

Book Reviews

Sarah Phillips, 1999, **Drama with Children**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 152 pages (paperback) Series: Resource Books for Teachers.

Reviewed by Rimli Bhattacharya
& Rita Ronita Sen

Drama with Children (hereafter *DwC*) is meant for use at primary and pre-primary levels. The appeal is chiefly to primary teachers, whose needs are largely ignored in India. Sarah Phillips aims to promote teaching-learning of language skills; revising grammatical structures through role play and various other activities.

In this book, there are many innovative ideas, both practical and well explained. Without the stress of putting together large and elaborate drama productions, the book could help teachers with their daily lesson plans, add something unexpected in the classroom to make lessons meaningful. For all these reasons it would be a valuable addition to any school library, although the price might be a deterrent factor for the average school. Also, as we suggest later, it could provide an excellent basis for creating workshops relevant to local conditions.

Imagining the child as a learner

The emphasis is on the 'process' of dramatizing rather than on 'a final product' of performance. Phillips rightly touches on the importance of motivation and how drama can be a great help when dealing with learners who *appear* disinterested, uncooperative or have short attention spans. The different units gradually move the learners from situations to dialogues, and encourage brainstorming to involve

students in preparing the dialogues. Phillips understands that for the teacher, the main aim is the process, while the child may only focus on the final performance. What is *not* addressed though, is how the teacher may draw on the children's own repertoire as there is little or no mention of the range of body language, sounds, songs, and miming capabilities that they already possess and bring to the classroom.

The units foreground the element of fun which a bit of role play or dramatization would introduce into the classroom. The 'language aims' are spelt out quite clearly in each unit. These range from overarching aims such as 'revising and recycling language' (as the units progress), to more specific exercises such as the 'use of prepositions, *must* and the past imperfect' (p. 101).

However, it is not clear what linguistic range of children the book has in mind. Does the 'target' include both native speakers of English as well as those learning it as a foreign language? In what different ways might English work as a foreign language? Would it work in multilingual contexts, or where the child may be fluent in another home language, or for a first generation learner? There are only scattered references to this complex but challenging issue, e.g. 'you can do this in your own language' (p. 32) or 'children can't read English yet' (p. 85). For drama to be an effective mode of everyday pedagogic practices, educators would first need to address the heterogeneity of the latter as a group. In seeking to cover all these diverse possibilities, without really spelling out any one of them, how successful is the book in its language aims?

In addition to the extensive section on mime (with visual, aural and kinaesthetic

reinforcement) DwC dwells on rhyme, rhythm, songs and chanting, so critical to a child's understanding and development of language. In Unit 2.6, p. 40, the author describes the rhyme 'Who Stole the Cookies'. Could there be a better way to relate to sound and movement, and enunciate and move with claps and expressive movements, such as the shrugging of shoulders, swaying, and so on?

The directions and planning are detailed even though some scope for improvisation has been left open. The sample short plays might be used as kernel-texts to be enlarged or adapted. All aspects of drama seem to be covered, including the worksheets with stencils (p. 00), which can be photocopied as well as enlarged for props and costumes. With the pressures of globalization through different media impacting most heavily on the visual culture of children, it would be fruitful to raise questions about the culture or class specific attributes of iconography or visual symbols. For example, the line drawings of castles (turrets), etc., in the Cinderella story may prove to be alienating if the book is followed blindly.

In general, Phillips avoids an over-determined schema, but one still notes an oscillation between the guided/controlled/structured mode, and another, nurturing improvisation. For instance, one wonders why mime words should come with a fixed or designated action (p. 19). How would children's subjectivity find expression if these actions are 'fixed'? Similarly, while one appreciates the emphasis on emotions, how effective would it be to think of and work with 'feelings' *in isolation*? (p. 16). There would be a danger of fostering, both in the teacher and the students, a limited repertoire of stereotypical (television-oriented?) gestures and expression.

In contrast to the rich range of pedagogic approaches, the choice of most of the stories and poems themselves is disappointing (e.g. enormous elephant, p. 20; or big blue fish). Perhaps this is a natural consequence of the attempt to address too-general an audience? Our experience within and outside the classroom shows that given a nurturing atmosphere and some contextualizing, little children are perfectly capable of responding to the unfamiliar.

Sections 3 and 4 on 'Making puppets and props' and 'Using puppets' respectively, have some of the most innovative and imaginative ideas. Phillips details the uses of finger, sock, stick and origami puppets. The vibrant line drawings that illustrate the concepts and contexts, add to the attraction.

The real test of the usefulness of the book however, lies in trying out the activities over an extended period of time in an actual classroom situation. A few of the suggestions sound a tad overconfident, e.g. can the 'ten minute role play' really be done in 10 minutes?

The very forte of the book — its comprehensive treatment of the subject — might lend itself to a cut and copy paste 'application'. Given the logistics of large numbers, the constraints of time and syllabi, and the lack of an intellectual support system in the Indian education system, not every teacher (even if he or she may desire it) actually feels empowered to be creative. As part of a series entitled 'Resource Books for Teachers', it would be most helpful if the author had a section (either as a foreword or afterword) directly addressing the teacher. This could indicate how and where to provide the scope for creative language learning and improvisation in order to:

1. Respect and seek the individual qualities of the child;
2. experiment and not be discouraged by the lack of immediate response; and
3. draw on the local rich performative and visual traditions (especially in South Asia, Africa, etc);

As the punning title promises, *Drama with Children* could also be a splendid resource book for workshops on drama and language learning, if we reconfigure in our multilingual contexts, many of its pedagogic and expressive assumptions.

Rita Ronita Sen has taught literature and social science in different parts of India for the past sixteen years. She has interacted extensively with school children of various age groups, conceptualizing and directing dramatic productions, including dance-dramas. She currently teaches at the Army Public School, Shankar Vihar, New Delhi.

Rimli Bhattacharya teaches at the University of Delhi. Her interest include performance studies, narratology and the visual arts. Among her translations from Bangla to English are Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Making a Mango Whistle, a Puffin Classic (2002). Her work in primary education includes the creation of teaching-learning material for children.

rimlibi@gmail.com

Rhyner, Paula M. (Ed.), 2009, **Emergent Literacy and Language Development: Promoting Learning in early Childhood.** New York: Guilford Press, 240 pages.

Reviewed by Aditya Raj

There has been a surge of transdisciplinary research on various facets of literacy in recent times. *Emergent Literacy and Language*

Development is indeed a good addition to this corpus of research as it forms a bridge which tries to establish bidirectional relationships between emergent literacy and language acquisition. The book is a compilation of six essays by leading scholars in the genre of emergent literacy. Early childhood education is the thread which moors the discourse of this collection. The book is edited by Rhyner, who is known for her work on the effectiveness of various strategies in facilitating language learning in early childhood, especially communicative strategies between adults and children. According to the editor, emergent literacy involves knowledge, skills, and attitudes that develop before literacy, but are related to conventional literacy skills. However, there is disagreement on the exact knowledge that defines emergent literacy. The chapters address the early formative experiences of listening and speaking. However, research, from which the maze of discussion is delineated in this edited book, pertains to clinical or social settings. The case studies illustrated are significant and evocative. They guide parents and practitioners towards instructions and practices that contribute to the development of a strong foundation in school readiness.

The framework for emergent literacy is categorized into three perspectives—developmental, components, and child and environmental influence. The different approaches towards emergent literacy are explained in the first chapter. The focus of the next chapter is the importance of the book sharing experience for the child. In sharing words with the young ones we also bring the world to them. The semantically rich cultural atmosphere contributes to oral language development, as well as development of meaning for emergent literacy. The discourse in chapter three looks at how a child's