Teaching/Learning English as a Foreign Language: Overcoming resistance through drama activities

Vera Cabrera Duarte
Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo
São Paulo, SP, Brazil

Abstract

Learning a foreign language is a citizen's right in Brazil. Students are, or should be, motivated to learn it, and schools are expected to help them develop various skills as well as creativity to face global challenges. Although educators have endeavoured to awaken students' interest in learning English, learners still seem despondent and unable to find meaning in learning the language. In this article, the researcher shares her experience and research with undergraduate students of English at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil. The pedagogical proposal resulting from the research project – Living drama: theory and praxis in English language teaching and learning contexts – is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach involving educational psychology, drama in education and teaching English as a foreign language. Focusing on significant learning, the proposal emphasises the role of affect in the learning process.

Findings suggest that students' resistance to learning English may be due to the lack of three interrelated competencies in language learning: 1. linguistic competency; 2. appropriate study skills; and 3. emotional competency. Such resistance seems to have been gradually overcome through drama activities, as students became motivated, more open to learning the language and more confident in building interpersonal skills. Finally, while analysing and interpreting the students' accounts, the author became aware of the essential role of the learning environment in the learning process.

Keywords: Drama Activities, English Language Learning, Educational Psychology, Affect

Introduction

Education is a civil right in Brazil, and learning an additional language plays an important role in the way people communicate, especially when the need of mastering the English language is taken into consideration. Students should not be excluded or deprived of opportunities for learning English and developing interpersonal skills, which are essential to their personal and professional development.

Although educators have endeavoured to awaken students' interest in learning English, learners still seem despondent and unable to find meaning in learning the language. Many changes are still needed in terms of educational policies and praxis of English language teaching in schools. Learners are, or should be, motivated to learn it, and schools are expected to help them build various skills, as well as creativity, to enable them to face global challenges. However, many students tend to show reluctance and inhibition towards English, especially in a foreign language class, because they are afraid of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated as a learner and as a person. Demotivation and resentment, as well as low self-esteem and other psychological barriers can be observed in the classroom situation, which can negatively impact the learning process.

In this paper, I will share the results of research on the use of drama in the learning of English which I have carried out with undergraduate students of English at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil, where I teach English language. The implementation of drama activities is an attempt to explore ways in which such activities can contribute to students' engagement in their own learning process.

I lead a research project called "Living drama: theory and praxis in English language teaching and learning contexts", which investigates the pedagogical benefits of drama workshops. The proposal is grounded in Educational Psychology, Drama in Education and Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Focusing on significant learning, the proposal emphasises the role of affect in the learning process, as well as the pedagogical implications in the use of drama activities in the class.

As the title of this article shows, three ideas have emerged from the very beginning: teaching English as a foreign language, resistance towards learning and drama activities. In other words, teaching English as a foreign language involves the idea that teachers often face some level of resistance on the students' part, and drama activities can be one of the ways to mitigate such resistance. However, success in dealing with such affective issues require the teacher to accept them as natural responses to the learning process. Brookfield (2006) contributes to this idea when discussing resistance in the classroom:

> Remember that resistance to learning is normal, natural, and inevitable. The trick is to make sure it interferes as little as possible with classroom activities that others see as important and helpful (p. 233).

To put it simply, resistance can be seen as a complex phenomenon that involves a combination of factors (Brookfield, 2006). As part of the learning process, it should be understood and accepted by educators, and the main discussion here is the implementation of drama activities in the classroom situation as a path towards success in the teaching-learning of English, and thus to overcome resistance to learning, specifically to learning English.

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical pillars support this research: educational psychology, teaching English as a foreign language, and drama activities in English language teaching.

The first pillar – educational psychology – draws on my PhD studies on educational psychology, especially on humanism, the philosophical movement that emphasises an intrinsic positive tendency to personal growth, which is manifested when the person is inserted in a facilitating atmosphere. It was from this humanistic movement that the person-centred approach was proposed by Carl Rogers (1969). Rogers' concepts, generated in a therapeutic setting, were extended to education, which is where I have concentrated my studies. The idea of learning as an experience that involves the whole person has been widely supported. Jarvis (as cited in Illeris, 2009) defines human learning as:

> …the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person (p. 25).

The second pillar, teaching English as a foreign language, has an outlook closely related to humanistic approaches, which have had great impact on this area of study, mainly because of the urge to value the role of affect in the classroom situation. Arnold (2005) points out the need for an integrated approach involving cognition and affect in language learning. That author states that inner factors, which are part of the learner's personality, should be taken into account, as they determine the student's success or failure in learning to some extent. Arnold also stresses that anxiety may be "an affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process" (p. 8). For the author, the feeling of frustration, low self-esteem and inhibition might negatively influence the whole process.

Drama activities in English Language Teaching (ELT), the third pillar mentioned above, have been recognised by language teachers, researchers and educators, who have been studying learning theories and pedagogical proposals to English language teaching-learning while integrating drama activities into their teaching practice. ELT can be seen as intertwined with the first two pillars: educational psychology and teaching English as a foreign language, once these main concepts blend in with a real interdisciplinary learning experience. According to Almond (2005), drama is beneficial for many reasons, as it helps materialise the principles presented in the two previous pillars:

> Drama is a whole-person approach to language teaching which requires us to look at communication holistically. Creating a character and acting in a play can be a visceral, intellectual and emotional experience which makes the learning process more meaningful and memorable and more transferable to the real world (p. 10).

Another ELT expert, Maley (1998), devises drama activities for language learning, stressing how motivating drama can be in the classroom, as a way to enhance engagement and group interaction:

> By working together, the students learn to feel their way to creating their own parts and adapting them…they are learning to rely on one another for their ideas and therefore using a considerable amount of language for discussion, argument, agreement and disagreement, organisation and execution. (p. 13-14)

Yet another ELT author, Heathfield (2005), also proposes drama activities for the English language classroom. He believes these kinds of activities can provide a great deal of

benefit for students because they enhance self-confidence. Moreover, the author emphasises the relevance of the emotional component in the learning process:

> The main aim is to build confidence, fluency and spontaneity. This comes before the purely linguistic objectives because it is fundamental. Without confidence, learners' progress will be limited. Without spontaneity, interaction will feel less natural. Without either of these, fluency will take longer to achieve (p.8).

As in this paper the main emphasis is placed on resistance to learning and to psychological aspects involving the learning process, the theoretical focus will be on the educational psychology pillar.

Joseph (2012), a psychologist and researcher on Person-Centred Approach and Client-Centred Therapy states that Rogers' ideas on the "organismic valuing process" constitute the "engine of therapeutic change", and adds that "many of the core ideas associated with person-centred psychology are topics that are alive and well in contemporary mainstream psychology" (p. 26). Rogers sees the organismic valuing process as vital for change; it is seen as an intrinsic positive force that may lead to change, which is manifested when the person experiences a favourable emotional atmosphere.

Having transposed those concepts to education, Rogers proposes the concept of significant learning as the basis of his theory of learning. In an attempt to explain the concept of significant learning, Rogers formulates and systematises his theory into principles, four of which are key to this discussion:

1. Every learner is potentially ready to learn and is able to achieve this potentiality;
2. Every learner has organismic capacity of valuation;
3. Every learner manifests resistance towards learning
4. If resistance to Significant Learning is low, then the learner will achieve his potentiality towards learning (Duarte, 1996, p. 19).

These four principles suggest that individuals have an intrinsic drive to learn and that it is this drive which enables learners to choose what and how to study. Undoubtedly, experiencing learning generally demands effort and involves risk-taking, and consequently resistance towards change might occur. However, it is worth considering the fourth principle, which states that if resistance is low, students are most likely to achieve learning. Therefore, it seems that when teachers implement pedagogical proposals aimed at lowering resistance, they will likely find their students more successful in achieving learning outcomes.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2011), in the area of psychology, the word is referred to as "a process in which the ego opposes the conscious recall of anxiety-producing experiences". Such experiences tend to lead to some sort of change, and resistance towards learning may be understood as a defence against that necessary change.

Certain learning experiences can often be felt as a threat to self-identity, therefore, overcoming resistance towards change will demand a great deal of effort on the learner's part, a struggle against something that comes from the inside (Duarte, 1996), or in other words, the fear of taking risks. We avoid taking risks because we anticipate judgement from others and even from ourselves. Duarte (2012) states that change:

> … demands another outlook on school life and on personal life. Thus, moving from language 1 to language 2, or trying to meet the requirements of the language learning process might be threatening to the learner's self-image, therefore, resistance to

learning is likely to occur. So, when a learning situation becomes somehow threatening to the student, he sometimes tends to avoid it (p. 120).

On this line of thought, Brookfield (2006) suggests that:

… the basis of resistance to learning is the fear of change. Learning by definition, involves change. It requires us to explore new ideas, acquire new skills, develop new ways of understanding old experiences and so on. No one is the same after learning something (p. 214).

It is important to understand the various factors that might explain students' resistance and help them find the missing motivation; however, we cannot naïvely assume that resistance will disappear. It can be overcome in the process of working towards self-development, but it is human and present in learning situations.

Brookfield (2006, p. 217) also states that there are different sources of resistance: (a) poor self-image as learners – probably due to a history branded by failure; (b) fear of the unknown – it is difficult to leave one's comfort zone and experience the unknown. We tend to hold on to beliefs that have served us well; (c) individual pace of learning in the learning process varies according to what students are experiencing at the moment; (d) disjunction of learning and teaching styles – different students have different learning styles which sometimes fail to fit the teaching style; (e) apparent irrelevance of the learning activity – the learning experience as meaningful experience is essential in the whole process; (f) inappropriate level of required learning – the feeling of not being able to learn helps to dwindle the students 'self-esteem'. Frustration quickly becomes resistance; (g) fear of looking foolish in public – students who appear to be very self-confident sometimes fear to make mistakes in public; (h) cultural suicide – the fear some students have of cultural exclusion, and of losing their cultural support; (i) lack of clarity in teachers' instructions – learners feel lost when teachers' instructions, intentions and evaluation criteria are unclear; (j) students' dislike of teachers – a good relationship among people in the classroom is key in the classroom situation. Sometimes objections to teachers are justified and sometimes not.

Robert Reasoner's ideas (as cited in Arnold, 2005) contribute to this discussion when he proposes that resistance involves five key components of self-esteem: sense of security, sense of identity, belonging, purpose, and personal competence, which in my analysis are an essential part of emotional competence.

Having presented and discussed the principles supporting this study, two questions might be raised: How can students be helped to build and sustain their intrinsic motivation towards learning English? How can teachers encourage change and, by doing so, encourage learning?

Methodology
Drama workshops as a pedagogical proposal

As mentioned earlier, our English language teaching interdisciplinary pedagogical proposal has been implemented through drama workshops comprising 5 stages, described in Duarte (2012): (a) sensitisation, which consists of a corporal and/or vocal warmup exercise, concentration and group interaction activities; (b) improvisation exercise, based on thought-provoking texts which can be either a narrative, or a poem, or a film, etc. Such elements will trigger off discussions and bring forth conflict; (c) choice and preparation - students decide which improvisation situation to concentrate on. They create the story, its characters and write the sketch, making the necessary staging decisions to dramatise it at the end of term. Divided into acts and scenes, all sketches must contain the following essential elements: title,

plot, characters, and cast; (d) dramatisation. At the final stage, students' work goes public, as they perform their sketches to guests at one of the Catholic University's theatres (Duarte, 2012, p. 127).

The main goal of this pedagogical proposal is based on the idea that by becoming more open to the experience, the student will pose less resistance to the learning process.

The Research

The English language situation considered in this paper consists of a group of 25 undergraduate students at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil, taking an English language and literature course, either to become teachers of English or translators. The meetings took place weekly, in the form of 150-minute sessions for 18 weeks, as part of the college curriculum, in a subject called Drama Workshops.

At the end of term, the students wrote reflective accounts on the following topic: "When I think of the experience I have been through in the Drama Workshops, I…", and they were supposed to express their opinions and feelings about the experience they had had. They were reminded of the four stages of the pedagogical proposal they had been through in order to write their accounts. They pointed out their achievements in the learning experience, as well as difficulties in drama activities. Subsequently, the accounts were analysed through a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Franco, 2008) from an interpretative/qualitative perspective based on a case study approach (André, 2005).

Presentation and Discussion of Results

The various sources of resistance emerging from the accounts were analysed and organised into three categories, which are in fact three fields of learning (Figure 1): linguistic competence, study habits, and emotional competence. These fields are equally important and integrate a wider field which I called Self.
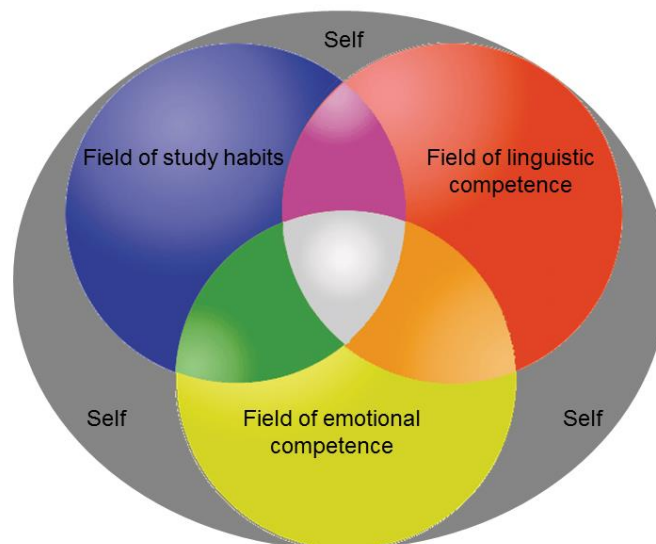

Figure 1. Representation of three learning fields.

Figure 1 depicts the analogy between the language learning process and the set of dynamic forces that interact with one another and intermingle during the whole process (Duarte, 2002). The learner makes use of inner forces integrating affective, cognitive and biological aspects within the learning experience, making it very difficult to establish the boundaries of each learning field, as shown in Figure 1.

The students' accounts indicated that the difficulties they experienced were related to the three fields mentioned above and were gradually reduced over 18 weeks. However, what the accounts seemed to highlight were difficulties related to the emotional field, which is the focus of this analysis. Some students stated that, in the beginning, they were self-conscious and extremely frightened at the idea of having to expose themselves in class through acting, but that they gradually became engaged in the process:

> At [*sic*] the beginning I didn't like the idea of dramatising. I don't like this sort of activity, but then at the end, it was great. Although I made many mistakes, I learned a lot. I have many difficulties to learn English. But this subject demands a lot from us and requires a lot of exposure, and that is why we learn so much. We had the feeling of togetherness and became a real group. We did the impossible to make it happen. (Joyce)

The qualitative content analysis of students' accounts showed that difficulties were diminished, and therefore the various resistances were lowered for two main reasons, which, in fact, are related to two subcategories of the emotional field: 1- the proposal itself, and 2- interpersonal relationships. Joyce's report above illustrates the first subcategory when she states that she somehow succeeded because the subject demanded a great deal from her, and therefore it can be said that the drama workshops played an important role. The feeling of togetherness and the feeling that students had become a real group seem to indicate that colleagues play an important part in her success. As mentioned earlier, Brookfield (2006) discusses one of the possible resistances to learning: inappropriate level of required learning, which might cause the feeling of being unable to learn. Joyce complained she did not have a reasonable level of English, which might have caused a strong resistance, although she did overcome it later in the process.

Daniel, another student from the group, reported that the proposal and his colleagues were also essential to his improvement:

> One of the biggest difficulties that we have is inhibition, the fear of speaking a language with different sounds from the Portuguese language. Doing relaxation exercises was very important in the process. I noticed that my colleagues used to get nervous before each class, but despite that, they always expected it with enthusiasm. Solidarity and generosity were also part of the classes. Those who knew more (English) helped those who had more difficulty. (Daniel)

Again, Brookfield's (2006) ideas contribute to this discussion as he states that the fear of the unknown constitutes one of the sources of resistance. In the author's view, this feeling might hinder the learner's willingness to learn, as it is difficult to experience something new, especially if the situation entails a threatening exposure of the self. Daniel said he was afraid of speaking English, and possibly he feared making mistakes, but for him a welcoming atmosphere, a positive learning environment (Duarte, 2012) together with certain procedures in class, helped him overcome resistance. He also realised the important role the colleagues played in the process.

Another student, Richard encapsulated the idea that the proposal itself and his colleagues' attitude were essential aspects to his improvement. He stated:

> …I am not a confident person. I worry too much about what other people would think of me and I know that this hinders my spontaneity, but it was awesome to work in a

team. Those who knew the language better tried to help the ones who didn't, and this helped us to improve as students, as classmates and even as friends. (Richard)

Arnold and Andrés (2009, p. 10) discuss the role of affect in a foreign English language class and quote Carl Rogers (1969), who emphasised 'positive regard' as an essential attitude from others in a classroom to help strengthen the inner sources of students' self-esteem. When drama activities are used in class, students tend to work more affectively together and, in groups, they find ways to interact and cope with a task effectively. The feeling of belonging gradually becomes more evident throughout the course. This is what Beatrice said about her experience:

> I think that the course has given us the opportunity to strengthen the friendship bonds in the classroom and we became a real group, especially because of the presentations, which allowed us to get to know each other better, to help one another and, more than that, to learn how to learn a language in a more effective and pleasant way. (Beatrice)

Besides what has been discussed so far, it is worth stressing that the results of the analysis not only indicated students' attempts to overcome resistance, especially in the emotional field, but also showed some of their achievements in the learning process. Those achievements seem to be indicative of a transformation in their attitudes towards learning. Mariana summarised her experience:

> Despite our fear of speaking in public (even worse because it is in English), we did go through the odds and put aside all the shame. It was amazing. I did enjoy speaking in public…What I find most important is that I will take this experience outside the classroom…I feel more confident to make presentations at seminars and share my ideas during the classes.

Many accounts suggest that drama activities, if carried out in such a way that students may feel emotionally open to engage in the process, tend to lead to students' development as a whole; that is to say, students seem to have had their resistances mitigated in the three fields of learning presented. However, some students' accounts also indicated that, at the end of the process, some learners were still reluctant when it came to new experiences and some of their comments were related to personal feelings about the proposal itself. The accounts showed that not everybody felt free during drama workshops. Leda stressed this point:

> At the beginning of the semester, I wasn't comfortable with the class at all. But then I decided to give it a go and try to relax and accept the activities proposed with an open mind. But I am still feeling bad and I can't see much improvement towards my own process of learning. (Leda)

This has led me to think that willingness to engage with dramatisation in EFL classes may be put down to personality traits which should be respected. Therefore, for the production of final sketches as well as for the improvisation exercises, students should be guided to concentrate on specific activities, such as writing sketches and stage managing, rather than on dramatisation.

When proposing a daring activity such as dramatisation as part of the curriculum, we should make sure that all students are absolutely aware of its purposes, as well as of teachers' expectations, otherwise resistance towards the pedagogical proposal may emerge. In Isabella's words:

> But all in all, I prefer the traditional classes and besides that, I think that we are not used to having this kind of classes, and we lack explanations about it, its purposes, advantages, hints on how to take the most of it etc. (Isabella)

In relation to the subject Drama Workshops - the context in which this study developed - the program, its objectives, and its 'table of content' were extensively discussed with the students. However, Isabella still seemed uncertain and doubtful about its meaning and its purpose. Thus, it seems necessary to revisit the aims and assess whether the teacher's expectations meet students' understanding of the process. In the account above, Isabella leads us to understand how relevant it is to consider the emotional field of learning and its integrated aspects: the pedagogical proposal itself and the interpersonal relationships.

The teacher's role in the learning process is to be constantly tuned to students' needs and wants so as to make the learning situation into an experience which gives learners the opportunity to play an active role in their own process of change and growth, and consequently to improve their abilities in the three fields of learning discussed previously. As I reported in an interview to my university television station (TVPUC-SP, 2014):

> The activities should have a meaning to students and this meaning is created inside the classroom together with the students…they search what to study, what to write, how to act, and I keep guiding them step-by-step so that they can achieve this goal.

Farkas, a student from a more recent group, was also interviewed on his experience in the Drama Workshops and conveyed a feeling of achievement and freedom:

> The classroom was not supposed to be a prison, because I believe that this conservative and traditional way of teaching doesn't allow students to ask questions or have debates with teachers. It lacks openness. So, subjects like this one and like the others I'm taking make me feel comfortable here. I'm not tied in. I have a voice.

Conclusion

I was about to finish the paper I presented at the Third 21st Century Academic Forum at Harvard, and I was still analysing students' accounts of their experiences in learning English through drama, when I was led through a stream of reasoning over the various experiences I have had when using drama activities in different learning contexts so far.

What I realised was that any pedagogical proposal for the teaching of English can only be really effective if a broader issue, in fact an essential component, is taken into account. This is what I call the learning environment, which entails two different aspects: the social educational aspect and the various physical spaces where learning takes place.

The social educational aspect requires an outlook on education that is geared towards the growth of human beings as a whole, to the key role of interpersonal relationships, and to the urge to consider and include the development of creativity, as well as affect, in the learning situation. Physical spaces where learning occurs should not be restricted to the classroom itself, as learning can happen in the school break-out area, in a garden, at home, or on stage (Figure 2), among other spaces. In other words, when the classroom is expanded and students choose where and how to experience learning, they tend to become freer and more engaged in the process.
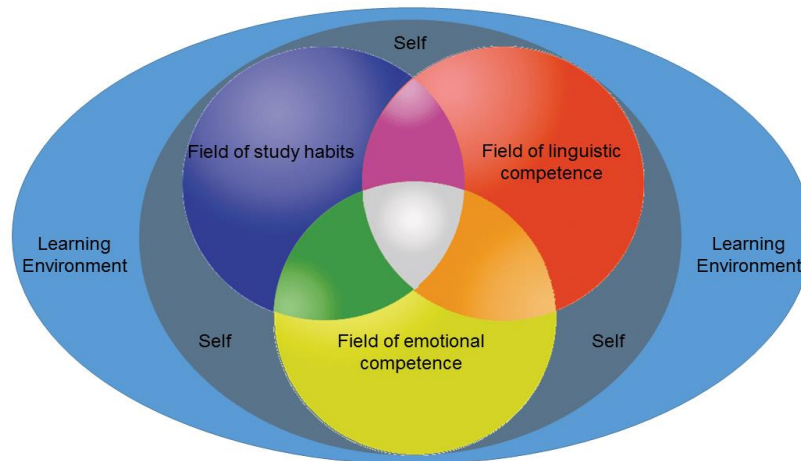
Figure 2. Results and Reflections. This figure depicts the role of the Environment in the Learning Process.

This study has demonstrated that the three fields of learning - study habits, linguistic competence, and emotional competence - along with the learning environment, play a crucial role in mitigating resistance to learning. The former can be the basis for pedagogical practices, while the latter can be the basis for political acceptance, and for the application of such practices by curriculum developers.

From now on, this is the research path I intend to pursue, supported by the premise that students should be aware of their needs and resistances, so that they can evolve into authors of their own creations.

References

Almond, M. (2005). *Teaching English with drama. How to use drama and plays when teaching - For the professional English language teacher.* Hove, BN: Pavilion Publishing.

André, M. (2005). *Estudo de caso em pesquisa e avaliação educacional [Case study on research and educational evaluation]* (Vol. 13). Brasília, DF: Liber Livro Editora.

Arnold, J. (2005). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Brookfield, S. (2006). *The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Duarte, V. (1996). *Aprendendo a aprender. Experienciar, refletir e transformar: Um processo sem fim [Learning how learn. Experiencing, reflecting and transforming: a never-ending process].* Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo.

Duarte, V. (2002). Reflective learning: Discussions upon reports on students' feelings and achievements. *Revista De Letras & Letras, 18*(1), 55-70.

Duarte, V. (2012). Living drama and learning English: Why and how to step onto the stage. *The ESPecialist, 33*(2), 117-134. Retrieved from http://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/esp/index

Heathfield, D. (2005). *Spontaneous speaking: Drama activities for confidence and fluency*. Surrey: Delta Publishing.

Illeris, K. (2009). *Contemporary theories of learning learning theorists -- in their own words*. London: Routledge.

Joseph, S., & Murphy, D. (2012). Person-centered approach, positive psychology, and relational helping: Building bridges. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 53*, 26-51. doi:10.1177/0022167812436426

Maley, A., & Duff, A. (1982). *Drama techniques in language learning: A resource book of communication activities for language teachers* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mayring, P. (2000, June 1). Qualitative content analysis. Retrieved December 15, 2015, from http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089/2385

Rogers, C. (1969). *Freedom to learn*. Columbus, OH: C.E. Merrill Pub.

Resistance. (n.d.) *American heritage® dictionary of the English language* (5th ed.). (2011). Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com/resistance

TVPUC-SP. (2014). *Projeto living drama é apresentado por alunos de Letras-Inglês da PUC-SP [Living drama project presented by undergraduates of English-Portuguese of - PUC-SP].* Retrieved from http://www.livingdrama.com.br/#!em-eventos/c1ls6