Doing Playback Theatre in a Foreign Language: Learning Language, Learning Culture, Learning Identity

By Janet Salas
Introduction
I have given this essay the title of "Doing Playback Theatre in a foreign language: learning language, learning culture, learning identity" because I couldn't talk about language or playback theatre without talking about culture and identity. Doing PT in one's own language context – that is, where actors and audience, or the group members, share the same language and culture - differs in important ways from doing PT in a differentiated language context. I would like to look at some of the elements contained and the particular challenges involved, from my own perspective, which is both self-directed learner and also teacher, living as I do in a country (Germany ) where the language is not my native tongue, and where my work is teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). I will concentrate chiefly on the experience of doing playback in a company, but refer to the use of playback as a classroom tool for teaching language. For the sake of brevity, I use the term "foreign language " (FL) to include "second language" (SL) although in language teaching, the two are differentiated, FL referring to a language learnt outside one’s own context, SL for the language of the (foreign) country one is settled in. I also use L1 (first language) for “mother tongue”, and L2 for the foreign or second language being acquired or learnt.

My own playback experience has two relevant strands – one as a playback group member and co-director in settings where I function in my L2, and the other where the language medium is English, my L1, but L2 for most of the group. My experience of doing playback in Germany began when I joined an existing German group. Later I co-founded a German group where I am currently the co-director, and parallel to this, co-founded an English medium group. I have participated in workshops and meetings where German, English (and French) have been the medium. This experience, over some years, has given me material for reflection on my own processes and those of others.

Apart from using my own reflections and (some) reference to what others have written about playback and language aspects, including Fox, Salas and Feldhendler, I have also used the responses to a brief questionnaire about doing playback in another language (see appendix), where the respondents were asked to reflect on possible benefits and /or difficulties (Q).

My background
My native language is New Zealand English. I grew up in New Zealand, a land of several cultures, including an indigenous Polynesian population with a very distinct culture and language, but with a dominant British English language and culture at least when I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s. It is a land where certain risk-taking is widely tolerated, but where strong reserve and minimal display of emotion were the norm.

When I started teaching EFL to mixed groups in New Zealand in the mid-1980s, I had little teaching experience. In those days, an English degree and some enthusiasm was enough to get a job in New Zealand. Untrammelled by theory and other people’s concepts of what one should and shouldn't do in the classroom, and what indeed constitutes a “classroom”, I brought in ideas from other parts of my life, wrote sketches for the students to perform, and, being acquainted with PT, saw that the playback idea of spontaneous re-enactment of personal story could be extended to language teaching and learning. The elements of telling, retelling, listening, acting out seemed all ideally suited to language learning and I began to use these elements. Naturally I am not alone in this - the perception is shared by language teachers who come across PT, and some, like Daniel Feldhendler, have developed it extensively as a method.

My interest in language learning has always been there. I acquired some French at school and university, always returning to it in courses and visits to France, and I have also dabbled in Italian, Japanese, and later Czech. I am not a very good "classroom" learner and need strong communicative motivation to progress.

Having now lived in Germany for 12 years, I have learnt reasonable German, am married to a German and speak German at home. I still teach EFL, and now do some translating from German into English. Culturally, I am a foreigner, and even when I do PT in English, it is
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chiefly in a situation which is culturally more German, since it is within the German framework and most people involved are German or living in Germany.

Playback in L2
One reason for wanting to join a playback group was because I was sure it would help me acquire the German language. My teaching experience had already shown me that it was a rich context for language and a key experience was taking part in one lesson given in French by Daniel Feldhendler at the Goethe University in Frankfurt where I experienced for myself, for the first time, being a language learner participating in playback activities myself. It was freeing, challenging and utterly convincing. The first group I joined, in Stuttgart, accepted me and my limitations, and I remained with them for five years.

Knowing playback already meant that joining the group and functioning in a foreign language was a bit like moving house – everything is familiar but strange at the same time - different kitchen, bathroom, neighbours. In the group, my diffidence and reserve gradually lessened as my comprehension and playback confidence and skills increased. Sometimes people would translate something for me, but I could understand a lot, through the form of questioning and repetition and enactment, and gained more and more confidence in doing playback in German When we began to perform, I chose to do the music rather than act as I was worried about misinterpreting something, making ungrammatical or inappropriate utterances, or not being able to say anything at all. Later, this fear left me, and I participated in performance without worrying. I learnt valuable lessons in playback, German and what it means to be German.

In the meantime, I had got married (to a German, also a member of this group) and in 1999, on my partner's initiative, we left the group and started our own company, offering it as a course in the local adult education institute. I was in fact reluctant to comply with my partner's wish me for me to be the co-leader of this group, but agreed to it for practical reasons. One strong reason for this reluctance was the language – I felt a distinct lack of experience in directing or group-leading in German. As a teacher and teacher trainer, I was used to dealing with groups in English, but leading and inspiring a group with my deficient language skills was a daunting prospect. However, as time went on, I gathered assurance, and arrived at the point where I felt confident functioning as co-director, and began conducting performances in German. A year ago I initiated and set up a performance in German for the first time. In the last six months I have taken on the director role more completely though not permanently.

Playback in L1
In July 2001, with several others, I followed up on an idea of mine of starting a group which would function in English, though of course still in Germany, with members coming from existing groups and meeting every two or three months. It had taken nearly two years to reach this point, but once started, we kept going, adding members and reaching our present complement of eleven, from five groups. We meet every few months, have organised several workshops in English and have travelled together once outside Germany. We do playback together in English over a weekend, and mostly offer a small semi-private performance after working together for a day. At present there are two native speakers of English in the group, and at times there have been three. Our next project is (we hope) a combined weekend with an Irish group.

My own motivation initially was my need to do playback in my own language, and I saw that an environment where others could become comfortable in working in English, for international workshops, for example, or just deepen their English in the playback setting would attract some. I did not aim to set up a group of exclusively native speakers of English, and did not offer to teach, though I offer comments or suggestions sometimes. I am the coordinator and background director, but organisation of meetings is devolved onto the individual members, who host them in succession. As an FL teacher, I can't help but observe the language events that take place. I write a fairly detailed summary of our meetings afterwards for everyone, partly as a reinforcement of the language, and sometimes include some feedback on language. Over the years of working together like this, changes have
taken place in the English competence and security of the members. It isn't easy for people who are native speakers of one language to communicate with each other in a foreign language, but there is some group pressure, and their own motivation. The most notable change I see, apart from the reduction in inhibitions about actually doing playback in English, is the assurance which has grown among members in using English for communication, during the playback work and outside it.

Another important element of the group is the level and kind of experimentation which happens. We experiment with rotating organisation, leadership, conducting, performing, structuring of the meetings, membership, handling conflict, handling feedback, and extending into new areas, like organisation of workshops. However, we take extraordinary risks: we perform, which for the majority, including the audience, is an enormous risk. Here we perform, sometimes with a conductor, players and audience almost all in L2, which means all are insecure - members of the group who are not leaders in their own groups sometimes taking on the conducting role, hugely demanding even in one’s own language. The strain can be seen in the counteracting wish which sometimes arises for a “native speaker” to at least conduct – usually me. This is seen as being less risky even though there are other factors which can make it more difficult – if I conduct and a native speaker teller is telling, some actors may understand less than when conductor and teller are both L2. I as a non-German may well misunderstand a cultural reference which a German-speaker would pick up. Still, the perception that the one with command of the language in question must be better qualified dies hard.

The fact that we are mixed L1 and L2 means that we all function at a relatively limited level of expression and language dictated by the need for an equal basis, which in turn reduces our reliance on verbal expression to a support level. We all use more simplified utterances, there is more emphasis on body language, and we have to cope with reserve and shyness. What we actually speak together, is technically English, but our cultural references a more German. In fact, like every group, we have created our own special culture – not American or New Zealand, not entirely German, but what has developed from our practice of playback and our personalities, the structures we have built for our interaction, and our English language medium. At the last meeting, which was a combined workshop with our group and others present, held in Germany but with an English-speaking instructor, the German native speaker members of our group would continue to naturally communicate with each other in breaks in English, a confirmation of the acceptance that they have of their identity, cultural and linguistic, in their L2.

The workshop context resembles the group practice meetings, only more sustained and intense – the immersion method of language teaching at its most intense. My first experience of doing this partly in L2 was in 1994, before I came to live in Germany. It was mixed, in fact, but there was plenty of German and after the workshop, one participant had written a detailed account of the procedures and events, which he mostly kindly distributed to all others. This document in German was a great boon to me – I read it many times, looking up all the extremely useful words which recur in playback. I was learning playback and learning German at the same time. Through functioning in playback groups and attending meetings and workshops in German, I have progressed to feeling comfortable in other workshop and meeting situations in German, including psychodrama.

In a simple questionnaire, I asked others about their experiences of doing PT in another language and whether it helped their language learning or not. Two responses were typical of the more reflective responses:

“Most important learning a language (English) by PT for me is the way of learning (more important than results) The learning process is more unconscious, learning by practising, by imitating the native speakers and other group members (in the group); I identify myself with them, like children are playing the subjects of the everyday life of their parents or other grown
ups…. The way to understand through stories and lively is a most complex one (words in different contexts) to understand and talk in another language, learning by playing singing and dancing is a joyful way." (Q)

"the learning of the foreign language by doing PT is much more effective than the learning by book or other media. It is a learning with all senses and emotions. When I as a German speaker did PT with an American audience and together with the training for this performance. I made the experience that this was such an intensive experience that in the following night I dreamed in English "(Q)

Cultural learning
Language and its relation to culture has enormous relevance to PT, where people from diverse language/cultural backgrounds often come together to do playback.

I was teaching English to Czech university students in the Czech Republic, and talking to one young man who had returned from a stay in England about his experience He said one thing that had puzzled and frustrated him was not knowing the unwritten rules of the culture, in terms of language - what someone says is not necessarily what you are supposed to understand. He said, "If someone says, "I'm cold," I learnt that it. means, "please shut the window. Why don't they just say, please shut the window it that's what they want?" In my culture this indirectness is perfectly normal, but for others it is baffling and demoralising, unless they have been learning the cultural lessons as well as the words.

Just knowing what the differences are doesn’t mean that people feel good about honouring them. Living in Germany, I can’t bring myself to answer my telephone by saying my surname, or even my whole name even though I know that it confuses and annoys people. My custom of answering the telephone by saying “Hallo?” has been part of my telephone behaviour and identity for a long time, but in German and Germany it is regarded as extremely informal and not very polite. Standard German practice is for the answerer to tell the caller immediately who is speaking, whereas I think that they should know who they want to speak to!

On the other hand, a German student of mine, a man in his forties, when we were practising being polite on the telephone became exasperated and said “But I don’t want to be polite!” In his culture, politeness can be obstructive – time wasting, not getting the real message through – the possibility that people might be hurt or offended is secondary. But of course, in some cultures, rudeness and directness are almost equated, and the offence that is perceived is a major barrier to further communication.

The point is, though, that until we feel how it is ourselves, we are unlikely to believe that it is necessary to make concessions to cultural expectations. "I get more feelings about the emotional situation of immigrants with whom I had to do in my daily situations and in my profession. This is for me very important, I become more tolerant and my interest for their life story. So it is not only learning of the language as a skill like car driving it is learning of language as communication of lives"(Q)

In playback, we can experience others in a way that lets us learn to feel in this way – the understanding comes with the knowledge we acquire of others and their stories. Playback seems naturally suited to working interculturally – the framework of listening to each other, of hearing each other’s voices with tolerance and empathy ideal for promoting understanding, breaking down prejudices:

“my own cultural prejudices toward people from other country, or from a special life culture…. All circumstances before meeting the people and before our performance (like, the house, where we had the performance, the pictures on the walls, the furniture and maybe how it was smelling) had forced pictures and images in me …While then doing PT my prejudices and images were totally changing because of the openness and kindness the people brought to our joint experiences, and we were all part of it."(Q)

Yet when cultural misunderstandings inevitably arise, working in a foreign language can worsen the confusion. A workshop situation, with people from mixed language / cultural
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Doing Playback Theatre in a foreign language carries with it all the risks as any workshop situation, but accentuated. Those more competent in the language can dominate the less fluent; through the reticence of those affected, cultural misunderstandings which arise may not be recognised and addressed; the teacher feels less in control than in a monolingual context through his/her own language and cultural limitations. The intuition the conductor thinks he/she has may seem to disappear - "Harder to cut in over people in a sensitive way!", as one respondent to the questionnaire said.

The L2 playbacker’s insecurities and sensitivities are heightened and the feeling that “doing PT in English for me sometimes is more difficult than in German, because I am more sensitive in all directions,” (Q) is not uncommon.

My own experience has shown me the increased reticence which non-mastery of the language and unfamiliarity with cultural norms creates. Generally, the danger is there that those who come from minority cultures may feel themselves misrepresented in their stories, but not have the language confidence to speak up, or may feel intimidated or resigned. Nevertheless, the opportunity is also there to anticipate the difficulties and open up space for voices to be heard, and to encourage people to seek ways of coping which are less language oriented. Where full participation takes place, the chance is there to experience the manifold benefits which can be derived from the playback experience.

Over the years I have attended the annual German meetings of playbackers, held in German of course in one of the German-speaking countries. These are always very intense exposure to the German language and culture in the playback theatre context over three days, with workshops and plenary sessions. There are also meetings of delegates and group leaders. Now about 130 people attend, though at the beginning we were 18. As a non-German and learner of German, my participation has limits. I have only once told a story in a plenary sessions, once acted in the plenary sessions where everyone is free to come on stage, (it was a ballot - not entirely voluntary, and I found it a great honour, but a terrifying experience) and I have often felt overwhelmed and isolated, not just through my deficiencies in the language, but because of the difference in cultural norms. Playback as a form holds wonderful possibilities, but is only as powerful as the perceptions of the people who do it. We need to recognise that where there is cultural diversity, a common language is not enough to create open channels of communication. We can, however, see that the more we take part in these events, the more opportunities there are to experience the stories of others, and learn more mutual acceptance through this, which is what I have found.

"Another example of learning is to make a small part of how it might be for people who live in a country and have to communicate in new language without help from a group and from friends… I ask myself what’s going on when this is not possible."

The language in Playback and what we can learn

In theatre, verbal production is a obviously a major component, though not necessarily the strongest and can be at times rather minimal or absent. Nevertheless, in English and some other languages as well, the “audience” are listeners by definition, rather than just spectators. PT, one step further as an interactive theatre form, relies not only on the attentive listening and watching of the audience, but also on the verbal input of an audience. True, it is more a "theatre of action and the senses" rather than "theatre of words" (Fox, 67); in the forms of fluid sculptures and sound sculptures "words are rare" and music is a "strong non-verbal element" (Fox, 38). But outside of the actual story enactment, words do play a major part in the process: "the entire thrust of the performance is to take the verbal rendition of experience and translate it into not-so-verbal drama." (Fox, 38) (my italics).

But "doing PT" in a playback company also means meeting on a regular basis with the group, telling, acting, conducting discussing, socialising etc, with other members of the group – and/or performing – being an actor, musician, conductor and interacting with an audience who may or may not be familiar to you. The company is a team, which means that each member must function well for the group to achieve its goals, whatever they may be – pulling off a successful performance, working together productively, improving and deepening skills,
not to mention wider objectives of community involvement or professional advancement. These contexts and roles are specific and varied, and the language demands placed on them are also specific and varied.

I would like to look at the language competence and flexibility which might be required, specific to playback functions in performance, and also in rehearsal or workshop contexts, and where language is most and least important.

The playback company in rehearsal (workshop)
The specific functions being fulfilled at any one rehearsal or practice session of a company are likely to include: actor, musician, conductor, teller, rehearsal director/workshop leader. Some may also take an "audience", role, but let's first look at the language required for the specific "playback" roles.

**Conductor**
- verbally elicit stories etc from group members
- interview teller (asking questions, commenting, asking for clarification)
- repeat, rephrase, summarise stories
- guide/instruct/respond to actors

**Actor**
- hear and interpret conductor's interview and instructions, teller's story,
- listen actively and respond to other actors' inter-story conversation and commentary,
- listen actively and respond to utterances in activities, forms such as fluid sculptures, chorus, pairs etc
- listen actively and respond interactively to dialogue offers and utterances in scenes
- produce language which is appropriate socially and culturally

**Musician**
- hear and interpret conductor's interview and instructions, teller's story,
- listen actively and respond to other actors' inter-story conversation and commentary,
- listen actively and respond to utterances in activities, forms such as fluid sculptures, chorus, pairs etc

**Teller**
- relate a story or moment
- understand the conductor's questions
- understand the actors when they play the scene
- respond to/reflect on the scene

**Rehearsal director/workshop leader**
- leading warm-up /training activities, directing the flow of the session
- commenting
- offering feedback
- directing reflection processes
- organizational matters

**All**
- reflect verbally on own and other's actions and performance
- interact verbally in the group on a team and social level

**PT in performance**
In this context, the role of the conductor changes to include the motivation of the audience and coordination of the performance:

…"the conductor has more lines than anyone else, is in the spotlight more than anyone else, communicates directly to the audience, invokes the Tellers, is a link between the teller and actors … is a conduit for words, feelings, energies." (Fox, 121).

It is a highly verbal role, although the non-verbal elements are of course vitally important. In German, the conductor is often referred to as the "Moderator", which emphasises the verbal
function more than the English (playback specific) term "conductor" as connector or gesturing director. 

"The conductor's questions structure the telling of the story so that essential information is revealed as economically as possible." (Salas, 74). The conductor sums up the story and guides the actors, "As well as reminding the actors and audience of key features of the story, the conductor can deliberately use language that sets up the drama of what is to follow." (Salas, 78).

The conductor is then a major verbal performer, wielding a number of important and specific verbal instruments – for example:

- addressing the audience in an introduction
- exhorting the audience to perform certain actions (talk to a neighbour, reflect on a moment etc)
- interacting with the audience on a semi-conversational level
- questioning
- asking for comments
- summing up and encapsulating
- sharing
- encouraging and motivating the audience verbally

The conductor's ability to use language plays a powerful role in stimulating stories in the audience, triggering off recollections exerting the "subconscious power" contained in language. (Fox, 39)

The language requirements for the actors and musicians retain more or less the same parameters as they do in rehearsals, but for all three roles – conductor, actor and musician, the demands for competence and accuracy in all aspects of the language are considerably heightened, in particular the need for fast comprehension.

The teller's role is now taken by an audience member, the director's role is not represented. Where the audience is functioning in a foreign language as well, specific requirements are also present. Of course, unless an audience member becomes a teller, the choice is there to be completely passive, requiring no language comprehension or production, otherwise, as active tellers or listeners, a high level of concentration is required, to understand the stories told.

Typical language actions/demands are:

- listening and understanding either native or non-native speaker level language (accents, colloquial language, errors)
- speaking to strangers or familiar people about personal matters
- speaking in front of strangers
- participating in a interview – understanding questions and responding adequately

But even when we or others don't have all the language resources at our fingertips, we are not lost. The workshop leader, working in his/her L1 while the participants are working in L2 needs to adapt to not understanding everything, but can experience the power of the nonverbal aspects of language: "Hearing the rhythms of the language and getting into the flow of the language I have learned quite a bit about how to see dramatic elements – it's like learning to see light or learning to see the space around shapes. Being less language based and more open to the multitude of elements in my receptive perception."

One major part of the job of the actor is to be able to take on any role handed out –which could be anywhere from the president of the United States to an exhaust pipe. However, in language production terms, it would be a lot more "exhausting" to play the president! To stay with the word play, the exhaustive list of roles one might meet has a correspondingly exhaustive list of registers and vocabularies which a well-equipped native speaker carries
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around and can draw on without thinking, if necessary. We can play on words, we know what
to leave out and what to select, we know how to respond to cues without hesitation. Where
we are not in command of the language, we have to be satisfied with other ways of
functioning. The challenge is to develop reliance on nonverbal skills and spontaneity. The L2
actor has a far smaller collection of language resources, but all his/her normal stock of
nonverbal equipment. When we don't quite understand the words, we hear the tone of voice
and see the expression or the body language. Responses to my questionnaire emphasised
this – all felt that working in another language brought increased awareness of body
language and more physical expressiveness in enactment "more body less words ". Instead
of three sentences, perhaps we manage one word, but it's powerful. We repeat a phrase that
carries meaning and we also make mistakes.

As most people I surveyed expressly said, working in L2 does bring the language benefits of
increased confidence and fluency but also the development of spontaneity in expression of
emotions.

"one of my first short forms in German was instrumental: I didn’t know what I would say or
how as it came my time to speak, and one by one, the words came – exactly what was
needed to be said. It reminded me that I can trust my deeper resources to come up with the
words, rather than be busy “thinking” about what to say. ” (Q)
Spontaneity is the key to playback –to paraphrase E.M. Forster - “How do I know what I feel
until I see what I do / hear what I say”. When Fox talks about spontaneity he uses the key
word "Intuitiveness" to comment:
"The …actor, unrestrained by a playwright’s lines, can say whatever comes, often producing
word and action as stunningly à propros as it is unexpected. Thus an actor with a trained
imagination and with full access to his or her senses has available a wide range of
expressive possibilities." (Fox, 80)

However, in L2, we can't just say whatever comes, as we are without the associative
resources of our mother tongue. We cannot rely on our intuition or the subconscious
associations aroused in us by words/ notions to produce appropriate responses – verbal or
not, in the way we do in L1. The spontaneity we want to tap into is not necessarily bubbling
away just under the surface waiting for a signal to pop out in a fully-formed creative act.
“Spontaneity demands an integration of left and right functions and is essential to
nonscripted theatre.” (Fox, 188). We have this vast store, repertoire, library of linguistic and
non-linguistic information and reactions and can normally rely on the situation to trigger an
appropriate response; we rely on having all our linguistic knowledge at call to supply us with
well-formed sentences framed in the correct register containing the appropriate message.

The effort of dredging up words, the uncertainty of using the correct structure, the difficulty of
being blocked by a word in L1 which we know we can't say but which doesn't let us find its
equivalent – these are special hindrances which the L2 player knows. The library shelves are
suddenly empty and the librarian has to scurry down to the basement archives to search for
the title. Any spontaneity we might have is lost. The associations we conjure up with the
words we produce may be far removed from what we would like.

My little one and a half year old grandson, not yet speaking but learning words, was staying
with us. His parents having gone out, he was restless and wanted to find them We had
ignored the pointing to the door and “Mama?” “Papa? as gently as possible, trying
distraction. Then he went off and brought his outdoor shoes to us, pleasantly indicating that
he would like to put them on. If people in an L2 situation are freed of the expectation and
need to search for the appropriate language response, trusting the nonverbal reaction, this
then can become verbal in a new and powerful way

Despite our limited resources, or perhaps because of them, working in L2 can mean that the
rich freedom to interpret in other ways, the skills we develop in listening with the body,
sooner or later give us the spontaneity to enact, and eventually the words come as needed,
in a pregnant, elemental way. When we have had more exposure to colloquial language, we
also find ourselves suddenly finding the right book on the right shelf, even when we didn’t
think we knew where it was.
Identity in L2

It is a fairly common feeling for adults functioning in an L2 context to feel handicapped in a very real way – people are suddenly stripped of faculties they are used to being in control of: the lack of words at their command which renders them mute, the cultural blindness, the deafness of noncomprehension. In normal social interaction where conversation and discourse are of paramount importance in determining the development of relationship, this can mean that friendships cannot be developed or are stunted in growth. Without language or recourse to nonverbal ways of communicating, the L2 speaker cannot reveal emotions, tell stories, interact with humour, cannot display the full depth and diversity of his/her personality, cannot assume cultural understanding on the part of his/her interlocutors - in the playback context, this can mean the audience or fellow actors. Frequently people complain when they have to do playback in a language not their own. The Swiss Germans, who often mix with Germans at playback events, speak of the strain of having to use High German instead of their own dialects. Even if one understands the language well and can speak it fluently, the constraints are there, and one major problem talked of is expressing one's feelings.

The words of one respondent to my questionnaire are very representative: "when it becomes very emotional, then I fall back in my own language". The Swiss German example is of interest, since here, people do not lack the words or the grammar. What people are possibly really saying is that they feel that they are not in control of their identity or personality. Our speech is an incalculable part of our identity, to ourselves. It is not only the expression of our thoughts, however well or badly we do it, but our whole expression of ourselves, including our cultural positioning. We control this, or think we do, using the tool of language. "I don't always have the right feeling for the words, i.e. I'm not always aware of how strong or soft an expression is. This means that there's always the danger of expressing something I didn't intend to express, or I wanted to express in a less strong way, but didn't know how to do this." (Q) Take away the familiar tool and replace it with an inferior one, and we no longer recognise ourselves. For others, there is no difficulty - they accept the message and interpret it according to their own resources, using all the accompanying nonverbal information as well to build their own picture, quite possibly erroneous, of our personality. The bumbling slow L2 speaker reduced to endearingly simple ungrammatical utterances may be the possessor of a swift, flaying tongue, who in his/her own language can dominate effortlessly. An opposite effect can also happen - "In some situations, especially very emotional ones, it's easier for me to use English because it keeps a certain distance between what I want to play and my own feelings."(Q) This is of course a paradox - the risk of doing PT is lessened by taking a further risk precisely because one's constructed personality is not completely present. Normally having to function in a foreign language is a fearsome thing for adults, but it can often entail a return to childish feelings and behaviour, and liberation from cultural inhibitions, as when doing PT (Fox, 1994). Combined, the experience becomes a welcome release from much of the pressure on adults in some cultures to be calm, unemotional, sophisticated and serious. Nevertheless, for many, the sense of lost self when functioning in another language is one reason for playback to be a threatening context. The uncertainty and risk-taking that are present in playback anyway are intensified by the incomplete grasp of the language. We are submerged in a murky sea where things are not quite clearly seen or heard, but we must respond quickly and effectively. We can no longer control what we say and how we are heard. Our ability to be funny verbally is constrained, and since the language we think we need does not emerge without some cognitive effort, we are less spontaneous – until we decide to relinquish our claim to that kind of language.

In acting, we can, however, rejoice in the playback freedom to enter the new language through the nonverbal door, to take on another identity, and release ourselves from the constraints of expectation,— in Daniel Feldhendler's poetic words (questionnaire):

"Take freedom....
to become Self as
An
Altogether, what we do in playback theatre gives us an opportunity to transcend the threats it imposes. Specifically in the L2 situation, at the same time as we are developing our language skills, we are building our relationships in nonverbal ways not available to us in everyday intercourse. As a teller, we take central place in a group event, which in a normal social context would be fearsome and difficult. We can tell a story – maybe simply, maybe inaccurately, but with the full attention of the group - and trust that the enactment will convey the physical and emotional experience on an experiential level, allowing everyone to understand even though they haven't "heard" all the information. The conductor's role allows us time to reflect and shape with words, to delve for words for feelings and try to express them. The resulting web of connection functions in a similar way as for people working in L1. We learn each other's stories, we see each other's responses and understanding, interpretation and humour, and foundation of trust is built for more risk-taking. Simply hearing the language being used in this context invites us to join in. We can "enjoy [the L2] more and [feel] more interested in learning it." (Q)"Hearing particular words over and over again" builds security, "Hearing the rhythms of the language and getting into the flow of the language" (Q) builds familiarity.

PT and language teaching

For language learning the activation of memory is very significant. One of the most difficult part of language learning as an adult is committing to memory. Words need places to embed themselves, they need context, they need affect if we are to acquire them, and playback provides this. Watching a story enacted in playback theatre leaves a powerful impression. The visual transformation of story which one has heard impresses itself deeply in a way that simple listening does not necessarily do. This is another powerful tool in playback's effect in an L2 context. When we hear the L2 item, speak in the L2, there is almost always a "veil" which stands between us and the meaning. Words are not the same as in our own language. I say 'tree' in English and it is the tree outside my house, but also the tree in hundreds of books, the trees in As You Like it, the tree of life, the family tree, the shoe tree. It resonates in my being in hundred of ways – I become an encyclopaedia of trees. The L2 translation, by comparison, has to reach me first through cognitive recognition. I hear 'Baum', and my mind tries to place it in a known English context. If I have seen the word it may resonate with English words which look similar. My experience of “Baum” is thus not comparable with my experience of “tree”. In the playback theatre context, this transposed and much thinner experience of words becomes filled out by the affective impact of seeing the story. The cloths that are used, the people's voices, the context of the story attach themselves to the words of the story. I remember conducting a story about someone being on Cyprus and wanting to see a tortoise farm. The word in German is “Schildkröte”. I knew the word, but I didn't have any strong pictures associated with it. Now, when I hear the word 'Schildkröte', I think of this story that was told, the people involved, the response we made in playback. It's very personal, but it means that this word is firmly anchored in my repertoire, with my own rich personal associations.

A language classroom is of course focused on the language as its main object. The personal element is incidental, though more or less important depending on teacher and method. Learning, however, takes place at many levels, and how adults learn is not fully understood. That different people learn in different ways is accepted – one talks about the varying motivations for learning a language - the desire to immerse oneself in the culture and concepts, to take on a personality in that language, or conversely to acquire the language for career or other reasons without having any emotional inclination towards the language. Then there is the kinaesthetic/aural/visual differentiation - different individuals responding more to
one or other of these stimuli. Nevertheless, language is communication, and in classroom teaching communication is limited.

Playback theatre, as opposed to the language classroom, provides a context for real, personal communication, where the language is a tool and all stimuli are present. Even when working on playback theatre in the medium of another language with the intention of acquiring or improving the language, the focus is, as in any other PT context, on the person and the group and communication rather than the language. While the enactment of stories told provides the chance to “practise” real-life situations, the group transactions are real.

Daniel Feldhendler, teaching French at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, is probably the leading exponent of the method and has written and published on the topic. He comments in the questionnaire:

"Dans notre contexte de travail (université, formation linguistique, formation des enseignants) la méthode de théâtre-récit (PT) constitue un entraînement actif à la réflexivité dans la communication car la démarche repose sur différentes phases : écoute, compréhension, expression, action, interaction, rétroaction et mise en commun. Elle permet l'émergence d'attitudes relationnelles entre locuteurs et récepteurs. Ses formes spécifiques accentuent:
la capacité d'écoute et de compréhension,
la réceptivité et l'expressivité,
la spontanéité dans la parole et dans l'action,
l'adéquation de la réponse donnée,
la traduction d'un message avec d'autres supports (le corps, la voix, les sons etc.),
l'intégration de l'expression verbale et non verbale,
l'expression de l'affectivité et des émotions,
la perception de soi et des autres,
l'ouverture à une situation nouvelle."

In the context we work in (university, language teaching, teaching teachers) the method of playback theatre constitutes active training of reflexivity in communication, since it takes place in different phases – listening, understanding, giving expression to ideas, action, interaction, ... and ... It permits the development of a relationship (relational attitudes) between speakers and listeners. Its specific forms intensify:
the capacity for listening and understanding
receptiveness and expressiveness
spontaneity in word and action
the appropriateness of the response made,
transmission of a message through other means (body, the voice, sounds etc)
integration of the expression of the verbal and non-verbal
expression of the affect and the emotions
perception of oneself and others
the approach to a new situation (translation JS)

My own use of playback in the classroom has been mostly more incidental to the lesson and not the whole activity. I have focused on the story telling and enacting, with pre- and post-playback related activities (writing, interviewing, “publishing” deriving related language teaching points etc.) That the stories are personal is excellent, meaning that students are expressing things relevant to themselves and being empowered in this way. A more challenging aspect is that the activity is open ended in terms of language structures and vocabulary, thus demanding a lot from the teacher in terms of creativity, knowledge and classroom management.

In Australia, the Czech Republic and Germany, I have experimented with groups at different levels, sometimes also offering an optional class based on the playback idea of telling and enacting, or using enactment of stories as an element of class practice. I have also offered workshops to teachers (who have found it a wonderful experience for themselves but are not always sure they can “sell” it to their adult students). I haven't always told students that what
we were doing had a name, and I haven't tried to use all the forms available, working mainly with stories and one-to-one scenes.

What I have found is that some people love doing it and throw themselves into their roles while others are more sceptical of its benefits, seeing it as a (as one Czech student called it ‘a silly game’. I don’t think he meant it to be quite so damning, but nevertheless, he saw it as being not very serious.) Yet although I have continued to use these elements over the years, there are difficulties which deter me from using playback in some situations.

Role play is of course used constantly in language teaching as it is in other teaching situations. The roles are based on authentic situations and in FL teaching used very often as structured activities with written instructions, either to practise standard language appropriate to the situation, or to give a context to grammar or vocabulary items to be learnt. Role play is also used simply to allow students to be spontaneous and creative, developing their own language and situations with no specific language aim. The last is the most open-ended and difficult to control and probably the least used. It is not particularly beloved by adult students, who are likely to feel uncomfortable and out of their depth when they have to produce ideas and appropriate grammar and vocabulary in the target language. Adults' expectations of themselves are always that they can perform perfectly in the target language and open-ended role play gives them a sense of floundering. They risk not making themselves understood and not understanding, or making mistakes and hearing others’ mistakes. All these difficulties make people fearful, insecure, and timid. They don't want to tell, they don't want to act, they don't want to conduct. All of these things are risky and require courage in our native language, but in a foreign language the risk is far greater. But what happens if we do it, despite the risk?

A playback setting in a classroom may not diminish these negative feelings, but even exacerbate them. The high level of demands placed on students when they do playback and the complexity of what they are doing may obscure the value of it from them, especially if they see language learning as book-based, test-assessed, teacher-controlled, where one acquires rules and can then produce (as they believe). Those who believe that the classroom is not a place for action and risk-taking may not enjoy playback, even if they are good at it, and benefit from it, because their expectations are too different.

It has often been hard to convince people that playback type work is beneficial for them. After doing playback work, they feel the deficiencies in what they have produced, not realising that it has been a semi-authentic situation and they have coped very well. Not all personalities can let themselves be "silly" and stop worrying about making mistakes.

Playback theatre is not only a technical structure of teller /actor/ conductor/ musician, but also a framework of trust, tolerance and encouragement. Risky as it is, it is also a place of learning to survive risk. As small children learning our language we tried and failed and tried again until we succeeded, We didn't know we were taking a risk, because our environment was so secure. Our failures in communication were frustrating, but not dangerous. We had, if we were lucky, loving helpers who guided us. If we didn't we had models who showed us how to succeed. We never questioned the necessity of becoming competent because we were convinced that we had to do it because we could see that everyone else did, and we wanted to be heard, too.

Those who do over a period of time, lose their inhibitions and gain confidence. Of course, one of the biggest differences between "classroom playback" and the playback company, is the reason why the participants have chosen to be in the group. If they have chosen to be part of a playback group, or have voluntarily entered into doing it and have accepted what that entails, then the natural inhibitions of the adult or adolescent learner can be more quickly overcome.

I remember one group of older women I had been teaching for quite a while, very limited speaking skills and very cautious. I decided to risk doing some playback with them, thinking they would find the open-endedness very difficult. I was astonished at the extent to which it
freed them up, although I had hoped it would. They came out with language I didn’t know they had, and improvised with gusto. We used it after that quite regularly, and the related extension work.

If the learner is aware that the language learning process is taking place at many levels, it becomes a learner-driven process, where the teacher may be present as facilitator and guide, but where the learner is taking full responsibility for progress. Then the open-ended, risk-taking, experimental nature of the activity can be exploited for all its benefits. The matrix is there—the playback framework and ritual to provide the structure, shared experimentation to reduce the dangers of risk-taking, using nonverbal communication to support or replace verbal if the language is missing.

A Playback company lives on the life stories of the members to a certain extent. We are given space to tell and be heard, and seen. We learn to trust each other with our stories and give each other the gift of our respect and enactment. The chance to communicate is there for all. There is a point at which the difficulties inherent in functioning in L2 are overcome by the power of the opportunity to relate, never mind how inadequately. At that point, the trust is there, and if not damaged by mishandling will grow and flourish. A simple fact about language learning is that the more you do the better you get. We find the trust and safety necessary to take the risks we need to learn how to survive risk taking, and so gradually our fear is lessened, and we take more control. Gradually, skills improve, above all, the confidence to communicate regardless of how many errors we may make.

We learn to trust our other abilities, and discover our nonverbal resources in a more conscious way. We acquire words for feelings and relationships from others in a way not unlike the way we learn as children— we hear the unfamiliar word spoken in the context of a story we understand, told by someone we know and trust. We find strategies for communication, we start to develop a personality in the L2, or learn how to reveal our true selves without having recourse to all the language and cultural resources we have in our L1.

References

