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TEACHING MYTHOLOGY THROUGH ROLE PLAY AND CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IN AN EFL CLASSROOM

Abstract: Studies conducted in the last decade of the 20th century demonstrated the efficiency of content-based instruction not only concerning EFL learning and content material retention, but also regarding the development of critical thinking skills and overall school success. The present paper aims to determine the benefits of integrating content into EFL teaching, with regard to Greek and Roman mythology, by means of two popular techniques: role play and contemporary songs. A total of 40 high school students at intermediate level of proficiency participated in the study comprising an experimental (=20) and control group (=20). The experimental group underwent a one-month long instruction about mythology through various role play tasks and modern songs containing relevant mythological information. The control group likewise received lessons on mythology, yet in a more traditional setting with the teacher holding lectures. The results confirmed the initial hypothesis that role play and music activities would be more efficient than traditional teacher-fronted instruction.

Keywords: role play, contemporary music, EFL, content-based learning.

Content-Based Learning

Content-based learning (CBL) represents the integration of content and language learning. It includes learning relevant subject-matter by means of authentic material adequate for the needs of learners (Stryker & Leaver 1997). It is suggested that CBL enables actual use of language in real life situations outside the classroom simultaneously stimulating the independence of learners. By learning meaningful content and acquiring skills in a language, students of a

CBL classroom attain a twofold proficiency and are thus more motivated and interested than students studying under different approaches (Davies 2003). However, potential problems may arise due to the fact that learners may disregard the language believing that the subject matter is of primary focus and, furthermore, CBL may be demanding for both teachers and students (Troncale 2005; Stryker & Leaver 1997). Additionally, excessive use of native language during the explanation or practice segments may be a drawback for it decreases the time for TL use. Vocabulary is a fundamental component of the previously mentioned approach, which is why classes must be carefully planned taking vocabulary requirements as well as content suitability into consideration (Gardner 2009). Studies showed favourable effect of CBL on vocabulary retention (Kiji & Kiji 1993), which is why we decided to test the interrelatedness of the two once again in the Serbian EFL context.

Role Play in EFL

A successful language instruction aims at enabling opportunities and activities that might benefit students' overall performance in a target language (TL) especially outside the classroom. Thus numerous renowned authors have been promoting the employment of communicative tasks concentrating on conveying a message, not on form, which will involve students in interaction and develop necessary skills and strategies for further expansion of L2 knowledge (Nunan 1998). Role play, as one of the social communicative activities, is believed to enhance communicative competence for it stimulates the use of a foreign language (FL) in real life situations (Livingston 1983). In the aforementioned technique, students are supposed to use their imagination in assuming another identity and display a range of acquired structures and vocabulary. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that role play increases learners' motivation and involvement, it is enjoyable, enables spontaneous production, development of all four skills and the use of social, empathic and communicative strategies (Van Ments 1999) and informs learners about the aspects of TL culture (Maxwell 1997). However, some of the disadvantages may include discipline issues due to the technique's unpredictability, introverted learners' unwillingness to participate as well as the lack of time for other activities since it is fairly time-consuming (Van Ments 1999).

Music in EFL

Similarly to the use of role play, the employment of contemporary and popular music may be motivating for students, for it provides possibilities for the

expansion of vocabulary, clarification of grammar through authentic language use, pronunciation practice etc. Songs are interesting, pleasant, catchy and thus the relevant aspects of TL they convey are easy to remember. Music likewise decreases anxiety, creates a favourable learning environment and may successfully introduce TL culture to FL students. Hence, the employment of music may have psychological, pedagogical and sociological benefits (Shen 2009). Nevertheless, potential problems with using music may include a lack of clarity and deliberately mistaken pronunciation or structure for special purposes.

Methodology

The Aim of the Study

The present study aims at determining whether integrating mythological content in Serbian EFL curriculum by means of role play and contemporary music can be beneficial in terms of expansion of overall knowledge about mythology and TL vocabulary. We likewise investigate the attitudes of students enrolled in a content-based classroom towards learning about mythology through the aforementioned techniques, although the latter goal was not our primary concern.

Research Questions

Before conducting the actual research, we formulated two fundamental research questions relevant for the study:

- Is the use of role play and contemporary music in a content-based classroom more efficient than traditional teacher-centred techniques, especially regarding teaching mythology?
- Can the employment of the previously mentioned techniques in a content-based classroom (in our case content is concentrated on mythology) benefit EFL learners' vocabulary expansion?

Hypotheses

Bearing the research questions in mind, we based the present study on the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Learning about Greek and Roman mythology is facilitated by the use of role play and contemporary music.

Hypothesis 2: Learning about mythology through role play and contemporary music benefits EFL learners' vocabulary retention.

Participants

A total of 40 high-school students at an intermediate level of proficiency (B1 level CEFR)¹ participated in the study. To measure the proficiency level, the participants took the relevant Cambridge diagnostic test. For the purpose of the study the participants were divided into two equally numbered groups: experimental (=20) and control (=20). Only the experimental group underwent a one-month long instruction about mythology through role play and contemporary music, whereas the control group had traditionally instructed classes also including facts about Roman and Greek mythology

Instruments

To measure the participants' current knowledge of mythology we distributed a multiple-choice and fill-in-the-gap test before the experiment and repeated it after the experiment with both groups (pre-test/post-test). Furthermore, to explore the second hypothesis, we conducted a vocabulary test containing the words covered during the experiment with both groups and compared the results. Again, there was a pre-test prior to the experimental period, and a post-test following the period in question. Finally, in order to gain an insight into students' attitudes towards this particular type of content-based learning, we conducted a five-point Likert scale questionnaire that comprised two parts. The first part regarded general attitudes towards learning mythology, and was done by both groups, whereas the second part contained statements about techniques employed in the experimental group and was thus completed solely by them.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted from February to March 2011/2012 academic year. The participants received course credit for the engagement in 45-minute after school sessions of content-based learning, two days a week, irrespective of their regular English classes. The experimental classes consisted of various role play activities (Appendix 1) in which students usually assumed the roles of certain mythological beings transforming myths into real-time situations. Role play activities were then followed by diverse exercises discussing the topics or characters occurring during the role play as well as the relevant vocabulary. In addition to the previously mentioned techniques, each class included at least one contemporary song (Appendix 2) containing either

¹ Diagnostic tests were taken from the official Common European Framework of Reference website <http://www.examenglish.com/CEFR/B1.htm>

mythological situations or characters. Songs were likewise followed by discussions and exercises including vocabulary explanation and practice.

Statistical Data Processing

To accurately compare results of the two groups before and after the experiment, a t-test was conducted to explore whether there was a statistically significant difference in the performance of the two groups. Percentage counts were determined and compared for the results of the final questionnaire.

Results

Results part 1: Knowledge of Mythology

Results of the pre-test: Accuracy count

Experimental group: mean value 3.15; percentage count 15.75%

Control group: mean value 2.65; percentage count 13.25%

Statistical significance (t-test score)

$p=0.2345$ $t=1.2080$ $df=38$ Standard Error of Difference: 0.414

Standard Deviation: 1.31 SEM: 0.29

The results of the test that preceded the actual experimental period show that the two groups were not significantly different statistics-wise ($p=0.2345$), which means that both groups possessed an approximate level of knowledge of mythology. These results could be supported by the mean values of answers, which was 3.15 for the experimental group, and 2.65 for the control one, or percentage scores (15.75% accurate answers in the experimental group, and 13.25% accuracy in the control group). Although the means were not identical they were similar enough to ensure the validity of the starting point concerning similarity of the two groups participating in the study. Furthermore, we notice a slightly lower achievement within the control group, however, it was not considerable enough for us to consider it a drawback for the control group.

Results of the post-test: Accuracy count

Experimental group: mean value 16.25; percentage count 81.25 %

Control group: mean value 8.30; percentage count 41.5%

Statistical significance (t-test score)

$p<0.0001$ $t=10.9053$ $df=38$ Standard Error of Difference: 0.729

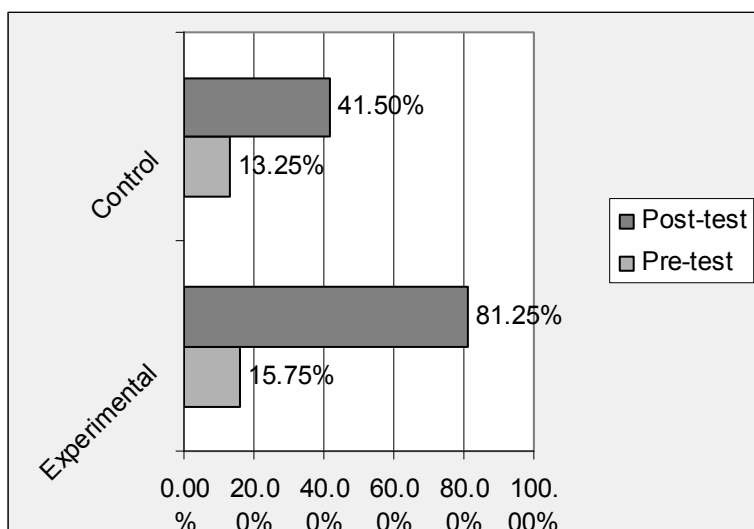
Standard Deviation: 2.67 (E Group) / 1.87 (C Group) SEM: 0.60 (E Group) / 0.42 (Group)

After the experimental period, the performance of the experimental group was almost two times higher than that of the control group, which could be seen from the mean values (experimental group 16.25 and control one 8.30)

or percentage scores (81.25 % for the experimental versus 41.5% for the control group). Judging by the results of t-test, the difference in the performance of the experimental and control group proved extremely statistically significant ($p < 0.0001$), meaning that the improvement in the accuracy percentage was not due to chance but to successful implementation of the two investigated techniques. The results of the performed statistical analysis thus confirmed our first initial hypothesis, that learning about Greek and Roman mythology is facilitated by the use of role play and contemporary music. Hence, the aforementioned techniques may be considered more beneficial than traditional ones in helping students acquire knowledge of mythology.

Diagram Chart for Percentage Scores

For the sake of clarity and conciseness, we present the summarised percentage scores for both groups and both testing periods in a chart that follows.



Results part 2: Vocabulary Retention

Results of the pre-test: Accuracy count

Experimental group: mean value 11.30; percentage count 45.2%

Control group: mean value 10.75; percentage count 43.2%

Statistical significance (t-test score)

$p = 0.4839$ $t = 0.7070$ $df = 38$ Standard Error of Difference: 0.778

Standard Deviation: 2.89 (E Group) / 1.94 (C Group) SEM: 0.65 (E Group) / 0.43 (C Group)

Similarly to the results of pre-test of general mythological knowledge, the results of the initial vocabulary proficiency test for both groups did not appreciably diverge from each other. Mean values (11.30 for experimental versus 10.75 for control) or percentage scores (45.2% for experimental and 43.2% for control) for both groups show that both groups had almost the same level of relevant vocabulary knowledge and could thus participate in the experiment on equal terms. Following the t-test calculations, there was no significant statistical difference ($p=0.4839$) between the two groups which ensured the validity of the choice of groups. Although there was again a slightly lower test score on the part of the control group, it was not significant enough to affect post-experiment level of attainment concerning the control group.

Results of the post-test: Accuracy count

Experimental group: mean value 20.35; percentage count 79.4 %

Control group: mean value 12.00; percentage count 48%

Statistical significance (t-test score)

$p<0.0001$ $t=11.8540$ $df=38$ Standard Error of Difference: 0.704

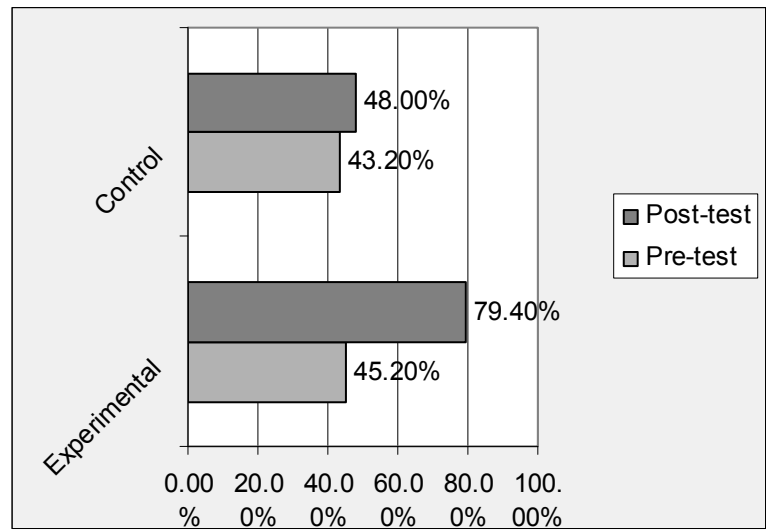
Standard Deviation: 2.28 (E Group) / 2.18 (C Group) SEM: 0.51 (E Group) / 0.49 (C Group)

The results of the post-test for vocabulary retention were more favourable for the experimental group than the control one (again almost two times better performance on the part of the experimental group - mean value 20.35 (79.40%) versus 12.00 for the control group (43.20%)). T-test scores showed that the difference between the two groups was statistically extremely significant ($p<0.0001$), which means that the improvement in vocabulary production with the experimental group was not accidental, but a result of consistent application of the two studied techniques and content-based learning. Hence, our initial hypothesis that learning about mythology through role play and contemporary music can enhance EFL learners' vocabulary retention was likewise confirmed. Thus, we may conclude that carefully structured and persistent implementation of role play and contemporary music may assist not only successful acquisition of content, in our case mythology, but also in retention of relevant vocabulary. Judging by the pre-/post-test scores, the control group displayed considerable improvement in content acquisition (28.25%) when compared to vocabulary retention (4.80%), which could be explained by the fact that students are generally accustomed to learning content in traditional fashion, i.e. without the employment of non-conventional techniques. Furthermore, the fact that the results of vocabulary retention were also less successful than content acquisition with the experimental group, could be justified by the previously mentioned potential problem of content-based

learning. Namely, students may have predominantly focused their attention upon content learning and consequently disregarded the language part of content-based lessons, which is why their performance was at a higher level concerning mythological knowledge.

Diagram Chart for Percentage Scores

Once again, for the sake of clarity and conciseness, we present the summarised percentage scores for both groups and both testing periods in the chart below.



Results part 3: Questionnaire

Table 1: Questions answered by both groups (Experimental (E), Control (C) (%))

Statements		Strongly agree		Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	Learning about Roman and Greek mythology is enjoyable.	E	10 (50%)	5 (25%)		5 (25%)	
		C	2 (10%)	3 (15%)		12 (60%)	3 (15%)
2.	An educated person needs knowledge about different mythologies.	E	4 (20%)	10 (50%)	5 (25%)	1 (5%)	
		C		5 (25%)	9 (45%)	6 (30%)	
3.	Integrating lessons about mythology in English classes can make the classes more interesting.	E		11 (55%)	4 (20%)	5 (25%)	
		C		2 (10%)	6 (30%)	5 (25%)	7 (35%)
4.	Stories about mythological beings can be interesting.	E	7 (35%)	5 (25%)	3 (15%)	5 (25%)	
		C		4 (20%)	4 (20%)	8 (40%)	4 (20%)
5.	Schools should offer mythology as one of the optional subjects.	E		3 (15%)	3 (15%)	12 (60%)	2 (10%)
		C			1 (5%)	5 (25%)	14 (70%)
6.	Learning about mythology is unnecessary and boring.	E		4 (20%)	4 (20%)	7 (35%)	5 (25%)
		C	10 (50%)	5 (25%)		3 (15%)	2 (10%)
7.	Learning about mythology is demanding.	E	7 (35%)	5 (25%)		2 (10%)	6 (30%)
		C	12 (60%)	8 (40%)			
8.	The knowledge of the morals of mythological stories can be applied to real-life situations.	E	15 (75%)	5 (25%)			
		C	2 (10%)	5 (25%)		12 (60%)	1 (5%)

To examine the level of motivation and investigate students' attitudes towards incorporating mythological content into FL learning, we conducted a questionnaire after the experimental period. The results of the questionnaire done by both groups show that the majority (75%) of members of the experimental group (75%) find learning about Roman and Greek mythology enjoyable and think that it should be incorporated in EFL lessons hence making them more interesting (55%), whereas those belonging to control group mostly disagree (75%) when it comes to enjoying and only 10% believe that including mythology in an EFL curriculum is interesting. Likewise, 70% of the experimental group are of the opinion that an educated person needs knowledge about different mythologies, while merely one quarter of the control group believes so. However, even though a majority of the experimental group (60%) state that stories about mythological beings can be interesting, they would not like mythology to be offered as an optional subject in schools (70%). 60% of the control group does not even consider mythological stories interesting and, correspondingly, would not like mythology to be offered as a school subject (95%). A possible explanation may lie in the fact that both experimental (60%) and control group (100%) claim that learning mythology is demanding, while the control group simultaneously finds it uninteresting and boring (75%). Members of the experimental group predominantly disagree (70%) and they all state that knowledge of the morals of mythological stories can be applied to real-life situations, whereas merely 35% of the control group think so.

Table 2: Questions answered by experimental group only

Statements		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	I enjoyed learning about the lives of Roman and Greek gods and goddesses.	5 (25%)	7 (35%)	3 (15%)	4 (20%)	1 (5%)
2.	Assuming the roles of mythological beings makes learning about them easier.	10 (50%)	6 (30%)		4 (20%)	
3.	Listening to songs about mythological beings makes remembering easier.	2 (10%)	8 (40%)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)	
4.	Listening to songs made me feel relaxed and less intimidated to speak about mythological beings.	16 (80%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)		
5.	Role play with mythological content made me feel confident and relaxed.		11 (55%)	4 (20%)	5 (25%)	
6.	Role play and music activities are more demanding than the ones I am used to.		3 (15%)		5 (25%)	12 (60%)
7.	Role play and songs help me remember English words.	16 (80%)	4 (20%)			
8.	I would like to learn more about different mythologies.	10 (50%)	8 (40%)		2 (10%)	

Regarding the attitudes of the group that underwent classes with role play and contemporary music activities, the majority (60%) enjoyed learning about the lives of ancient gods and goddesses, which points to the effect these techniques had on making the lessons more interesting and pleasurable. Additionally, 80% believe that role play activities facilitate learning and 50% think that music may do so. Furthermore, the vast majority (90%) stated that music had made them feel relaxed and less intimidated to speak about mythological beings, and they also preponderantly claimed (55%) that role play had made them feel confident and relaxed. They likewise believe that the previously mentioned activities help them remember English words (100%) and 90% would like to learn more about different mythologies.

Conclusion

After a brief account of the recently conducted studies closely related to the issues dealt with in the present paper, the results of the conducted research were presented and elaborated on. Our initial concern was to investigate whether two techniques known as role play and contemporary music can benefit students' retention of mythological content as well as TL vocabulary. The results of the research supported by statistical analysis showed that learning about Greek and Roman mythology was facilitated by the use of the investigated techniques. Furthermore, the results demonstrated significant vocabulary retention enhancement. Thus both our original hypotheses were confirmed and we may conclude that the current study successfully answered its initial research questions.

Judging by the results of the questionnaire, we dare say that implementing role play and contemporary music when teaching mythology within the content-based learning in EFL can be beneficial not only regarding actual performance, but in terms of motivation and increasing confidence as well as the creation of positive and enjoyable classroom atmosphere.

Although the presented research was preliminary in nature and consequently restricted by certain limitations predominantly concerning the number of participants and the length of time invested in the training, it may serve as a cornerstone for future research and promote the increased employment of content-based learning in daily Serbian EFL instruction.

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Appendix 1

Role Play Examples

Icarus and Daedalus

Roles: Homer, and ancient Greek epic poet

Daedalus

Icarus

Audience

Icarus and Daedalus are telling their story to Homer, who is asking various questions about the event from Greek mythology. The audience watches and writes down the most important facts on which they will base their essays.

Theseus and the Minotaur

Roles: Theseus

Minotaur

Audience

The whole class except the roles of Theseus and the Minotaur get the story in advance to become familiar with it. The two characters receive the text about the famous mythological story in advance to prepare, as well, but their story is incorrect. As they act it out, the audience corrects and later reports the corrections.

Narcissus

Roles: Narcissus, three roles

Director, three roles

Costume designer, three roles

Jury

The whole class gets the story about Narcissus. The class is divided into groups, they are supposed to recreate the story about Narcissus as a dramatic monologue. The jury decides what the best performance is based on truthfulness and dramatic elements.

Appendix 2

Songs containing mythological facts

Led Zeppelin – Achilles Last Stand (Greek; reference to the hero of the Trojan War)

Aphrodite – Kylie Minogue (Greek; reference to the goddess of love and beauty)

Daedalus – Thrice (Greek; reference to the skilful craftsmen)

God of Wine – Third Eye Blind (Greek; reference to Dionysus)

Sophia – Laura Marling (Greek; reference to the goddess of wisdom)

Troy – Sinead O'Connor (Greek; reference to the city of Troy)

Phoenix – Wishbone Ash (Greek; reference to the bird that rises from the ashes)

Zephyrus – Bloc Party (Greek; reference to the god of west wind)

Wrapped Around Your Finger – The Police (Greek; reference to sea monsters)

Venus – The Shocking Blue (Roman; reference to the goddess of love and beauty)

Possible questions for discussion (summarised)

What are the characters or events in the song you listened to?

What mythology are they derived from?
Is there a similar story in Greek/Roman mythology?
What is the moral of the story?
If you had been in shoes, what would you have done?
Have you heard about a similar event in modern history or in your neighbourhood?

Даница М. Јеротијевић

Настава митологије кроз игру улога и савремену музику у учионици где се енглески учи као страни језик

Сажетак: У последњој деценији двадесетог века спроведене су студије које су показале значај укључивања разноврсног наставног садржаја у часове енглеског језика, и то не само по питању учења самог језика и памћења датог садржаја, већ и за развој критичког мишљења и општег успеха у школи. У раду се испитују предности укључивања наставног садржаја, у нашем случају грчке и римске митологије, у наставу енглеског језика као страног, и то уз помоћ две популарне дидактичке технике, *играње улога* и *савремену музику*. Укупно 40 средњошколаца на средњем нивоу постигнућа учествовало је у истраживању, подељени у две групе: експерименталну (=20) и контролну (=20). Експериментална група је месец дана имала предавања о митологији, и то кроз активности попут играње улога и кроз савремене песме које говоре о релевантном митолошком садржају. Контролна група је такође имала наставу везану за митологију, али су часови држани на традиционалнији начин, уз наставника који је држао предавања *ex cathedra*. Резултати су потврдили иницијалну хипотезу да ће настава у којој се користе претходно поменуте технике бити успешнија од традиционалних предавања.

Кључне речи: митологија, савремена музика, играње улога, настава страног језика.

