

## Overcoming Anxiety in Adult Migrants' Language Learning by Means of Process Drama

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how drama activities can provide an opportunity for adult migrants<sup>1</sup> to develop their competence in the language of the host community, in this case Italian, in a protected and anxiety-free space. Language anxiety has been classified as a specific feeling of apprehension due to the risks language learners may be required to take during the learning process, and which they may perceive as threatening. When it is adult migrants who are engaged in the learning of a new language, such anxiety might easily be aroused by specific socio-cultural factors, such as power relationships, the awareness of belonging to a minority, and the need to use an unknown language to demonstrate their skills. The article will describe how the Process Drama approach – which includes drama-based activities that can be adapted to the needs and preferences of learners – can be used to enable migrants to gain greater self-confidence in their foreign language knowledge and skills. The task-based nature of Process Drama engages learners through the pleasure of creation, self-expression and discovery, and promotes interaction and cooperation among the members of the group. The paper includes observations gathered in the field: it will describe how Process Drama activities were adopted during two workshops for migrants in the city of Padova in northern Italy, conducted in 2018 and early 2019. The workshops were facilitated by the authors themselves and the data analyzed consists of teacher logs and focus group discussions.<sup>2</sup>

### Keywords

Language anxiety, Process Drama, migration, Italian as a second language, adult learners

### Introduction

The starting point for this study is the well-documented need for migrants to learn the language(s) of their new countries of residence so as to facilitate their inclusion in them. As highlighted by Li (2013) in her review of migrants' language acquisition, "the ability to speak and write in the target language in the host culture is a basic step to enable them to participate in the life of the host culture, further their education, get a job, obtain health care and other social services" (p. 271). In addition, Smith

(2016) reminds us that in the case of forced migration, a lack of knowledge of the language and the culture of the host community can lead to a sense of powerlessness. As well as formal language learning, it is important for migrants to have opportunities to engage in authentic informal communicative events, so as to develop their language skills. Yet as pointed out by Dalziel and Piazzoli (2019), in the case of refugees and asylum seekers, informal interaction may be restricted to service encounters and limited in terms of input, output and negotiation of meaning. This is sadly true of

Italy, where at the time of writing the political climate is not one which fosters dialogue between newcomers and the host community. In fact, one of the participants in the workshops described in this article, a young female Nigerian asylum-seeker, complained of the lack of Italian peers with whom she could engage in informal conversation. On the basis of the findings of previous studies (see for example Balfour, Bundy, Burton, Dunn, & Woodrow, 2015), the authors felt that the Process Drama approach could attempt to bridge this gap, by enabling learners to explore language through interaction and discovery. An opportunity to explore this hypothesis arose when the authors were approached by a local NGO to conduct a series of sessions in which drama activities would be used to enhance language acquisition in migrant women. The decision to focus this study on the issue of language anxiety was taken in view of the authors' observations of workshop participants and with reference to previous work on drama approaches and anxiety (Piazzoli, 2011). Despite being a small-scale project, the initial findings could provide some valuable insights into the benefits of adopting drama approaches in migrant language education.

### **Foreign Language Anxiety**

Considering languages as dynamic systems constantly and unpredictably perturbed by several variables (De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Lowie, 2012), foreign language anxiety (FLA) has often been taken into consideration as one of these variables, in order to understand how second-language (L2) students' learning paths may be hampered by anxiety-provoking situations. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) include FLA in the category of specific anxiety reactions: this kind of apprehension is triggered when learners perceive their competence as communicators threatened, which leads "to

reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (p. 128).

Among the numerous factors which may impact on second language students, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety have been underlined (Horwitz et al., 1986). Other factors which have been correlated with FLA are: perfectionism, self-impression, low self-esteem, low emotional-intelligence, the level of familiarity between the interlocutors, age, frequency of use, and even the number of languages learners know (Foss & Reitzel, 1988; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; Dewaele, 2017).

However, it is inadvisable to look for a clear cause-effect connection between anxiety and what may be considered its causal factors. Moreover, considering relaxation and anxiety as states and not as traits, the anxious student may feel temporarily relaxed during undemanding and anxiety-free language activities, and even those students who usually do not feel anxious when speaking the foreign language may develop a temporary state of apprehension if asked to speak in stressful conditions (Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Meza, 2014). This leads to the need to deal with anxiety in accordance with "ecological linguistics" (van Lier, 2004), in other words considering it as an element that influences language learning through an unpredictable and non-linear process, where causes, consequences and anxiety itself merge in a vicious circle (MacIntyre, 2017).

Language anxiety has often been observed within the language classroom; however, some authors have also explored how this kind of apprehension may influence the life of migrants. On the one hand, migrants may feel the same apprehension as any anxious student when they are asked to speak the language of the

country in which they have settled, not only due to language competence, but also because of possible “psychological barriers” (Wang, 1999). On the other hand, migrants’ situations differ from those of foreign language students: the difficulties of using the non-native language are not confined to the classroom, since the language is a necessary tool “to demonstrate their [immigrants’] skills and abilities to the host community” (Plutzer & Ritter, 2008, p. 9). When migrants have difficulties with the host country’s language, this will have consequences in their daily lives – in education, in finding a job, in creating relationships with the members of the community, and in being accepted (Wang, 1999; Garcia, Ford, & Casey, 2017; Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018).

Due to the variety of situations that can be labelled migrant contexts, some authors decided to analyze the attitude towards the target language of specific groups of migrants. Wang (1999), for example, working with a group of Mandarin speaking women who had moved to Canada, analyzed their experiences with English language. The study showed that these women did not find it difficult to study the language, its grammar and vocabulary on their own, but to use it in front of others – in particular in spoken interaction. Garcia, Ford and Casey (2017) analyzed whether and how the context, the individual biographical background (age, gender, level of education), self-rated competence, and personality factors influenced language anxiety during oral communication. After observing a group of Latin-American migrants (whose first language was Spanish) to Australia, and their behavior when speaking English, the authors claimed that language anxiety varies depending both on the interlocutor, the means of communication, the context, and the time one has spent in the host country.

Learners’ excessive concerns about the risk of making mistakes, looking silly and being negatively evaluated may lead them to be unfocused and not so proficient (Eyseck, 1979, in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Therefore, it is important for the learning process to take place in a relaxed and anxiety-free environment, where students can totally benefit from the activity. Only when the learner feels safe can he/she practice the language and test his/her knowledge accepting corrections as feedback to improve (Hashemi, 2011; Ur, 1996, in Ellis & Shintani, 2014). When students do not feel at ease within the classroom, they often choose to avoid possible uncomfortable feelings and a sense of awkwardness by not speaking: indeed, although they may receive positive feedback, which would contribute to their self-confidence, anxious students are more focused on the risk of losing their face in front of their peers and teachers (Tsui, 1996, in Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

### **Drama-based Language Learning**

Drama has been seen to be a valuable tool in the language classroom in many ways: it involves students in their own learning process, stimulating their mind, body, emotional sphere and creativity (Maley & Duff, 1978; Piazzoli, 2018; O’Neill, 1995). There are many different activities that can be borrowed from actors’ practice, such as: mime, role-play, storytelling, dramatization, narration, hot seating, still images, interviews, thought-tracking, simulations, tunnel of decision (Davies, 1990; Owens & Barber, 2001). These activities may be adapted not only to different spheres of language learning – such as grammar, literature, or vocabulary (Chang, 2011; Schewe, 2013) – but also to the students’ “means of acquiring information” (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993, p. 334) and learning preferences. Drama enables students and teachers to explore the same concept through different channels and codes,

visual, verbal, kinesthetic, or affective (Ashton-Hay, 2005; Chang, 2011).

Practitioners adopting drama activities strive to make the classroom a relaxed environment so as to enable students to practice the second language without being hampered by affective barriers (Carson, 2012; Piazzoli, 2011; Sharp, 2014). Along with the excessive fear of making mistakes, shyness is also a factor that can fuel language anxiety (Athimoolam, 2013). Drama-based preparatory activities can help students to become used to expressing themselves in front of others through their voice and body (Ntelioglou, 2011). Indeed, like public speaking, drama requires students to stand in front of others and to communicate with an “audience”. Tableaux and mime (Davies, 1990), for example, enable students to focus on their body, face and movements, without requiring them to deal with the problem of speaking the foreign language. Through this kind of activity, students’ language anxiety may be lowered because they are able to recognize that communicative competence does not depend only on language, and that they can adopt non-linguistic means of expression (Liu, 2002). Drama-based activities are also of value because many of them imply that students work in small groups, encouraging collaboration and interaction. It may be useful to spend some time enabling students to know and trust each other, through games that involve their names, hobbies, and experiences, and also through activities requiring them to work as a team (Swale, 2009). Working together to reach a common goal creates a community atmosphere within the classroom, where even the shiest student can feel at ease and willing to actively take part in the activity.

Process Drama is an approach that developed from Drama in Education and exploits drama-based activities and negotiation

between the members of the class to practice the foreign language instead of aiming at the creation of a final performance (Schewe, 2013; Piazzoli, 2018). In this approach, the facilitator provides the learners with input as the starting point of an activity, but then it is up to the students to bring their knowledge, skills and experiences into play (Maley & Duff, 1978; O’Neill & Lambert, 1982; Kao & O’Neill, 1998, in Stinson & Freebody, 2006). Students acquire authorship and responsibility for their own learning experience, and when the whole class actively contributes to the activity, the result is an energized learning moment (van Lier, 2008). In Process Drama, students have the chance to access fictional times, places, roles, and situations, just as actors on the stage (O’Neill, 1995). In order to help students in accepting the suspension of disbelief and in entering the fictional world, it may be useful to introduce it through an appropriate pre-text (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019; O’Toole, 2008; O’Neill, 1995), which is the input to be modified and developed through negotiation. Another way to help the students in accepting the fiction is to introduce and/or develop it through the device of the teacher-in-role (O’Neill, 1995). This implies that the teacher takes on a fictional role to involve students more directly in the make-believe, which is personified by a character that students can see, touch and speak with (Pheasant, 2015). This lowers affective barriers by reversing the usual teacher-student relationship, since students are usually given power, knowledge and control, while the teacher becomes the one needing help (Stinson & Freebody, 2006).

The creation of a fictional world has a number of benefits. Firstly, students can experience situations that they would not have the chance to do so otherwise, providing not only a deeper understanding of topics and language uses, but also the opportunity to

express themselves in different contexts (Schewe, 1998). This may fill the gap between the language handled within the classroom and its actual use, and enable students to practice vocabulary and linguistic structures without the negative consequences that linguistic mistakes and misunderstandings may have in real life (Chang, 2011; Stinson & Freebody, 2006). Secondly, the fictional character the learner plays during drama can also be worn as a mask, which makes students feel safe (Piazzoli, 2011). Therefore, they are enabled to take risks without fearing the consequences, since possible negative evaluation or criticism would fall on the fictional character, not on the student (Stern, 1980; Stinson & Freebody, 2006). Finally, since drama arouses tension, enthusiasm, enjoyment, sympathy and other emotions, it can meaningfully involve students in the learning activity, foster them to put aside foreign language anxiety to give voice to their feelings and creativity (Schewe, 1998; Pheasant, 2015; Stern, 1980).

### **Case Study: from here and there to Padova**

This section will report on some observations, in the form of teacher logs, of two workshops that took place in Padova, Italy, in October – November 2018, and in March – May 2019. The workshops were promoted by the NGO *Razzismo Stop*, organized by the authors, and aimed to help migrants to Italy to learn and practice Italian through Process Drama. The section will give an overview of the make-up of the groups, of the structure of the workshops, and of some of the activities conducted. It will also report on some incidents that may foster reflection on the effect foreign language anxiety can have on the individual, and on how Process Drama activities could be used to make the anxious learner feel that he/she is in a safe environment. What follows is the result of the

observations that the facilitators made upon the behavior of the participants during their workshop, and recorded in their logs, of the comments and doubts the participants raised during the activities, and of the final focus group interview the participants took part in during the last meeting of the first workshop – the authors thus adopted a qualitative research method (Merriam, 2009).

The first group met once a week for six weeks, and each meeting lasted about three hours. It was intended only for women, since the purpose was to create a safe environment where women with little knowledge of Italian could practice and learn it without feeling embarrassed, which would be encouraged also by the drama-based approach that would be adopted. On the other hand, the March-May group included men and women – and even one school-aged student – who met for seven weeks, two hours per week. In both cases, no limits on language knowledge were set, and it was difficult to predict who and how many people would come. Moreover, after the first few meetings, it became clear that the group would not always be the same, and due to this continual change of participants, it was necessary to create a series of workshops that could be completed within each meeting. Furthermore, the activities were planned by taking into consideration that they would possibly need to be modified during the execution of the workshop itself, depending on the number of participants and their language level.

Throughout the first workshop 17 different women took part in the activities, from a minimum of three to a maximum of seven people per meeting; most of them were from Nigeria, the others from Ghana, Morocco, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Brazil, Slovenia, and Moldova. During the second course of workshops 19 different people came to at least one meeting,

from a minimum of two to a maximum of fifteen (during the first meeting); they were originally from Brazil, Cuba, Morocco, Nigeria, Afghanistan, India, Russia, Burkina Faso, Syria and Lebanon. The groups were made up of different categories of migrants: refugees, asylum seekers, international students and economic migrants. English was often used as a lingua franca, both to explain the activities, and also among the participants when they needed to discuss and create brief scenes; however, not all of them spoke English, which sometimes created communication problems. As the groups were made up of different learners most of the time, it was necessary to start each meeting with some simple warm-up and team-building exercises, to move then step by step into the actual Process Drama activity. Here are some examples of the steps followed during most of the meetings.

**Warming Up.** Speaking in a foreign language, moving and pretending to be someone else in front of strangers may be highly demanding (Schumann, 1975; Ntelioglou, 2011); therefore, the learners were first asked to complete activities which were simple both in terms of language, movement and acting, and which would enable them to get to know each other. For example, they were asked to say their names and to make a little movement, to be copied by the other participants, or they were introduced to the activity Pass the face, which consists in thinking about an emotion and “passing” it to the next person who has to imitate it. Another exercise used was the Mirror game: the learners were asked to choose a partner and to imitate first his/her movement, and then to repeat exactly what he/she was saying. Then, to encourage cooperation among the learners, they were invited to complete another leader-follower activity, where the followers would close their eyes and let the partners lead them first by the shoulders, then

by holding their hands and finally using only the voice.

**Focus on Language.** Since some of the participants were total beginners, some exercises aimed at providing them with the vocabulary they needed in the following activities. *The Puzzled man* (Figure 1) helped them to revise and learn the parts of the body by collaborating to understand how to complete the image. We also used Italian songs, whose words had been introduced using cards to link meanings and images, and Italian idioms (Figure 2), which the participants analyzed and compared with similar idioms in their own languages.



**Figure 1:** The Puzzled Man (property of authors)



**Figure 2:** Italian idioms (property of authors)

**Pre-text.** The aim of this stage of the drama is to give learners some inspiration to create and enter the fictional world where the actual drama will take place (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019). Examples of pre-texts that can be used are photographs, pictures, songs or short videos (Piazzoli, 2018). The participants were often asked to describe a picture and to make guesses about its context.

**Towards the Drama.** Starting from the pre-text, learners were asked to create tableaux about a word, a situation, or a topic. They were given time to discuss how to create the silent, motionless scene, and about the role of each member of the group. After showing it to the other learners, they were asked to add movements (*mime*), and only in the following step could the fictional characters also speak. In this way it was

easier to create a scene, because learners were guided step by step; moreover, the temporary audience was invited to guess the roles and the intentions of the characters, and to ask for clarifications. We also used *hot seating* to help learners to create credible and precise fictional characters and to enter their roles: first, they were asked to write some details about the character – name, age, job skills, dream job – and then to answer some questions while pretending to be him/her.

**Teacher in Role.** There was another tool that was often used to involve the learners in the drama: the *teacher in role* (O'Neill, 1995): the facilitators played the role of people needing help, while the learners took on the role of the experts who could solve the problem. During one session, one of the facilitators pretended to be a girl who had lost her voice and who was supposed to sing at her sister's wedding, and the learners were asked first to give her advice to get her voice back, and then to create the scenes of the wedding, and finally to sing with her.

**Reflection.** The language and drama activities alternated with moments of reflection on the activities that had been completed, and on the language that had been used during the exercises, so that learners had the chance to ask for clarification or to focus on particular linguistic items. For example, during a semi-improvised scene, one of the learners used the Italian idiom “In bocca al lupo” [Break a leg], but many of the others did not know the meaning, so it was explained during the following reflection activity.

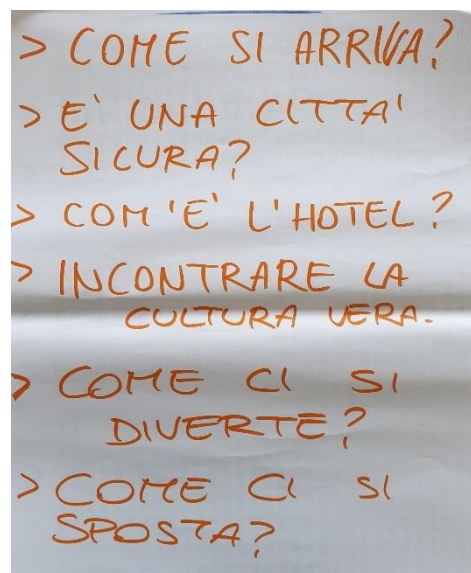
To make the approach clear to the reader, we will now describe an entire session from the March-May circle of workshops, when the group was entirely made up of men: Ro. (Brazil), D. and M. (Nigeria), Y. (Burkina-Faso), and Fr. (Afghanistan).

**The Mirror Game as a Warm-up.** Participant Y. was often reticent both to talk and to take part in the activities, but being in a pair with participant Ro. – who was not only about the same age but also very friendly with Y. – made him highly involved when asked to copy/lead the movements of Ro., although he found it difficult to repeat his words.

**Group Building - Pre-text.** The members of the group were asked to talk for a few minutes about their birthplaces, first in their own language and then in Italian. This activity gave the chance to hear the voice even of the most silent among them. However, Y. and D. did not use their actual native language, but rather their second, namely French and English; furthermore, Fr. preferred to describe his country directly in Italian, and when the group asked him to say something in Farsi – his mother tongue – he only whispered a short sentence, looking highly embarrassed. This reaction from participant Fr. made the facilitators reflect upon how important it is to convey the message that learning the target language is not meant to substitute the native one, since it is part of what a person is, of the *private self* (Piazzoli, 2011).

**Language.** At this point the group was invited to reflect upon the information they may need when traveling, and the

questions they might ask a person organizing a trip: for example, “How do you get there?”, “Is it a safe city?”, “What is the hotel like?” Ro., M. and Fr. contributed actively during this step, helped by the fact that they had the vocabulary that was necessary to ask the questions. D. instead needed to be encouraged to speak, and he only did so in English. However, it is worth noting that enabling him to actively contribute to the list making helped him to become more involved in the following drama activity, although he spoke little Italian. Their suggested questions were written down by the facilitator (Figure 4), so that the participants could easily remember them during the following activity, and thus act as scaffolding, so as to minimize anxiety.



**Figure 4:** Questions about trip

**Teacher in role.** At this point, one facilitator made an excuse to leave the room



and the group was told that they would soon meet a travel agent, since they had won a trip. After a while, the facilitator came back disguised as the travel agent. While most of the participants had already seen the *teacher in role* approach, Fr. was experiencing it for the first time, and was amused and involved. However, no one broke the fictionality, and without the need to introduce it, the whole group immediately entered the fictional situation. They started asking questions about the trip, discovering that we would go to Rio de Janeiro, which is the birthplace of participant Ro.

**The Drama.** First the participants were invited to create some tableaux or simple scenes about the arrival in Rio and then the problem to solve was introduced: the other facilitator – playing the role of one of the group traveling – got lost, and the other members of the group had to think of how to find her. The participants showed a high level of involvement – which often means low level of language anxiety – in particular because of the constant tension due to the clash between fiction and reality (Piazzoli, 2018). For example, at a certain point the facilitator playing the lost girl changed her role into that of the police woman asking the group to describe the missing person. The final step consisted to have a group discussion discussing as a group (out of the fictional world) where the girl had gone, and creating a complete scene with movements and dialogues. All of these elements – the involvement of the learners’ private lives, surprise, problems to solve and tension – make the

learning at the same time unpredictable and meaningful, less easy to control by the facilitator, but more useful to the learners (O’Neil & Lambert, 1982; Maley & Duff, 1978).

### Signs of Anxiety

As recorded in the teacher logs, in both workshops, there were some participants who apparently showed little or even no signs of anxiety, and who took part actively in the proposed exercises even if their level of Italian was low. However, as this article aims to explore language anxiety and how drama-based activities may help learners overcome it, the observations will mainly focus on the participants who appeared to be anxious.

During the very first meeting of the first workshop, most of the women explained that the greatest difficulty for them was understanding when Italians speak. J. and B. (Nigeria) and M. (Pakistan) did not answer the facilitators’ questions but only nodded. Unlike other participants with little knowledge of the Italian language, they did not exploit the meeting as a chance to practice the language, but preferred to keep silent, even though one of them (participant J.) during an informal chat complained about the lack of interaction with Italians in her everyday life. It soon became clear that the reticence to speak was not only due to lack of linguistic knowledge. Some of the participants, for example, appeared to feel under pressure even when asked to say their name, and tried to mask it by smiling or saying it in a whisper, as if they feared to say it incorrectly.

A common characteristic shared by most of the women who were reluctant to take part in the activities was that of keeping their bags close to them, as if to protect themselves from an external threat. The fact was observed the first time when F. arrived and sat down by holding her bag close to her body for the whole first part of the meeting; this tendency was observed several times, and those women holding their bags close turned out to be those less willing to speak. Another sign of possible anxiety noted by the facilitators in their logs, revealed for example by on the part of J. (Nigeria), was whispering. From the first meeting she appeared willing to practice Italian, but at the same time to be not very self-confident about her linguistic competence. Indeed, whenever she tried to say a word or a short sentence – for example during the task of guessing what the other group was miming – she said half of it in a low voice, and completed it only when receiving confirmation from the facilitators.

On the other hand, B. (Nigeria) tried to cover her embarrassment by laughing nervously. At first she seemed to be sceptical about the approach, and whenever she was asked to do or to say something she reacted by showing – or saying – she did not understand the instructions. Furthermore, when the task was clear – for example when the participants were asked to say their names – she said her name while laughing and glancing nervously at J., maybe in search of complicity since she was clearly embarrassed. In some cases, the lack of a common lingua franca – for example with M. (Pakistan), F. (Morocco) and Y. (Burkina

Faso) – made it difficult to understand whether the lack of participation of the learners was due to the problems in understanding instructions, to shyness or to actual language anxiety. Moreover, since many of the participants with a beginner level of Italian only came once, it was not possible to understand the reasons behind such behavior.

### **Signs of Relaxation**

This section will report on some examples showing how drama-based activities created a relaxed atmosphere that enabled even the hesitant participants to relax and benefit from the exercises. The preparatory activities proved to be useful both to help the facilitator in understanding the participants' levels of language, and the learners in becoming accustomed to the unconventional learning approach. To this end, drama-based activities requiring movements and creativity were often alternated with moments of reflection, discussion or explanation where the participants were seated. M. (Pakistan) and F. (Morocco) provided examples of how high foreign language anxiety can be overcome. They had a beginner level of Italian, and neither of them spoke English, which made it difficult both to explain the activities and to build up mutual trust. However, simple undemanding activities proved to be useful to engage the participants during the workshop. In the first meeting, during an activity to get to know each other, the participants were asked to say their names by making gestures, so that the other members of the

group could repeat both the name and the gesture. When it came M.'s turn, she just smiled and after a few seconds of complete silence opened her arms as a sign of surrender since she had not understood what to do; however, the rest of the group took that as her gesture, and repeated it saying her name, a reaction that led her to smile – sincerely this time – probably because she understood she had completed the task although she had not understood the instructions.

Similarly, after being asked to complete a simple task, F. seemed to relax. During a preparatory activity, she was asked to mime the word “occhi” [eyes]; as she did not speak English, the facilitators showed her what to do. First, she did not understand and just stood up in front of the others, but then we showed her again what to do and she completed the task. The second time we asked her to mime “sorriso” [smile]: this time she already knew what to do and when she saw that she could complete the activity, a genuine smile of satisfaction substituted the fictional one. The warm-up activities also turned out to be useful because they were sometimes challenging. For example, the simple games requiring learners to remember others' names enabled the newcomers both to know each other and to relax – even the group of women holding their bags tight appeared to lower their guard during this phase. Indeed, when someone forgets a name, often tension arises and is then released through laughs or smiles.

Curiosity is also a good tool to lower affective barriers. The collection of words

used in different languages to say “fuoco” [fire] seemed to animate and involve the participants, who were asked to utter the word in their own language. Indeed, by collecting the words used in different languages to refer to fire, they had the chance not only to feel that their native culture and language had the same importance as the target one, but also to contribute actively to the activity, and to become curious about other languages. During the second course something similar happened when Ro. (Brazil) was describing Rio de Janeiro, and all the others started using Italian to collect more information about it because sincerely interested in knowing more about that city. Probably, this kind of activity lowers affective barriers because the learners feel like they are included in the learning process; for example, Fr. (Afghanistan) demonstrated a willingness in helping the facilitator by explaining some language rules of Italian to those with more limited knowledge, taking on the role of the expert, and adding to the sense of community in the group (Piazzoli, 2011).

Observing J. and B. – in the first workshop – the facilitators noted that that the group appeared to be influencing the individual's level of anxiety (Athimoolam, 2013). First, B. started managing to complete the tasks without laughing when she was not in the spotlight. B.'s reserve was mostly due to the presence of people she did not know and to the exposure of her lack of knowledge of Italian in front of them. This speculation results from witnessing her active participation and numerous attempts

to use Italian language throughout most of the activities of the second meeting, where only two other participants were present. Indeed, it was still possible to notice a difference: she forgot her embarrassment during the activities requiring participants to practice vocabulary related to the family and parts of the body, even if this required making movements and speaking Italian, but when she was asked to answer simple questions in Italian, in a “hot seat” activity, she appeared to be very anxious and started laughing again, although both questions and answers had been prepared in advance. However, after overcoming her panic, she found the courage to run the risk, and successfully completed the task, this time without glancing at J. but at the facilitators, as if she had been looking for confirmation about the language instead of for complicity.

The facilitators noted that participant J. appeared to be more willing to take part in the activities when working in small groups, rather than speaking in front of the whole class; she also appeared more self-confident when she had time to prepare her utterances in advance. For example, during the planning of a short scene, she proposed the lines “Mi piace” [I like it] or “Andiamo a ballare” [Let’s go to dance]. However, during the third meeting, when the level of Italian of most of the new participants was higher than that of J., she became silent, since the activities became increasingly demanding: like the other women with a lower knowledge of Italian language, J. seemed eclipsed by those who could answer the questions faster and with a wider range of vocabulary. It became

necessary to address questions explicitly to J. to encourage her to speak and not to let the others answer before she could do so.

The final step of most of the meetings was the creation of a short partly-planned scene where both the facilitators and the participants played roles. It was often introduced by the teacher-in-role activity described above, which always arouses surprise among the learners when they see the teacher becoming a character in the story for the first time. Indeed, through a pre-text, a mystery or a problem to be solved was introduced and students were asked to discuss how to solve the problem and to create a scene about it. The tension created through these devices involved the learners and made them willing to speak Italian in order to take part in the problem solving component of the activity. Moreover, tension was also aroused by the contrast between reality and fiction. For example, during the second course, one of the facilitators adopted the role of a lost member of a group of tourists, played by the other participants, who needed to plan how to find her. However, at a certain point a police officer was needed in the scene, and the facilitator changed role, asking them to describe the lost girl. The contrast between the real self and the two different fictional characters she was playing stimulated amusement and smiles among the participants, but no one broke the suspension of disbelief, because everyone was enjoying completing the scene.

## Conclusion

In the context of migration, the interaction between expert speakers of the target language and newcomers may unfortunately be impeded by the reluctance of members of the host community to enter into dialogue with migrants, who are often viewed as a burden to society, rather than a resource (see for example Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019). All too often, integration is seen as the one-way process of migrants adapting to the host society's norms, rather than a two-way process of reciprocal learning and engagement (Li & Sah, 2019). It is for this reason that language educators in migrant contexts need to find ways of going beyond formal language learning to help students who may experience language anxiety and to motivate them. The first step is to go beyond the traditional idea of teaching, and to encourage the creation of an environment where the group can critically explore their different situations through a genuine dialogue among all the members and facilitators included (Freire, 2018).

During the last meeting with the only-women group, the facilitators asked the participants to take part in a brief focus group interview, which gave the chance to have a clear view on their opinions about process drama approach in language learning and about the workshop. Many of the facilitators' hypotheses were confirmed by the words of the interviewees, both about language anxiety and their attitude towards the learning method (Maistrello, 2019).

*Facilitator:* Did you ever feel anxious when you had to speak

Italian, afraid to speak sometimes, even if you know what to say [...]?

A.: No, I felt free to ask, so it was very comfortable for me. No an anxiety.

J.: Like before when I try to speak, they'd be laughing at me, that I'm not correct, but I'll keep on pushing, no matter what, I'll keep on trying.

B.: Yeah, for me it's sometimes difficult, even when I know what to say, it's just like [...] somehow difficult for me, [...] to reply is somehow difficult.

*Facilitator:* Did you feel forced to speak here or did sometime happen so that you were like "ok I want to speak in this environment, like I feel free to speak" I mean, was it somehow difficult, or different from other classes you had before?

B.: Yes, because we [...] laughing, because you [...] us free, when I don't know something to say you have to help [me to speak] [...]. Yes, because it is more easier, more easier [...]

*Facilitator:* [among] the activities we have done, something in particular you liked, something that you think helped you somehow?

J.: Last time I went for... to submit curriculum. Most of the things, you know, we studied here I used them. When I went for they asked me questions I want to submit my curriculum cause I'm looking for job,

so [I knew] how to present it, how to say it, so I learnt a lot.

After repeated meetings, not only did the learners appear to be less anxious in testing their hypotheses about Italian and in asking for clarifications or translations when they recognised gaps in their knowledge of the language, but were also more willingly to use Italian to chat with the other members of the group – facilitators included – about themselves. When learners manage to overcome language anxiety, they become able to negotiate meaning without being afraid of appearing foolish in asking for clarification. Mutual negotiation facilitates comprehension for both the interlocutors, reduces misunderstandings (Krashen, 1982; Long, 1983), and enables the learner to use language in a meaningful way, which leads to language learning (Pica, 1991; van Lier, 2004).

Through this study it has been suggested that when students are absorbed in a fictional world, fear of negative evaluation, shyness, stress and concern about linguistic correctness may fade into the background, while the need to communicate and to keep the drama going encourages them to exploit all their communicative skills – the second language included – almost forgetting about their foreign language anxiety (Schewe & Woodhouse, 2018; Carson, 2012; Winston, 2011).

## Notes

1 The term migrant may be used as an umbrella term to refer to any individual who has settled in a new country. Within this category there is that of the forced migrant, including those with the status of asylum-seeker or refugee.

2 The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Padova. All participants signed consent forms giving the authors permission to cite their contributions to the focus group discussion. All names have been changed to initials in order to ensure anonymity.

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