



Theater as a Didactic Strategy for the Strengthening of Oral Expression in Secondary Education: Systematization of an Experience in Córdoba, Colombia

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Summary

This article presents the systematization of a pedagogical experience developed through a didactic strategy based on the use of theater as a resource to strengthen oral expression in high school students in Córdoba, Colombia. The research is part of a qualitative approach, with an action-research design, which allowed not only to intervene in the problem identified in the classroom, but also to critically reflect on the process. The intervention consisted of a pedagogical proposal composed of improvisation exercises, expressive reading, characterization of characters and staging, applied during planned sessions in the area of language. The results showed substantial improvements in verbal fluency, confidence in orality, mastery of the body and the use of expressive language. Likewise, students showed greater motivation towards participation in academic activities and a positive attitude towards reading aloud and the collective construction of scripts. From the analysis of field diaries, recordings and semi-structured interviews, significant transformations were identified both in verbal performance and in the communicative climate of the classroom. Experience shows that theatre, beyond being an aesthetic or artistic tool, can become a powerful pedagogical way for the development of communicative skills. This study offers practical guidance for teachers seeking to integrate active and expressive methodologies into their educational practice, especially in contexts where orality has been little worked on or undervalued within the curriculum. The proposal can be adapted to different educational and thematic levels, promoting meaningful learning from bodily, emotional and linguistic interaction.

Keywords: Educational theatre, oral expression, language didactics, action research, communicative skills, secondary education, pedagogical strategies

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Introduction

1. Context and Problem Statement

In many secondary education scenarios, **orality** occupies a marginal place in the teaching and evaluation processes, which generates a significant lag in the development of **students' communicative skills**. This situation is accentuated in contexts where the curriculum privileges reading comprehension and argumentative writing, but neglects the strengthening of oral expression as a comprehensive formative practice. In educational institutions in Córdoba, Colombia, it has been identified that a considerable number of students manifest **insecurity when speaking in public**, present **limitations in verbal fluency**, difficulties in structuring ideas in a coherent way and an impoverished use of expressive language. This problem translates into low participation in class, poor command of oral argumentative discourse and a deficit in the development of **socio-communicative competence**, which is fundamental for their academic, social and professional performance.

In response to this panorama, the need arose to design an innovative pedagogical proposal that would overcome these limitations from a transformative perspective. The intervention was based on the incorporation of **theater as a didactic strategy**, understanding that scenic practices offer a context of active, dynamic and participatory learning, where the word acquires body, emotion and communicative intentionality. Theatre, by requiring the student to consciously construct their oral discourse, enhances not only the way in which something is said, but also the ability **to produce meaning from verbal, gestural and corporal interaction**. Consequently, it was thought to systematize this pedagogical experience as a way to **recover the learning constructed, critically analyze the processes experienced** and offer references for the incorporation of expressive methodologies in the language classroom.

This systematization is part of a qualitative approach **with an action-research design**, which makes it possible not only to transform educational practice, but also to resignify it from collective reflection, participatory analysis and informed decision-making. The proposal, implemented with high school students, included activities focused on **body work, improvisation, expressive reading, character construction and staging**, thus configuring a didactic route coherent with the purposes of strengthening oral expression.

2. Theoretical foundation

The theoretical basis of this proposal is based on the recognition of **oral language** as a constitutive dimension of the subject in his interaction with others, as **Vygotsky (1978)** states when he points out that thought develops mediated by language and that higher mental functions are constructed in social interaction. In this framework, orality cannot be limited to a utilitarian means of communication, but must be approached as a cultural, symbolic and creative practice that articulates the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, the **constructivist** approach proposed **by Bruner (1996) is used**, in which the student is considered an active subject of the educational process, capable of constructing meaning from experiences that integrate action, reflection and symbolization. Theatre, as an aesthetic and communicative experience, fulfils this function by placing the student on a stage of representation where he or she must **assume roles, express emotions, interpret situations and articulate meaningful discourses**. This practice not only demands the use of verbal language, but also **body and paraverbal language**, enhancing the development of a comprehensive orality.

In the field of **language didactics**, authors such as **Cassany (2006)** and **Ferreiro (2000)** have insisted on the need to rethink classroom practices to promote teaching that articulates the real communicative functions of language with the development of expressive skills. The inclusion of theatre in the curriculum is aligned with this perspective, as it allows students to **experience language in meaningful contexts**, instead of reproducing decontextualised linguistic structures. Likewise, theatre favours **collaborative work, self-expression** and the **recognition of diversity**, essential elements for an education based on the integral formation of the subject.

From the perspective of **artistic education**, theater is recognized as a tool that transcends the aesthetic to become a space for the construction of subjectivities, identities and citizenship. According to **Boal (1979)**, the theatre of the oppressed is a form of language that allows the oppressed to express themselves, recognise themselves and transform their reality. Although this study does not address it from a political perspective, it does recognize in theater its **liberating and pedagogical potential**, especially in contexts where students have historically been silenced or reduced to academic passivity.

3. General methodological approach and expected results

The proposal was developed under an **action-research approach**, which combines pedagogical intervention with systematic reflection on practice. This methodological choice made it possible to involve educational actors in a process of dialogic transformation, in which didactic decisions were the result of continuous observation, feedback, and shared analysis of progress. Throughout the process, guiding questions were formulated about the evolution of oral expression, the appropriation of the theatrical strategy and the impact of the activities on the communicative climate of the classroom.

It was expected that, at the end of the implementation, students would show **greater confidence in expressing themselves in public, improvements in modulation and verbal fluency**, as well as a **greater willingness to participate** in oral activities. In the same way, a transformation in attitudes towards oral language was projected, overcoming the perception of discomfort or embarrassment and moving towards a more playful, creative and critical relationship with the spoken word.

This article proposes, then, to systematize this experience to account not only for the **observable results**, but also for the **tensions, learning, resistances and opportunities** that arose along the way, so that it can **inspire other teachers** to incorporate alternative pedagogical strategies, focused on **expression, the body, creation and dialogue** as the foundations of the educational act.

Methodology

This study was developed under the **action-research** approach, which is characterized by articulating educational practice with systematic and transformative reflection on this practice. This methodological choice responded to the need to intervene in a specific classroom situation – the limited participation and poor oral fluency of the students – and, at the same time, to generate relevant knowledge from the rigorous analysis of the lived process. Action research is conceived, in this sense, as a strategy aimed at **understanding and improving pedagogical practice**, placing it at the center of the research process, as proposed by authors such as **Elliott (2000)** and **Kemmis and McTaggart (2005)**.

The study was carried out with a group of **30 high school students** from an institution located in the department of **Córdoba, Colombia**, who voluntarily participated in the development of a **didactic sequence based on the use of theater** to strengthen their oral expression skills. The group was selected through intentional **sampling**, given its accessibility and the previous identification of difficulties in the levels of oral participation and argumentation in academic spaces. The students were informed about the objectives of the process and their participation was consented to within the framework of the ethical principles of qualitative research.

The **pedagogical intervention** was structured in **three moments**: (1) participatory diagnosis of the communicative problem in the classroom, (2) design and implementation of the didactic sequence with theatrical activities aimed at the development of orality, and (3) evaluation and reflection on the progress and tensions of the process. Each moment involved the systematic collection of information and joint analysis between the teacher-researcher and the students, which allowed **the pedagogical design to be continuously fed back** and adjustments to be made according to emerging needs.

As for the techniques for collecting information, qualitative instruments were used that allowed the experience to be captured from a rich and contextualized perspective. Among them are:

- **Participant observation**: the attitudes, behaviors and transformations observed in the students during the development of the theatrical activities were recorded through field diaries. This technique allowed us

to understand communicative processes beyond verbal language, including gestures, postures and emotional reactions.

- **Semi-structured interviews:** they were applied to a focus group of students in order to know their perceptions about the process experienced, the learning obtained, the difficulties faced and their assessment of theater as a didactic strategy. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent thematic analysis.
- **Student productions:** theatrical scripts, readings aloud, improvisation exercises and stagings carried out by the students were analyzed, evaluating their evolution in aspects such as discursive coherence, tone management and voice projection.
- **Reflective self-evaluations:** at the end of the process, the students prepared short stories in which they assessed their progress, expressed their emotions in the face of orality and proposed improvements for future experiences.

Open and axial coding **was used for the analysis of the information**, following the approach proposed by **Strauss and Corbin (2002)**. This technique allowed us to identify emerging categories related to the impact of the strategy on **verbal fluency, safety in public speaking, expressive use of the body and voice**, and the **perception of theater as a learning tool**. The analysis was performed inductively, allowing the findings to emerge naturally from the data collected.

Finally, the **methodological rigor** of the study was guaranteed through the **triangulation of techniques and informants**, the **systematic recording of each session**, the **intersubjective validation of the findings** and constant **ethical reflection** on the role of the researcher, the limits of the intervention and the positive or negative impact of the students.

Results

The analysis of the information collected during the implementation of the didactic sequence based on theater allowed us to identify **significant transformations** in the communicative performance of the students, as well as in their attitudes towards orality. These findings were organized around **four emerging categories**, derived from the qualitative coding process: (1) verbal fluency and discursive organization, (2) security and willingness to speak in public, (3) corporal and paraverbal expressiveness, and (4) evaluation of theater as a didactic strategy.

Verbal fluency and discursive organization

During the first sessions, most of the students showed difficulties in constructing coherent discourses, maintaining the argumentative thread and expressing themselves clearly in public. However, as theatrical activities developed—especially improvisation exercises and rehearsals of theatrical scripts—there was evidence of a progressive improvement in **verbal fluency**, the **logical order of ideas**, and the use of **appropriate discursive connectors**. Students began to better structure their interventions, decreasing hesitant pauses and increasing the use of precise vocabulary and expressive resources.

This progress was particularly notable in activities such as **dramatized readings** and the **oral reconstruction of collective stories**, in which participants had to keep the group's attention through their way of narrating. The analysis of the written scripts and the recordings of the stagings showed an improvement in the **articulation of the discourse**, the **appropriate intonation** and the **adaptation of the linguistic register to the communicative context**.

Security and willingness to speak in public

One of the most outstanding achievements of the intervention was the change in the attitude of the students towards the act of public speaking. At the beginning of the process, several expressed feelings of **shame, stage fright and withdrawal**, which limited their participation in oral activities. However, the group dynamics of the theater, the work in pairs and teams, as well as the possibility of assuming characters other

than themselves, contributed to **reduce stage anxiety** and to promote a **greater willingness to intervene verbally** in class.

From the third week of work, the increase in the number of students who requested to participate spontaneously in the exercises was evident, even those who previously avoided any public exposure. In their self-evaluations, the students expressed feeling **more confident**, highlighting phrases such as: "I am no longer ashamed to speak", "I learned to look into the eyes without fear" or "I no longer go blank as before".

Corporal and paraverbal expressiveness

Theatre made it possible to integrate **non-verbal dimensions of language** into the communicative process, which are often neglected in the classroom. Through training in **gestures, voice projection, stage posture and spatial displacement**, the students developed a greater awareness of their body as a channel of communication. This bodily dimension not only enriched their oral interventions, but also strengthened their ability to **transmit emotions, intentions and discursive emphasis** through paraverbal resources such as voice modulation, rhythm and intensity.

Observations made during rehearsals and theatrical performances indicated a significant improvement in **expressive use of the body, eye contact with the audience, and coordination between gesture and spoken word**. This synergy between the verbal and the corporal was recognized by the students themselves as an important achievement, stating that now "they can express themselves better with their whole body" and that "they no longer feel rigid when speaking."

Valuing theatre as a didactic strategy

Finally, the students expressed a **high valuation of the theatrical strategy** not only as a playful resource, but as an effective means to **improve their communication skills** and **strengthen their personal confidence**. In the focus groups and interviews, comments such as: "I learned more by acting than by copying in the notebook", "the theater taught me to think while I speak" or "now I feel that I have more words to say what I want" stood out.

This positive perception was associated with the possibility of **learning by doing**, of working collaboratively and of **feeling that the classroom was a safe space to make mistakes, rehearse and improve**. For many students, the theatrical experience represented a significant change in their way of relating to oral language, going from seeing it as an academic requirement to understanding it as an **expressive form of identity and communication**.

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If you agree, I can continue with the **Results** section, developing the thematic analysis of the emerging categories and articulating the findings with representative fragments of the intervention process.

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Discussion

The findings of this action research reaffirm the relevance of theater as a pedagogical strategy to enhance **oral expression in high school students**, especially in contexts where limitations prevail in verbal participation, discursive organization and safety to speak in public. The systematization of this experience

in Córdoba, Colombia, allows us to reflect on the contributions of the scenic approach in communicative training, considering both the observable transformations and the tensions experienced in the process.

In the first instance, the strengthening of **verbal fluency and the structuring of discourse** corroborates what **Cassany (2006)** argues, who argues that linguistic competences are developed more effectively when they are linked to real contexts of communication. Theatre practice requires students to construct meaningful messages, adapt to diverse communicative situations and sustain the narrative thread in front of an audience, which forces them to deploy language resources that are difficult to activate in contexts of passive teaching or focused on the repetition of content. This dynamic coincides with what **Bruner (1996)** proposed about learning as a situated symbolic construction, in which the subject organizes his or her thinking through the meaningful use of language.

Likewise, the improvement in **public speaking confidence** and the decrease in **stage fright** that students manifested is closely related to the principles of **social constructivism** of **Vygotsky (1978)**, who recognizes the mediating role of cultural tools —such as theater— in the development of higher psychological functions. The classroom was transformed into a space for expressive experimentation where error was resignified as part of learning and oral presentation was no longer perceived as a threat. This resignification of public speaking was possible thanks to the collective, playful and dramatized nature of the activities, which allowed the students to explore their voice from the **interpretation of characters**, which in turn gave them a certain **symbolic distance** from the anxiety associated with self-exposure.

In terms of **nonverbal communication**, the theatrical process promoted an expanded understanding of language as a multisensory and bodily phenomenon. The students went from speaking "with their mouths" to speaking "with their whole bodies", integrating gestures, postures, movements and expressive pauses into their interventions. This finding confirms what **Boal (1979)** proposed about the body as the actor's first instrument and as a territory of resistance, expression and creation. In the educational field, this corporal perspective breaks with the traditional conception of orality as a purely linguistic competence, and opens the way to integrative methodologies that conceive the student as a communicative being in multiple dimensions.

On the other hand, the **value that students assigned to theatre as a learning tool** translates into a more positive disposition towards the classroom, a greater emotional attachment to the content and a perception of the concrete usefulness of oral language in their daily lives. In this sense, the theatrical strategy managed not only to improve academic indicators, but also to influence **intrinsic motivation**, the **sense of belonging to the group** and the **communicative self-image** of students, elements that are fundamental in the construction of significant educational trajectories.

Finally, this experience also evidenced some challenges, such as the need **for sufficient time for stage preparation**, teacher **training in basic theatrical techniques**, and the **transversal integration of the artistic approach into the school curriculum**. These tensions do not nullify the effectiveness of the proposal, but rather point to paths for improvement for future implementations. As **Kemmis and McTaggart (2005)** state, the value of action research lies precisely in its ability to make visible the limits of practice, in order to transform it from a participatory, reflexive, and situated logic.

Overall, the results of this systematization suggest that theater should not be seen as a decorative complement to language education, but as a **structuring methodology** that allows **language to be experienced** from experience, emotion, the body, and social interaction. This broad perspective of language opens up pedagogical possibilities to approach orality in a critical, creative and contextualized way, in tune with the challenges of contemporary education.

Conclusions

The present study allowed us to verify that the use of theater as a pedagogical strategy has a significant impact on the strengthening of **oral expression** in high school students. From a didactic sequence built from the principles of **action-research**, active and participatory learning spaces were generated, in which

students transformed their relationship with the spoken word, resignified their place as communicative subjects and developed new ways of interacting with language.

Throughout the process, the progressive improvement in **verbal fluency**, the **organization of oral discourse** and the **management of expressive resources**, both verbal and non-verbal, was evident. The theatrical activities, structured around dramatized reading, improvisation, character construction and staging, provided a real and meaningful context for oral production, favoring not only the development of language skills, but also self-confidence, collaboration between peers and the willingness to communicate in front of an audience.

Theater was consolidated as a methodological resource that allowed linking the cognitive dimension with the bodily, emotional, and social, generating an integrative and transformative educational experience. Through dramatic play, the students not only rehearsed ways of saying, but also ways of being in the world, of assuming themselves as valid interlocutors and as subjects capable of constructing meaning through words. This experience resignified orality as a cultural, affective and situated practice, giving it back its pedagogical power in a context where it has traditionally been relegated to an accessory place in the curriculum.

In addition, the systematization of the process made it possible to identify key aspects for future implementations: the importance of time and planning for the development of stage activities, the need for teacher training in theatrical resources, and the value of integrating this type of strategy with other components of the language area to favor a more articulate and meaningful teaching.

In short, this experience showed that theater is not only a playful resource, but a powerful way to **humanize language learning**, restore to orality its educational value and allow students, through body and word, to recognize themselves as subjects of knowledge, creation and transformation. Therefore, it is suggested that other teachers consider this strategy within their pedagogical practices, adapting it to their contexts and enriching it from their own professional experience.

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