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Using drama to teach French in secondary school: challenges, practices and teaching perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of dramatisation in the teaching of French at secondary school level, considered both as a pedagogical approach and as a subject of didactic study. Drawing on a body of research in the didactics of French, theatre pedagogy and language sciences, this analysis begins with the observation that teaching is often centred on the

written word and on detached textual analysis, to the detriment of a lived, embodied engagement with language and literature. By engaging the body, the voice, space and interaction, dramatisation creates a space in which pupils' linguistic, discursive, literary and socio-emotional competences are developed simultaneously. The article first provides a theoretical framework for the concept of dramatisation and its psycho-pedagogical foundations, then discusses the specific challenges raised by its integration into French lessons in

upper secondary schools. It goes on to present concrete practices and approaches — dramatised reading, dramatic play, staging of texts, guided improvisation — accompanied by a proposed lesson plan and assessment strategies. Finally, the limitations and resistance encountered in practice (time constraints, teacher training, class heterogeneity) are discussed, before outlining pedagogical perspectives for the reasoned and sustainable integration of theatre into the teaching of French at secondary school level.

Keywords: dramatisation, French language teaching, upper secondary school, drama, language proficiency, public speaking, theatre pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The teaching of French in upper secondary schools remains, to a large extent, structured around the written word: analytical reading, essay-style commentary, dissertations, and the study of language for normative purposes. This focus, historically linked to the French school tradition and widely prevalent in French-speaking education systems, tends to reduce literature to an object of analysis and language to a system of rules, to the detriment of their lived, sensory and communicative dimensions. Yet literature, and particularly the play, is only fully realised through its utterance, its vocalisation and its embodiment. To teach theatre without staging it is to deprive pupils of what constitutes its generic specificity: a text written to be spoken, embodied and performed.

In light of this, dramatisation — understood as the range of approaches that involve conveying a text, a situation or content through physical and vocal performance — emerges as a fruitful avenue for revitalising the teaching of French in secondary schools. It is not limited to the study of dramatic texts: it constitutes a cross-curricular methodology capable of enriching reading, speaking, writing and even the study of the language itself. It forms part of a broader movement to promote speaking and oral skills within the curriculum, which have long been the poor relation of French language teaching.

This article aims to examine this issue on three levels. Firstly, it seeks to clarify the theoretical framework within which the concept of dramatisation is situated, by distinguishing it from related concepts (dramatic play, role-play, forum theatre) and by explaining its psycho-pedagogical foundations. Secondly, it aims to identify the specific challenges raised by the integration of dramatisation into the teaching of French at sixth-form level: linguistic and communicative challenges, literary and cultural challenges, psycho-affective and motivational challenges, and challenges linked to the school

context. Finally, the aim is to describe specific practices and approaches, to discuss their limitations, and to identify pedagogical strategies for the informed integration of dramatisation into French lessons in upper secondary schools.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

2.1. Dramatisation: an attempt at a definition

In educational literature, the term ‘dramatisation’ encompasses a relatively diverse range of practices. In the broadest sense, it refers to any activity that involves transposing content — a text, an event, a concept — into the realm of acted performance, by drawing on characters, a fictional narrative context, and physical and vocal expression. It should be distinguished from related concepts: dramatic play, which focuses more on the pupil’s free exploration and expressive creativity, without the aim of performing before an audience; role-play, which emphasises the simulation of social or communicative situations for the purpose of language practice; and strictly theatrical staging, which involves a more sophisticated approach to space, rhythm and addressing the audience. Dramatisation, as envisaged here, lies at the crossroads of these practices: it borrows its exploratory dimension from dramatic play, its function as language training from role-play, and its demands regarding form and communication from theatrical staging.

When applied to the teaching of French, dramatisation can thus take various forms: a theatricalised reading aloud of a narrative or poetic text; the embodiment of characters from a novel or play; improvisation based on a dramatic situation or conflict; the staging of extracts from plays on the syllabus; or even the theatrical adaptation of non-literary content (a debate on ideas, a historical situation, a moral dilemma). What unites these practices is the use of the body and voice in the service of linguistic or literary content, and the tension between a text or set of instructions and an embodied interpretation, which is necessarily unique.

2.2. Psychopedagogical foundations

The theoretical foundations of school dramatisation draw on several converging fields. In terms of learning theories, socio-constructivist approaches — which regard interaction and mediation as the driving forces behind cognitive and linguistic development — find in dramatisation a prime area of application: dramatic play is, by its very nature, a collective activity, where meaning is constructed through exchange, mutual adjustment and negotiation amongst peers. The concept of the zone of proximal development thus sheds light on how pupils, supported by the group and the teacher, can,

within the safe framework of fiction, access linguistic and expressive behaviours that they would not spontaneously employ.

From the perspective of language sciences, dramatisation enables pupils to develop what are sometimes referred to as discursive and pragmatic skills: adapting one's speech to a particular communicative situation, taking the audience into account, and modulating prosody, rate of speech and intonation according to one's intention. It also provides an ideal setting for mastering spoken language in its prosodic and paraverbal dimensions — stress, rhythm, pauses — which are all too often neglected in teaching activities centred on the written word.

Finally, in the field of theatre pedagogy, research on dramatic play in schools emphasises the mediating function of acting: playing a character means experiencing a perspective other than one's own, stepping outside one's own frame of reference, and thereby gaining a better understanding of a text's motivations, stakes and tensions. This function of shifting one's perspective aligns with the aims of literary reading itself, understood as an interpretative activity that suspends immediate judgement in favour of a deeper understanding of characters and situations.

2.3. Targeted skills

Dramatisation, as a teaching approach, aims to develop several types of skills simultaneously. On a linguistic level, it requires mastery of spoken language (pronunciation, prosody, rate of speech, articulation), the memorisation and reproduction of syntactic and lexical structures, as well as the adaptation of language register to the fictional context. In terms of discourse and communication, it develops the ability to organise one's thoughts, to take an interlocutor or an audience into account, and to employ strategies for self-presentation in oral interaction. From a literary perspective, it fosters an embodied engagement with texts by requiring pupils to interpret a character's intentions, subtext and dramatic stakes, thereby extending and enriching traditional literary analysis. Finally, from a psycho-emotional perspective, it contributes to the development of self-confidence, helps manage anxiety associated with public speaking, and fosters a more positive relationship with school and the French language.

3. Pedagogical considerations regarding dramatisation in upper secondary school

3.1. Linguistic and communicative challenges

The primary challenge of dramatisation lies in the prominence it gives to oral expression, which has long been underestimated in the teaching of French at sixth-form level in favour of written expression. Whilst the syllabuses do set out objectives for oral proficiency — such as presentations, structured debates and end-of-cycle oral examinations — these exercises often remain formal, centred on individual performance and assessed according to criteria similar to those for written work (logical structure, lexical richness), without any real focus on the voice, body language or addressing the audience. Dramatisation, on the other hand, makes the physical and vocal aspects of oral communication a subject of learning in their own right: it enables explicit work on breathing, voice projection, articulation, rhythm and intonation — all elements that determine the comprehensibility and effectiveness of a spoken address, but which are rarely taught as such.

It also serves as a means of developing pupils' pragmatic skills: acting out a scene necessarily involves taking part in a fictional communicative situation, with an addressee, an intention and a context, which requires pupils to adapt their speech according to explicit communicative parameters. This aspect aligns with the objectives of a communicative approach to language teaching, applied here to French as a first or second language depending on the context.

3.2. Literary and cultural considerations

The second issue concerns pupils' relationship with literature and, more specifically, with dramatic texts. The study of theatre in secondary school faces a recurring difficulty: a play, unlike a novel, is not intended to be read silently; it only takes on its full meaning when spoken aloud and staged. A strictly analytical reading, which treats theatrical dialogue as an ordinary narrative or argumentative text, fails to recognise this distinctive feature and deprives pupils of a sensory appreciation of the effects of rhythm, subtext, irony or dramatic tension, which are only fully revealed when spoken aloud.

Dramatisation thus enables the theatrical text to regain its performative dimension, and to link literary analysis with sensory experience: having a line spoken aloud, whilst exploring its various possible intentions (irony, anger, pretence, hesitation), brings out meanings that a silent reading would leave unnoticed. This approach aligns with the aims of

a literary and cultural education that seeks not only to foster an understanding of works, but also to build a meaningful and lasting relationship with culture.

3.3. Psycho-emotional and motivational issues

The third issue concerns the emotional dimension of learning. Many sixth-form students experience significant anxiety about speaking in public, particularly when doing so individually and under assessment. Drama, by establishing a fictional and collective framework, provides a space where pupils can practise speaking without fear of direct judgement: it is not they who are speaking, but the character they are portraying. This shift in the speaker's identity, often described in research on dramatic play, serves a protective function that encourages linguistic risk-taking and gradual disinhibition.

Beyond managing anxiety, dramatisation also contributes to academic motivation by breaking away from the routine of traditional exercises and giving meaning to learning by embedding it within a concrete, collective and goal-oriented activity (preparing a presentation, a scene or a class play). This motivational aspect is all the more important in mixed-ability classes, where some pupils who struggle with writing can, through dramatic play, find a rewarding and valued role.

3.4. Issues relating to the school and institutional context

Finally, the integration of drama into the teaching of French at secondary school raises issues specific to the institutional context. In many French-speaking education systems, and particularly in Morocco, French syllabuses prescribe the study of theatrical works without always accompanying this requirement with methodological recommendations regarding the performance and oral delivery of texts. Dramatisation thus remains a marginal practice in these contexts, dependent on the individual initiative of teachers rather than being embedded in an explicit curricular policy. This situation calls for a review of the initial and continuing professional development of French teachers, who are rarely equipped with theatrical techniques, as well as the practical constraints (class sizes, classroom layout, teaching hours) that hinder the implementation of such practices.

4. Drama practices and approaches in French lessons

4.1. Overview of approaches

There are several approaches for integrating dramatisation into the teaching of French at upper secondary level, varying in terms of complexity and level of engagement.

Dramatised reading involves reading a text aloud whilst exploring different interpretative approaches (tone, rhythm, intensity), without necessarily having to memorise the text or move around the room. It provides an accessible entry point that is not time-consuming and can be practised with any type of text (play, poetry, dialogue from a novel).

Dramatic play, which is more exploratory, invites pupils to improvise based on a prompt, a situation or a conflict, without a pre-written script: it develops verbal creativity, responsiveness and the ability to construct a coherent monologue in real time.

Staging excerpts, which is more demanding, involves work on memorising the text, movement, pauses and addressing the audience; it amounts to a genuine introduction to the techniques of theatrical performance and lends itself particularly well to the study of the dramatic works included in the syllabus.

Finally, forum theatre and argumentative role-play enable the staging of situations involving debate or conflicting ideas, combining dramatic and argumentative skills: pupils take on contrasting positions on an issue, which promotes an understanding of the stakes involved in a debate and the acquisition of oral argumentation techniques.

4.2. Suggested teaching sequence

By way of illustration, a dramatisation sequence based on a theatre scene from the syllabus could be organised over five sessions. The first session is devoted to a sensory exploration of the text: silent reading, followed by successive readings aloud by several pupils, and then a discussion of possible interpretative approaches, without seeking to conform to a single interpretation. The second session focuses on a dramaturgical analysis of the scene (the characters' motivations, power dynamics, subtext), an analysis directly applied to the forthcoming performance. The third session is devoted to preparatory exercises: physical and vocal warm-ups, diction exercises, and exploring different interpretative approaches to a single line. The fourth session allows for work in small groups on staging the scene, with individualised guidance from the teacher. Finally, the fifth session is devoted to presenting the scenes to the class, followed by group feedback structured around explicit criteria (clarity of diction, use of space, consistency of performance, listening to one's acting partner).

This progression enables a close integration of literary analysis and theatrical practice, avoiding the pitfall of a purely playful dramatisation disconnected from the issues at stake in

the reading, as well as that of a purely conceptual analysis divorced from any sensory experience of the text.

4.3. The teacher's role

Implementing dramatisation requires the teacher to adopt a different approach. It is no longer simply a matter of imparting knowledge about the text, but of facilitating a process of collective creation, which entails accepting a more open classroom environment, a degree of improvisation and unpredictability, as well as an assessment focused more on the process than on the result alone. The teacher's role is similar to that of a game leader or theatre director: they set constraints and give instructions, but allow pupils scope for interpretation and choice, which is essential for them to truly take ownership of the activity. This approach requires specific training in the basic techniques of theatrical performance (warm-ups, directing actors, group management), which is still largely absent from French teachers' training programmes.

4.4. Assessing drama-based activities

Assessing drama activities presents a specific challenge: how can one evaluate an oral and physical performance without reducing the activity to a standardised performance, or discouraging students from taking expressive risks? Several approaches can be considered. Formative assessment, based on explicit criteria shared with pupils in advance (clarity of diction, use of space, listening and responsiveness, coherence of the performance), makes expectations clear without confining the performance to a single standard. Self-assessment and peer assessment, based on these same criteria, encourage the development of a critical perspective on one's own practice and that of others. Finally, emphasising the process — through logbooks, written records of interpretative choices, or reflective assessments — ensures that assessment is not based solely on the final performance, which is often influenced by contextual factors (stage fright, fatigue, practical conditions).

5. Difficulties and limitations

The integration of drama into the teaching of French at sixth-form level faces several difficulties. The first relates to timetable and institutional constraints: drama activities require preparation time, a suitable space and small group sizes — conditions rarely met in overcrowded classes and within timetables constrained by the demands of the curriculum and examinations. The second difficulty relates to teacher training, as teachers rarely have the technical skills required to lead drama activities with confidence, which can lead to a level of apprehension mirroring that of the pupils. The third challenge

concerns the heterogeneity of classes: some pupils, particularly the shyest or those least at ease with physical expression, may find dramatisation an anxiety-inducing experience if it is not sufficiently prepared and supported by a caring and progressive framework. Finally, a fourth challenge stems from the tension between the logic of formal assessment — centred on standardised and measurable skills — and the logic of experimentation inherent in theatrical performance, which requires a tolerance for error and incompleteness that is difficult to reconcile with the demands of marking.

6. Teaching perspectives

Several approaches can be considered to promote a reasoned and sustainable integration of dramatisation into the teaching of French at sixth-form level. In terms of the curriculum, it seems necessary to accompany the prescription of theatrical works with explicit methodological recommendations regarding the oral presentation and performance of texts, so that dramatisation no longer depends solely on the individual initiative of teachers. In terms of teacher training, the inclusion of drama practice modules in the initial and continuing professional development of French teachers would help to develop the necessary technical skills (voice, body language, group leadership) and reduce teachers' apprehension about these practices. From a pedagogical perspective, a gradual approach to introducing dramatic activities — from the simplest forms (dramatised reading) to the most sophisticated (staged productions) — would help to progressively establish a climate of trust conducive to taking expressive risks. In terms of assessment, the development of shared assessment criteria and a process-centred approach to assessment would help to reconcile the demands of the school system with the experimental nature inherent in theatrical performance. Finally, in terms of research, further empirical studies, particularly longitudinal, would help to better document the effects of dramatisation on the linguistic, literary and psycho-emotional skills of sixth-form students in a variety of school contexts.

7. Conclusion

Dramatisation, far from being a peripheral activity or merely a form of relaxation in the teaching of French at secondary school, emerges as a fully-fledged teaching approach, capable of coherently integrating the linguistic, literary, communicative and psycho-affective dimensions of learning. By restoring to the text — and particularly to the theatrical text — its performative and embodied dimension, it enables us to move beyond an exclusively analytical and detached approach to literature, whilst offering pupils a safe space in which to develop their oral fluency. Its effective integration into

secondary school classrooms, however, requires converging changes at the curricular, institutional and teacher-training levels. It is only on this basis that dramatisation can fully contribute to the teaching of French, conceived not merely as the transmission of knowledge about language and texts, but as a living experience of speech and of relationships with others.

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