

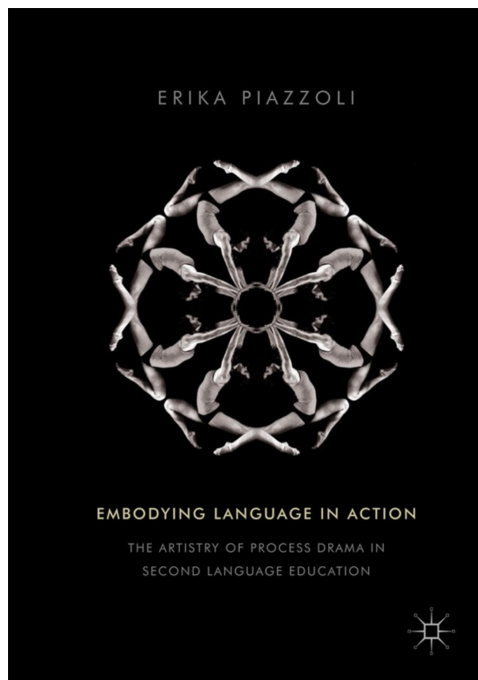
Review

Piazzoli, Erika (2018): Embodying Language in Action. The Artistry of Process Drama in Second Language Education. London: Palgrave Macmillan¹

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1. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.1.11> – Note that all views and opinions in this book review are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the SCENARIO editors.

Let's start with the image on the book cover which is placed between the author's name and the book title. It immediately grabs our attention, shows how eight adult individuals bodily connect and create a beautiful shape that looks like a flower, or rather a flower in full bloom. Is the shape that has been created by these individuals (movement artists?) the result of excellent choreography?



The 'embodiment image' prepares the reader for the main focus of Erika Piazzoli's monograph (367 pages): the *aesthetic* dimension of foreign language teaching and learning. Reflecting on "What is 'Artistry' and Why Do We Need

It in Second Language Education?” in Chapter 1, she then continues to address the aesthetic dimension in three parts: In Part I (chapters 2-5) she engages with “Key Definitions in the Aesthetic Dimension”; Part II (chapters 6-8) deals with aspects of “Navigating the Aesthetic Dimension”; Part III (chapters 9-12) centres on “Researching the Aesthetic Dimension”.

In these twelve chapters the author deals with a broad range of theoretical perspectives, including second language education, sociocultural theory, neuroscience and art history. This review highlights some aspects of this impressive monograph by concentrating on keywords which are captured in its title: *process drama*, *embodying*, *artistry*.

Process Drama

As a reflective practitioner² Erika Piazzoli convincingly argues for the use of *process drama* in foreign language teaching. She discusses the term process drama and the characteristics of this specific performative approach in more detail in Chapter 2 which includes a more recent definition by the Australian researcher team Haseman and O’Toole (2017: viii) who first used the term in 1990:

Process drama is an improvised form of drama in which you construct a coherent dramatic story with yourselves as the character in that story. It is a powerful way to explore, through experience, all of the elements of drama. This approach brings mind, body, emotions, imagination and memories into the classroom to shape and deepen your learning.

Piazzoli situates her process drama based practice within “the performative language teaching family, keeping an emphasis on performance as process” (41) and refers to Rothwell’s definition of process drama as “a performative pedagogy approach, rather than a means to a theatrical end performance” (41).

The reader will appreciate that Erika Piazzoli creates strong links between theory and practice through the inclusion of a process drama workshop after each of the chapters. Based on her teaching practice in different pedagogical and intercultural settings, she illustrates what embodying language in action can look like when working with asylum seekers, adult learners with intellectual disabilities, pre-service teachers, international students and children involved in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programme.

Piazzoli successfully manages to break down complex concepts in order to make them accessible. With this purpose in mind she frequently inserts images of works of art, photographs of classroom activities and helpful illustrations. At times she also skilfully creates a surprise effect to whet the reader’s appetite for the issue that will be dealt with in a given chapter. Chapter 2, *Drama as Process in L2 Education*, might serve as an example here. Its first sentence reads: “Let’s start with silence.” Silence might not be what is usually associated with the language classroom. However, in the paragraphs that follow Piazzoli makes a connection to her own language learning experiences (in Chapter 1

² Note that subchapter 5.1 deals in more general terms with the concept of reflective practice and subchapter 5.2 more specifically with reflective practice in process drama.

she told the reader how anxiety crept in when during her school years one of her English teachers decided to call her Heather instead of Erika), and she ends with a detailed description of a process drama workshop that “investigates the productive tension between the sound of our name in our mother tongue and in additional language/s, and perception of the connection these sounds may have with identity.” (44)

Embodying

Piazzoli ascribes a key role to embodiment in the language teaching and learning process:

as language teachers know well, in L2 settings the language is both the vehicle, and the object of learning. Interestingly, while language teachers may direct the focus of a class entirely on language, in drama-based embodied approaches, language emerges spontaneously, triggered by movement, body, imagination. Embodiment is key to such a purpose: in drama we let the body drive, and use language to express what the body is communicating. Language is thus guided by the purpose of an action. (95)

Bräuer’s (2002) edited collection *Body and Language: Intercultural Learning Through Drama* is one of the first publications to explicitly focus on the role of the body in drama based foreign language teaching and learning. However, Piazzoli situates embodiment within the larger theoretical framework of performative teaching and learning (subchapter 2.1) and complements the theoretical perspectives by concrete examples of embodiment in practice (see subchapter 2.2).

The emphasis on embodiment in this book is to be welcomed as it sends the strong message that embodiment in education is *essential*. As Piazzoli puts it:

Embodiment *is* – in the sense that teaching and learning, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, is an embodied activity, with teachers and students bringing their bodies into a mutual space, interacting and responding to each other in various ways, determined by the pedagogical approach. (322)

Artistry

The pedagogical approach favoured by Piazzoli is a performative approach in which the person who teaches is not only a teacher, but also an artist. In order to emphasise this dual professional identity Piazzoli frequently uses the word combination teacher/artist; for example, when she argues passionately for the importance of the aesthetic dimension of teaching and highlights what is a key question in this book: “How can teacher/artists navigate the aesthetic dimension to facilitate performative language learning?” (13)

Piazzoli ought to be commended for explicitly focusing on aesthetic aspects of language teaching and learning, for expanding on the findings of studies that have created an awareness of the aesthetic dimension, including Lutzker’s (2007) *The Art of Foreign Language Teaching*. She engages with different theories of art and philosophy, but connects the theoretical reflections to

practice by offering a distinctly applied perspective in subchapter 3.4 entitled “Aesthetic Engagement in Process Drama”.

Piazzoli’s reflections on the aesthetic dimension of teaching and learning are a great source of inspiration for foreign language teachers, and she therefore seems perhaps a bit too modest in her concluding sentences:

In this book my aim has been to bring forth the multi-layered argument that facilitating performative language learning involves artistry. Such artistry, I have argued, relates to embodying language in action. This book represents my imperfect attempt to reflect on this claim, and I hope it will inspire others to continue exploring this exciting field. Ultimately [...] as teacher/artists we are forever in the making. (331)

This timely publication is an excellent introduction to the artistry of process drama in second language education and a significant contribution to the scholarly debate on performativity in education. Erika Piazzoli offers rich theoretical perspectives on *Embodying Language in Action*, complemented by ten very inspiring examples of teaching practice, and engages the reader by drawing on autobiographical vignettes and personal memories. The book promises to become an important reference point for all those who believe that creative doing should be at the centre of education, who are eager to understand better in what sense and to what extent language teaching is an art, the teacher is an artist and the students are co-artists.

Bibliography

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- Lutzker, Peter (2007): *The Art of Foreign Language Teaching: Improvisation and Drama in Teacher Development and Language Learning*. Tübingen: Francke