



## Reorganizing the Vanishing Point in the Classroom – Theater and Improvisation in Finnish Grammar Teaching

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**Abstract:** *Theater and drama methods are moving outside the walls of theater both in different forms of participatory theater, and in the case of cultural and social performances. The reorganization of the vanishing point in theater can be seen in education, in classrooms examining the possibilities of theater and drama as part of teaching and learning. Using theater as a method in learning a new language engages the students in seeing language outside of their everyday roles, but simultaneously utilizing their whole being and bodies as a part of their linguistic performance.*

*In Finnish language teaching as a foreign and as a second language, the focus has been traditionally set on teaching grammar through writing, on learning the different grammatical cases and rules through written exercises. The learning of a new language is evaluated through the written performance made by language students, and language learning remains written, unilateral and distant from the real use of the language.*

*In my Ph.D. project, I am researching the impact of using certain techniques, e.g. drama grammar by Susanne Even, when teaching Finnish as a second language. My pedagogical aim is to improve the way in which students learn different grammatical phenomena when studying Finnish. My research focuses on teaching Finnish at the Babeş-Bolyai University using improvisation practices, drama methods and kinesics alongside more traditional language teaching methods.*

*In my paper, I will focus on the concept of language and the language of the theater through theater semiotics by Keir Elam (1980). Learning a new language happens through the collaboration of gestures, bodies, tones and voices – not just language structures. Theater has its own language of forms, which can be utilized in language learning and teaching. In addition, I will present some of the exercises I use in my Finnish language teaching sessions - from improvisation philosophy and methods by Keith Johnstone (1979, 1999), Gary Peters (2009), to the use of drama grammar, as defined by Susan Even (2004, 2011). The goal in my research is to demonstrate that the traditional grammar teaching methods used in classrooms today can be significantly improved through the use of kinesthetic learning techniques that incorporate motion, sound and improvisation throughout the entire learning process.*

*My theoretical framework comes from functional language learning as defined by John Biggs (2003) and Yrjö Lauranto (2011), in which the premise for language learning is based on the functional use of language through improvisational practices instead of relying solely on the declarative knowledge of grammar.*

**Key words:** *applied linguistics, Finnish as L2, drama grammar, theater semiotics, improvisation.*



## **Working with drama and language**

I teach Finnish as a foreign language at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. I'm working on my research as a pilot study, wherein I'm using drama as a part of one or two basic language courses and one course in the spring that concentrates mainly on using drama and improvisation. My Ph.D. research is about investigating the possibilities of improvisation and drama as part of teaching a language and its grammar. My aim is to investigate how students learn Finnish grammar in use through theatrical methods and exercises, and to make them realize how drama methods can be used as a learning tool. After one successful drama course at the BBU in the spring of 2015, I started wondering if drama carries hidden knowledge that makes the use of dramatic tools a viable method to help language learners associate, react and use the language more naturally by tapping into their kinesthetic and subconscious knowledge of the language. My research is concentrating on the use of drama in Finnish grammar teaching as a whole. Employing drama as a part of grammar teaching has opened my eyes to see solving grammar exercises as a possibility to investigate Finnish language and its grammar in use, and not only studying language phenomena from the books. Along with the realization that drama actually carries potential to work as a teaching tool, traditional book-based grammar teaching should gradually vanish from language education.

## **What is language – theater semiotics and the language of the theater**

Any language can be seen as a complex system of phonemes, lexemes and syntactical structures which form a logical entity. Nevertheless, language is also communication, kinesics and body language, which transmit different messages between the communicators. When a language is seen in use, as communication between people, it includes gestures, facial expressions, tone, and the entire human body. From the world of theater, we know that it is possible to communicate meaning and come to be understood without being able to produce any meaningful phrases in a foreign language. Theatre semiotics examines *signs* and *cultural traces* which indicate, illustrate and communicate through a variety of meanings. Theatre semiotics focuses on how the theater performance stage is produced through/via the meaning of the signs (TOEOTP II, 1219). These characters are in constant motion in the theater, they relate to each other, and in addition to their functions, they are changing and will change depending on the situation. As stated by Tadeusz Kowzan, the language of the theater is a network of systems, which can be connected by 13 different typological systems/typologies, all of which affect the significance of the transmitted code and its interpretation. According to Kowzan, the systems communicating with spectators in the theater consist not only of language, but also tone, facial mime, gesture, make-up, movement, hairstyle, facial mime, costumes, props, décor, lighting, music and sound effects. All these codes have their own signs, and their meaning cannot ever/can never be analyzed completely (Elam 1980, 50-51; Kowzan 1968, 61).



Language is more than grammatically correct sentences – it also engages students’ possibility to communicate with their whole body, gestures and the knowledge of the language strategies they have. Acquired language skills shouldn’t be evaluated solely based on the written performances of the students and by rating the grammar errors in their papers, but rather taking into account the functional and communicative nature of language and the students’ proficiency to use the language in different environments and situations. Language is much more than grammar rules.

### **The vanishing point of grammar teaching?**

We all have the experience of learning a foreign language in a classroom. The traditional type of classroom language teaching usually involves translation exercises, exercises based on the structure, grammatical rules and learning by heart outside the context of language in use.

According to recent publications on teaching Finnish language as a second and foreign language, all language teaching in Finland concentrates on functional and communicative skills – not just on the linguistic structure (Martin 2007, 72). Even though communicative and functional language skills are emphasized in second language teaching, the academic research in Finnish as a foreign or second language has ignored drama as a viable method to encounter this challenge. It seems that teaching descriptive grammar remains the most hated and, at the same time, highly valued part of language teaching for students. One of my students told me that he didn’t know how to communicate in Finnish. I asked him why he found it so difficult, and he answered that he should only study grammar and forget about everything else. “Grammar is the basis of the language and without that you can’t do anything else.” When I asked my students to write an entry in their diaries in Finnish and in an easy manner on the topic “*Why Do I Study Finnish?*”, many of them said that it would be nonsense if they didn’t stop to think about the grammar in every sentence. I forbade them to think too much about the grammatical structures and asked them to simply concentrate on writing about the idea I had given them. The results were interesting: I didn’t find more grammatical mistakes than usually when the texts were written without time constraints and with conscious concentration on the grammar. Besides, the texts were fully understandable despite the small grammatical errors. So, one might ask how much grammar knowledge matters after all, and whether there is any point in seeing it as a detached aspect of the language being taught. Language is primarily for communicating with others, not for knowing its grammatical system passively as declarative knowledge alone. From this perspective, grammar teaching can be seen as *a vanishing point* in second language teaching as a separate domain to be mastered.<sup>1</sup> Grammar teaching and traditional teaching in general can be seen more as a

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<sup>1</sup> In this context I am using the concept of *vanishing point* as a vanishing focus in Finnish language and grammar teaching.



hybrid of methods serving the purpose of students learning to master grammar, and encouraging them to integrate their knowledge of grammar into communication in the studied language. Learning grammar only through written exercises and without a contextual goal will not vanish completely – but the methods should increase their variety. Grammar doesn't vanish – but the old methods are vanishing and transforming.

### **Learning to speak and to act with language**

The goal in my research is to demonstrate that the traditional grammar teaching methods used in classrooms today can be significantly improved through the use of kinesthetic learning techniques that incorporate motion, sound and improvisation throughout the learning process. The philosophy of theater and improvisation serving as a basis to my teaching practice come from the British and Canadian improvisation pioneer Keith Johnstone (1979, 1999) and from Gary Peters (2009). Using drama and improvisation in different forms of improvisational games, and role games within a Finnish language course is not directed to achieve the staging of accomplished theater scenes or professional acting in the classroom. The artistic goals might become important for the students while practicing, playing and performing in front of others; nonetheless, the aim is to produce encounters in Finnish language used in action in a safe atmosphere and in lifelike communicative situations, and not for the students to become professional actors.

### **Improvisation and drama grammar in teaching**

My experiences based on the courses taught in Romania have been somewhat intriguing. I have used some of the methods and games of Susanne Even's drama grammar (2004; 2011) in my Finnish language teaching. I have also applied the philosophy of improvisation, and devised exercises suitable for my students based on my experience in practicing improvisation theater for the last ten years. Employing drama methods in the classroom demands flexibility and improvising exercises to encounter the needs of the students every day. I see drama and drama grammar as flexible tools where the teacher is in the key role, finding his/her own method to approach language teaching through drama. Teachers should be prepared and organized, but also ready to give up on the exercises that don't work with the students and replace them flexibly with others if the situation requires it. As Chris Johnston states, the teacher needs to be a master of timing in an improvisation class: "The best teacher will switch between the two strategies: sometimes throwing out a tough challenge and sometimes moving slowly, so individuals don't feel defeated." (Johnston 2006, 275).



## Experiences in the field

In my teaching, I have introduced theater, drama and improvisation in the Finnish language and grammar teaching gradually.

Susanne Even's drama grammar is a modular approach, according to which a language course may be easily devised. I follow the stages of her model, modifying the exercises so that they are suitable in teaching, for example Finnish case government and different verb types.<sup>1</sup> These phases can be used in the order Susanne Even has proposed, but one can also use them as an example of combining drama, improvisation and language teaching. From my point of view, one doesn't necessarily have to follow these steps strictly.

### 1) Awareness-raising phase

The awareness-raising phase *occurs at the beginning of* the lesson. It's the phase where *a specific* grammatical structure is chosen and used *to evoke the* students' interest in the topic worked on during the lesson. Improvisation games in this phase include different kinds of warming up games that are meant to be simple enough and tune the students in for playing and having fun with the language and their bodies.

Nonetheless, improvisation can be used merely to warm up the students' tongues, minds and bodies and to encourage them to be open to impulses and ideas without the fear of committing a mistake. Grammatical mistakes generally shouldn't be in focus when working with drama or with language learning altogether (Lilja 2010 34; Dufva et al. 2011, 27; Suni 2012, 410). In effect, a mistake might even become the starting point of an interesting phenomenon to take a further look at during the lesson.

### 2) Context-finding phase

The context-finding phase enlarges the grammatical topic into wider contexts. For example, if the topic is some grammatical form, the students play broader improvisational drama games using the verbs and the cases they need (Even 2011, 308).

### 3) Linguistic phase

The linguistic phase is the part of the drama grammar lesson when the students are examining the forms in a cognitive way. *In this phase* the students are guided to investigate the given forms they have been working with at the beginning of the lesson. This part consciously interrupts the dramatic flow, but it is the phase when students start to process the information they they already possess or have acquired while considering the grammatical structure in question (Even 2011, 308).

### 4) Dramatic play phase

In the dramatic play phase, the students *design* scenes based on the grammatical structures they have been working on. They are supposed to structure a scene where these forms are used and placed in a linguistic context (Even 2011, 308).

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<sup>1</sup> These stages are presented here according to Susanne Even (2011, 307-308). However, the number of exercises and their chronology may vary, depending on the group and subject of the lesson.



#### 5) Presentation phase

In the presentation phase, the students perform *for* other students and show the results of their teamwork (Even 2011, 308). *For teachers*, it's highly important to keep the other students *focused on listening to their peers and provide relevant feedback to the presenter*.

#### 6) Reflection phase

The reflection phase is an important closure of the drama grammar lesson. According to Even, it's a forum where learners can give feedback to the teacher and to each other about the practices, *and* drama scenes, *as well as* raise language awareness and language learning reflection (Even 2011, 308). It is important that reflection should be continued after the lesson. I usually pose guiding questions to be answered in the learning diaries of the students: "What did I learn today?"; "In which exercises do I feel I have succeeded today?"; "How did I feel about the drama session today?". The feedback about their learning gives me guidelines for my research on how drama works as a teaching method on the whole.

So far, I have relied on Susanne Even's drama grammar, utilizing it, partly, in Finnish grammar teaching. We have played the so-called "warming-up games" using different kinds of reaction-games to warm up the participants' bodies and tongues (using simple words, sounds and their bodies) in the middle of grammar lessons. I have taken the exercises from the textbook *Suomen Mestari (Finn Lectura)* and applied them to generate dramatic practices; e.g. I employed certain phrases to be used in semi-improvised scenes and gave students secret emotions, motivations and orientation on how to perform them. Furthermore, the students have been using different exercises (for example on verbs and case government) to produce shadow theater in the classroom, police interrogations when practicing the different past tenses in Finnish language and, additionally, they participated in a Finnish video contest, in which students wrote the scripts, directed and acted the parts in short movies.

### Findings

I have collected feedback from my students after every lesson and recorded the performed drama exercises. The feedback has been thankful and excited. It seems that drama used in language teaching is still quite a new method at the BBU and in Romania in general. The negative feedback in the learning diaries mostly referred to the students' own performances in the classroom. Many students felt that they hadn't succeeded "on the stage" as well as they would have wanted to. The insecurity about succeeding, about not making mistakes in Finnish grammar or playing the theater games right are a signal for me that the philosophy of improvisation should still be exercised in the classroom. The mistakes are not mistakes. "To be in error is not to be wrong; error is not the contrary of truth but a particular articulation of a distance from the truth." (Peters 2009, 162). My next goal is to increase the part of drama and improvisation gradually, collect more data, and hopefully discover how drama may be successfully integrated in a Finnish language course.



Furthermore, I am curious to examine to what degree the enjoyable, funny learning environment influences the language learning experience. (see also: Krashen 1981, 1985).

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