* – produces natural language input.

2. Focus on context:

meaning anchors through Total Physical Response, situational and visual context.

Disembodied English is dull: theatre brings English alive again! The context is a dramatized story, providing multi-sensory clues to meaning (gestures, facial expression, movement and groupings, costumes, scenery, props, sound effects and light). Encouraging interest in narrative can lead towards the love of books and supports literacy in English. Participation in theatre is also training for reading skills: memorised chunks of language are collected aurally (by ear), can be identified on the page (often with the help of a picture) and read.

3. Focus on learner:

holistic learning, affective, sociological, multi-sensory/ physiological and cognitive.

Participation in theatre helps achieve a positive mind-set to learning and expel the fear of peer pressure through a stress-free, play-like learning atmosphere. It encourages constructive, co-operative interaction and the expression of feelings, thus personal and social learning are enhanced. Children taking part can make gains in tolerance, reliability, ability to work in a team, putting the team first, learning from others as well as contributing their own ideas. Participation in theatre is exciting, motivating, enlivening and stimulating. The children learn while seeing, hearing, touching and moving – their natural pattern of learning. Their self-confidence and self-esteem, concentration and memory, planning and organisation skills, self-discipline, diligence and creativity are all encouraged and strengthened.

4. Focus on content:

identification with language through child-oriented and imaginative themes.

Participation in theatre brings intercultural awareness alive. Children experience alternative worlds: a different country and characters, a different time or culture. They learn to listen and respond carefully, and are provided with food for thought. The input flows into their (un)conscious collection of ideas. They learn to empathise with others in a different situation, so enhancing intercultural communicative competence.

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