Use of theater for a sustainable improvement of written & oral skills: a sample activity realized with Molière’s plays

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Abstract

When training language teachers, it is necessary to plan a continuous development and improvement of written and oral skills, especially in the case of some teacher candidates who had not have the opportunity to study abroad, in countries where the foreign language that they are supposed to teach is spoken by native speakers. Therefore, for a sustainable improvement of the skills mentioned above, some practical activities have been planned and realized, in the scope of certain courses such as French Syntax and French Literature given in French teacher training Department of Istanbul University, during the academic year of 2013-2014. So, the main objective of this paper is to present an applied study, realized in French Literature course with students of the French Language Teacher Training Department of Hasan Ali Yucel Education Faculty in Istanbul University. The study consists of four steps which are reading, rewriting, adaptation and staging of plays of the famous French writer Molière. Within the context of this study, two plays adapted by the students and the achievements obtained will be presented.

Keywords: French, french teacher training, written and oral skills, theater in foreign language teaching, Moliere.

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1. Issues and objectives

In foreign languages learning, acquisition of writing skills is essential, but no language is really acquired without oral communication skills. In the specific case of the French language learning in Turkey, despite the use of the latest methods that are intended to enable acquisition of oral skills, the levels of learners in general, appear to be unchanged. Knowing very well that the success of education is only possible with French language teachers who are supposed to have all the necessary knowledge and skills, we consider starting with querying their training, while on the other hand, setting up their training to improve their competency levels will certainly contribute to the improvement and the success of teaching of French as a foreign language in primary and secondary schools. From this basic idea, it seems useful and necessary to plan and design practical studies in the approach of subject materials taught even for the theoretical courses such as linguistics, syntax and literature that have in common the language studies. As we think that the use of theater can allow improvement of a number of skills, in the frame of French Literature courses, we have planned and realized an activity with Molière’s plays, containing several stages from reading until staging. Each step aims acquisition of a language skill. So, in this paper, a practical study that we have conducted with the main objective of improving, especially, written and oral communication skills of French Teacher candidates’ through French Literature course will be presented.

2. Framework and Approach

In language skills development, as in many existing language teaching methods aiming at making students able to perform tasks using the linguistic tool involving actively students in the learning process plays an important role in the success. Because this kind of approach allows on one hand to transform knowledge into competence, and on the other hand, to gain better literary knowledge. Therefore in the frame of French Literature I course, in French teacher training Department of Istanbul University some practical activities have been planned and realized during the academic year of 2013-2014. Some of Molière’s plays chosen by the students were studied, analyzed, rewritten and staged. To complete the study, fourteen weeks (i.e. duration of one semester) were estimated. Then the second year students of the license have made this work in four key stages: 1. Guided Reading of play texts; 2. Lexical, syntactic and semantic analysis; 3. Rewriting and adaptation; 4. Staging. Although certain students did not contribute to the work for various reasons, a vast majority has participated to this practical study. Four groups have studied on four plays of Molière which are “The Miser” (L’Avaré) “The Imaginary Invalid” (Le Malade Imaginaire), “The School for Wives” (L’Ecole des Femmes), and “Dom Juan”. Each group of students had to first read the play chosen and analyze it on the lexical, syntactic and semantic level to acquire and to appropriately use different registers of language in French. From a sociocultural point of view, this study was also supposed to allow for observation and understanding of the features of main characters of Molière’s plays, which are considered to be universal, and making an adaptation easily. So, after the guided reading of play texts, students have thought on the possibilities of making an adaptation and wrote a short story in the form of a play to be staged. They have presented the scripts and discussed them in the classroom. The plays adapted have been written first in Turkish and then translated into French, considering the registers of language. Throughout this study the students working in the same group have met two or three times in a week. For staging, after the distribution of the roles to be played, they chose to play only once and make a video of it. Finally, the videos of four plays staged, have been presented and viewed in classroom at the end of the semester. In this paper, only two representative adaptations will be presented.
3. The Two plays adapted

The Miser: The character of the miser was suited into the role of a student girl at university. This is a hardworking ambitious, selfish, and a kind of nerd student. She is also ready to do everything for obtaining the highest scores in the exams and she does not either share with or lend her notes taken during courses to some of her classmates who are some kind of a band of dullards, incapable to understand what professors tell and try to teach and then to write them down. As the period of exams is soon, the band of dullards who have no notes to study decide first to ask the nerd, to lend them her notes. But she refuses as she always did. Hence the band decides to steal nerd’s notes to teach her a lesson. Then they make a plan right away, it is now necessary to trick her. Here is the plan: One day during a break, the nerd was told that the boy she likes is waiting for her in the yard to talk with her about something. Although the nerd is not ready to rush out leaving all her stuff in the classroom, she also does not want to miss the opportunity to meet the boy who, in her mind, is going to tell her something that she has been waiting for. She makes the band of dullards to swear that they would not touch her bag with her notes inside and then goes to meet the boy in the yard. As soon as she goes, her mate Şeydanur from the band steals her notes that were hidden in her bag. As she already suspected something, the nerd looks right away for her notes immediately after returning to the classroom and starts crying like hell. Here is an extract of script written in French by students:

«(Derya avec un étonnement d’un moment, elle sort en laissant son sac. Şeyda a vu la sortie de Derya après elle rentra a la classe pour boire de l’eau. Elle vola ses notes de Derya, s’enfuit. En ce moment-là, toute la classe est dans le jardin. La récréation finit, ils rentrent dans la classe. Derya rentre en courant et s’assis à sa place, elle ouvre son sac et elle crie.
Yeşim: Qu’est-ce qui ce passe ici tout le monde a sa place. Quel bruit?
Derya: Madame Ils ont volé mes notes! Renvoyez-les de l’Université, surtout ma sœur!
Şeydanur: Pardon, moi? Pendant la récréation j’était avec mes amis dans le jardin. Je ne suis même pas venue en classe. D’ailleurs, je n’ai pas besoin de ses notes.»
The Imaginary Invalid: The story of The Imaginary Invalid has been completely adapted by students into a television series inspired by the life of Ottoman Emperor Suleiman the Magnificent. However in the original version of the play, there is only one imaginary invalid, in the adapted version besides the imaginary invalid that the roles of Emperor reincarnate, whole main characters have an illness, in the form of an obsession as they are presented in the scenario. This is also what gives a humorous aspect to the story of the play. Hürrem Sultan who is the premier wife of the Emperor is obsessed by magic and spells. Mahidevran, the second wife of the Emperor is obsessed by the presence of Sultan Hürrem. Valide Sultan who is the mother of the Emperor is an obsessive-compulsive. The daughter of Sultan Hürrem is obsessed by men, and finally Hürrem’s assistant Sümbül Aga has the defect of repeating everything twice. The play consists of three acts. As in the original version, the story is based on the intrigues caused by jealousy and ambition of the main characters. The play ends with a passionate crime scene organized by Mahidevran to kill Hürrem which is in fact only a dream of Mahidevran:

« Mahidevran se déguise en une femme voyante et va voir Hürrem. Elle lui demande de tendre la main pour lui dire ce qui va se passer. Juste au moment où Hürrem lui tend la main Mahidevran sort son poignard et le plante dans la poitrine de celle-ci. Le cri strident de Hürrem la réveille et elle réalise que tout cela était seulement un cauchemar ».

4. Conclusion

This study, first of all, provided the opportunity to enrich French vocabulary of the students, who have involved actively in whole steps of the practical study and also made them able to distinguish the literary language that is most often used in the written language, from the spoken French casually used. By the same token, the students have learned and acquired the specific vocabulary and specific language of Molière, plus his époque’s. In the step of staging of adapted plays, this practical work pushed the students to learn to make both individual and collective researches in a team; and on the other hand, by sharing the roles and by rehearsals, to express themselves more comfortably through the roles they have played. Particularly in the step of rewriting-adaptation, exercises allowing to distinguish different registers of language contributed to the acquisition and improvement of pragmatic competence as well. In other words, students have learned to adapt their speech to different socio-cultural situations. One example would be the use of French addressee pronouns like "tu" and "vous" depending on the social context, as well as other addressee forms using the professional titles. For example, in the writing of the The
Miser’s scenario, in some repliques, students had first used "mon professeur" to refer “hocam” in Turkish. While this form of address is completely cultural in French and the teacher is in general called by “Madame” or “Monsieur” (except the primary school context where they are called as ‘maitre, maitresse). In the same way, they learned also that in French forms of greetings, acknowledgements etc. vary depending on the social context, the degree of intimacy, etc. Briefly, with this practical study realized through the Moliere’s plays, while learning French literature, students have found the opportunity to improve their written, oral and pragmatic skills in French.

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