The Dartmouth Method of ELT and the Greek EFL teacher

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Abstract
This paper is a response to the Dartmouth Method of ELT (known as the J. Rassias method: H.H. Stern, 1983:475) designed and conducted by John Rassias in a series of innovative and interactive workshops held in Constantinople (12-15 November 1997), with teachers of English at both High School and University level. The spirit and substance of this article originates primarily from the discussions I had with Professor Rassias after the workshops. I will argue, in this paper, the aspects of his method which could be effectively applied in both Elementary and Secondary/High School Greek education as far as ELT is concerned. To start with, I support that Rassias’s approach to teaching, based on dramatic techniques, is ideal, in primarily Elementary School education. The importance of drama and emotions is feasible in relatively small groups of 9-12 year olds; whereas the same dramatic technique is less effectively manipulated by the High School EL teacher working with 30 member groups of more sophisticated Greek teenagers. Furthermore, I propose that the technique of dramatization, stressing the interaction of the cultural features of both mother tongue and English, would be better substantiated with students of Secondary/High School education. Finally, the actor-teacher association triggering motivation via spontaneity could find a realistic basis in only Elementary School education irrespective of the number of pupils. My arguments have been based on empirical work and information drawn from (a) personal participation in authentic classroom ELT situations with both Elementary and Secondary Schools in Thessaloniki (the 45th Primary School of Thessaloniki and the 3rd High School and 3rd Lyceum of Thessaloniki), and (b) personal involvement of ELT at an Advanced level, working with University students with EL courses.

0. Introduction
This paper will discuss on the Dartmouth method of foreign language teaching (also known as the Rassias method) in connection with the Greek EFL teacher. We will point out the aspects of the Dartmouth

*This work began in discussion with Angeliki Diamandidou, Educational Advisor of ELT, Athens, who made it possible for me to attend Rassias’s international workshop in Constantinople, along with participants from Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey and the United States. Mrs. Diamandidou’s thinking contributed in important ways to a number of ideas we discussed together concerning ELT. I express my deep gratitude to her.
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method which could have a realistic basis in both Elementary and High School EFL Greek education.

The organization of the paper is as follows: The first section is devoted to the description of the communicative view of EFL via creative dramatization and simulation in the classroom as has been adopted by EFL teachers world-wide (Via 1979 and 1985, Littlewood 1981, Stern 1983, Di Pietro 1990, et al). In the second section, Rassias’s dramatic technique of EFL teaching will be extensively analysed and criticised with regard to the circumstances of EFL Greek education. The extent to which dramatic techniques could be applied in the Greek EFL classroom as well as the difficulties and problems raised from such techniques will also be presented in the same section. Finally, we will argue in favour of the improvisation approach of the communicative method concerning EFL.

1. Using Creative Drama and Simulations to increase oral competence

The main purpose of creative drama in EFL is not to produce acting skill but to help students learn more quickly and effectively when movement precedes language. This stimulation, due to physical movement, results in a considerable increase in the easy flow of language.

Due to the shift of EFL teaching towards meaningful communicative activities, the use of creative drama and simulations has obtained a major role in EFL teaching. Admittedly, in Via 1985, the use of creative drama in the classroom provides an active approach to the study of English, putting students into situations that require practice in oral communication, on the one hand, as well as an opportunity to the students to use the foreign language creatively and realistically, presenting them with situations that stimulate imaginative responses. What should be raised at this point is that there has been a consensus amongst EFL teachers world-wide that creative drama has nothing to do with memorization and recitation which are totally unrelated to communication and meaningful conversation. Creative drama in an EFL classroom is concerned first and foremost with communication and problem solving that will create useful and meaningful language. Moreover, it helps students discover their particular individuality and be themselves. “Students need to learn to use the idea of ‘I am’, ‘I am myself speaking English - I am expressing my feelings, my beliefs, my culture and my wishes and concerns. In other words, everything that makes me, ME.” (Richard Via, 1985:13). A corollary of this is that dramatic dialogues are open-ended and unpredictable, in the sense that they engage students in communicative acts of real-life discourse. In real-life situations, discourse enables individuals to make choices, express intentions and achieve personal goals. These discourse actions are individual and internal. Whereas traditional syllabuses tend to stabilize learner performance, creative drama activities recognize the need to provide students with opportunities to use language in any way they can to fulfill personal goals (Di Pietro 1987).
At this point what must be made clear is that all interactions are organized by the teacher, (Harmer, 1991: 236), who acts as a communicator to the students as well as a controller of the activity in the sense that he organizes a number of sets of the role-plays around content areas. While students are involved in role-playing, the role of the teacher is to sit at the back of the room and watch the students gradually gaining confidence. While the students are carrying out the dialogues, the teacher will never interrupt to correct mistakes in usage of words or structures. Instead, he may use a cassette recorder to register the mistakes which are discussed afterwards, when the cassette is played back and both teacher and students listen to it and comment on the performance.

Another activity similar to creative drama is the use of simulations which aim at developing the students’ ability to interact in meaningful and realistic contexts. A simulation provides an oral communication activity ideal for students learning English on a curricular subject basis where they have no opportunity to communicate other than in the classroom. The main purpose of simulations is to have all students simulate real life situations in the classroom. In particular, the teacher plans a simulation activity from beginning to end by breaking it down into sets of role-plays in which every student participates. The procedure goes as follows: The teacher organizes sets of role-plays around content areas and topics derived from materials already discussed in class and based on information from magazines or visual materials (pictures, maps or charts) to help clarify the setting. Then s/he gives out slips of paper with the instructions for the groups mentioning the students who will be working together and a general reference to the theme of sketches. What differentiates simulations from realistic drama is that in simulations the students themselves and not the teacher prepare how and what to say. Once given the theme, they get together and prepare the dialogues gathering information from newspapers, magazines, maps, ads, menus, books, recordings, or by interviewing native speakers, whenever possible. The teacher’s role at this stage is simply to advise them, give an opinion or even correct the students' productions before these are acted out for the class. The whole idea is to have all students participate both in the preparation of the script as well as in acting it out and thus to have them gain confidence and fluency so that they gradually shift to an improvisation-like activity. Finally, before a simulation is acted out, three phases should be observed (Di Pietro 1987) (a) rehearsal, where all students know exactly what they have to do whereas the teacher may sometimes model utterances and then correct the students' productions - whether written or oral; (b) performance, where each group of students is asked to play the sketch they prepared. At this stage -the shortest and most enjoyable phase of the simulation- the students become aware of different communication strategies such as paraphrasing, making gestures, and asking for reinforcement (feedback); and (c) debriefing, a phase in which the teacher conducts a discussion on the activities performed. It is the self-assessment and self-evaluation stage with the main emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy: What is assessed is the students' ability to
contextualize grammar and vocabulary as well as their intonation and pronunciation.

2(a) The Dartmouth Method of ELT and the reality of EFL Greek education
Rassias’s approach to EFL is based purely on dramatic techniques. “The most effective technique,” he supports, “is to put students into real, living situations... If you get the students involved and make them do what you want them to, they will never forget what you teach them” (Rassias 1997). Thus he stresses the importance of drama and emotions in his teaching.

Rassias often draws on the skills he learned in an earlier career as an actor in France. “Both actor and teacher have to communicate with an audience” he admits, “but the classroom is not a theatre; the word ‘theatre’ comes from Greek and is a place to sit and see. They should say drama, which means action” (New York Times, July 14, 1993).

This essence of experiential learning concerning foreign languages has been the backbone of Rassias’s teaching methodologies. He believes that for both actors and teachers, the best way to be effective is to keep the audience’s, or the students’ attention respectively. He does so by using surprise and spontaneity.

In Appendix I, we display briefly those teaching skills and techniques which will act as a realistic basis in the Greek foreign language teaching systems. In the Rassias Method Training Manual (Nov. 1997) as many as forty-two techniques are exposed and evaluated. According to their focal point of applicability I have classified them into two main categories and selected only the ones appropriate to the Greek EFL teaching. (i) fluency oriented techniques and (ii) accuracy oriented techniques. We describe the accuracy oriented techniques first as these are on the borderline between pre-communicative and communicative activities as they are rather teacher-controlled.

2(b). The reality of the Greek EFL classroom
We will conclude this section by pin-pointing the difficulties of Rassias’s techniques, exposed in the Appendix, if applied in the Greek EFL classroom. Four issues have to be borne in mind. These will act as constraints to the Dartmouth methods. First, location. The classroom atmosphere can be the gravest hindrance to any of the fluency oriented methods. Irrespective of the learning level, i.e. Primary school, High school or University level, in the normal classroom arrangement of a Greek public school all students are seated facing the front of the room, with the teacher facing the entire class. Students sit in the same seat each day, rooted in their own secure space -never coming to grips with the realities of using the foreign language outside their own space. Their immobility will gradually feed their shyness and self-consciousness. The Dartmouth methods, such as any of the fluency oriented ones, e.g. miming, the ball game, the presentation-animation technique, etc. demand that the students should be standing and moving about; they
should be looking at each other face to face so as to be able to cope with the real world of language use outside the classroom. Second, time. According to the national curricular timetable, EFL students are offered 150 minutes or less per week. Given this time constraint and sharing the same classroom with the teacher of, say, Mathematics in the preceding or the following hour, the Greek EFL teacher is left with very little time to arrange and rearrange the tables and chairs or desks in the classroom. Besides s/he has to cover a certain amount of material from the EFL textbook in the allotted time. As a result, s/he has to carry through her schedule at a rather fast pace. Thus fast-paced EFL lessons leave students no time for communicative activities, such as simulations for instance. They simply follow their teacher rather rigidly and mechanically. Third, the large number of students in the classroom is an undeniable fact. Ideally, the minimum number of students in Primary and Secondary schools ranges from 25 up to 30 students. At a University level the number of EFL students can be twice as large. Now, with the Dartmouth methods applied in such groups the main benefit accrues to the performers, usually students who already have the appropriate linguistic background acquired from the so-called “Frontistriria”. So the teacher has to be on the alert over what is happening to the rest of the class which s/he will have to keep motivated until the end of the hour. Paradoxically though, in those techniques such as ‘Animation Dialogues’ or ‘Press Conference’, it sometimes happens that those who are genuinely interested in what their peers do and watch them and enjoy their performances in the creative drama, might just be learning more than the more active participants. Fourth, age. Both accuracy and fluency oriented activities could be applied in Primary School as well as first or second year High school, despite the limited number of curricular classroom hours. Now the situation is at all grave with teenage students of the 2nd and 3rd grade High school as well as Lyceum students or even mature University students, who, after all, do not need to communicate in the foreign language outside the classroom as they do not live in an English speaking environment. For the Greek teenager, English is one of the many curricular subjects and language learning for him/her is mostly considered a classroom activity, nothing but a teacher controlled learning process.

One can go on and on with more accumulative constraining factors and be pessimistic about the applicability of Rassias’s communicative methods. Moreover, I cannot restrain myself from mentioning one more problem: Finding the appropriate realistic situations which will motivate the Greek teenage students to communicate in the foreign language. The Dartmouth activities, like any other ELT communicative approaches, require real situations, real roles and real needs and purposes for communication. Their aim is to have all students interact in meaningful realistic contexts. However, classroom use of language is constrained by factors irrelevant to real life. In the classroom, errors in structures, vocabulary and pronunciation count against the student. Attention is given to how things are said (i.e. accuracy). In real life situations words
take on a functional and pragmatic purpose. Now the role of the Greek EFL teacher is to seek this cultural or natural context, i.e. English used in the natural course of events, that is, naturally. Because whatever is cultural in the English spoken natively might not be cultural in a Greek speaking classroom. Therefore the academic abilities of the greek EFL teacher should extend to sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Thus teachers have to participate in teacher-training courses quite regularly in order to promote their theoretical linguistic abilities.

3. Conclusion: Towards a tentative solution
One could start with the assumption that classroom teachers are the key to overcoming the constraints. If the EFL teacher decides that social interaction is the aim then s/he should exhaust all efforts to turn EFL teaching from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered activity. For instance, theoretically, it is not altogether impossible for the creative teacher to assign students to rearrange the desks and chairs in such a way as to leave room for the various group activities. Thus s/he will solve the problem of space and create a suitable atmosphere where the students will express themselves freely through action. Next, his/her academic awareness only might also defeat the time pressure and large-scale classes. The creative teacher may turn a curricular lesson into a real life experience, a fully spontaneous interaction. This can be achieved through large scale activities, such as improvisations. An improvisation activity is that form of role-playing in which students can be most creative, because they themselves prepare and perform (i.e. act out) on the spur of the moment a scene based on a real life situation. And the stimulus for such dramatic presentation (scene) can vary from a short story or a photograph to some objects left on a table, for example. Thus an improvisation activity is a way of encouraging confidence and fluency in FL use as it encourages students to express their own imagination and individuality through the FL. An improvisation activity, after all, is “a characteristic of any human interaction” (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979: 186). And the Dartmouth method does rely on improvisations as it encourages the students to express their own imagination and individuality through the foreign language, to function with whatever English they have at their disposal. As the students are encouraged to improvise their own roles, language errors are viewed as a natural part of the learning process, never as a drawback because the focus is on the process of learning, not on error correction.

In practice, an improvisation technique may sound rather daunting and time-consuming, given the Greek EFL classroom and the restrictions mentioned above. Nevertheless, the creative teacher should not give up. An improvisation activity, like most of the role-playing activities, relies upon the interrelationships within a group, the individuals of which are in need of support and fulfillment. This means that the EFL teacher will have a class of about 28-30 students divided into approximately 4 groups of seven, all of which will be working toward a common goal. And “since any genuine communication requires that one feel at ease in the situation,
these interrelationships among students and between teacher and student affect the success of the communicative interaction, even apart from differing levels of language control” (Wilga Rivers, *English Teaching Forum*, April 1982:9). And once the groups are formed by the students themselves (and not by the teacher - the students decide who they will be working with) they get to know the main issues of working together which are primarily based on collaboration and cooperation: (i) equal distribution of tasks and responsibilities among all students of each group who gradually learn that they need each other’s individual contribution to an improvisation activity. (ii) face to face conversations amongst the members of the group in a positive and affective climate with the aim to self-constructed and open-ended dialogues and activities. (iii) a genuine allegiance and increased confidence amongst all students of all groups through which they express their own feelings, share their viewpoints with others and develop a better understanding of their affective needs. Their need to teach others (by planning their own learning agenda, in the form of questions or problems needing to be resolved) makes them trust each other and seek assistance that results in peer-teaching and problem solving strategies.

What is the role of the teacher in such activities? First, **resourcefulness:** the EFL teacher should be the primary means of introducing and maintaining all kinds of role playing activities. Second, **encouragement** and **reinforcement.** S/he should make it clear to students that improvisation activities are meaning-centered; they will be entrusted with roles requiring them to interact with their partners focusing only on meaning, without being criticized for language errors. In doing so, the creative teacher will turn a conventional teacher-oriented curricular EFL teaching hour in a Greek School into a learner-oriented stimulating activity. Thus students will develop their capacity to ‘invent’ situations and convert their thoughts and ideas into language, on the spur of the moment, and within strict time limits and in doing so they will show an increased confidence in themselves and the other members of their group. Third, **sensitivity.** The EFL Greek teacher should be sensitive enough as to recognize the role of interpersonal communication. If students don’t feel at ease with him/her and their classmates, they are reluctant to express themselves in the foreign language -an experience that involves returning to a much less mature level of expression that can make the greek teenage student feel both foolish and vulnerable. Therefore the sensitive EFL teacher will discern this psychological issue and create the appropriate atmosphere for the real communication of ideas and emotions in a friendly environment that only communicative language teaching can provide.

**References**


APPENDIX

Accuracy oriented techniques

(a) Blue light/kaleidoscope. The process involves, for instance, drilling of demonstrative pronouns as well as interrogative/negative transformations. A student is asked to leave the room after the rules of the game are explained to him. The class, then, select an item in the room which is to be identified by the student after he is asked about an object which is, for example, blue. (For example: Instr(uctor): Is it this bag? St(udent): No, it isn’t that bag. Instr.: Is it this file? St.: No, it isn’t that file. Instr.: Is it this book? (The book has a blue cover). St.: Yes, it is this book.)

(b) Commands: With this technique students are given the opportunity to expand their knowledge of commands or idiomatic expressions through acting.

(c) Face-off: An entertaining and instructional activity for beginners to practise the vocabulary of the parts of the body: A pupil is asked to go to the board and draw a part of the body while simultaneously the teacher does the same on the other half of the board which should not be visible.

(d) Micrologue: What is important in this technique is time. The micrologue is one minute talk on a subject of cultural interest which can function as an introduction to a reading passage and discussion generator: First the teacher asks one student to come before the class and another to go to the board or the projector. Following visuals that he had placed or drawn on the board, the teacher recites the micrologue to the student while the second student as well as the rest of the class write it down. He then repeats the micrologue two more times, always following the visuals on the board and having the first student listening while the rest of the class and the student at the board or projector are writing it down. Each reciting of the micrologue should not exceed 60 seconds. The use of a time-keeper will add a dramatic element to the presentation by putting pressure on the teacher to complete his goal. In the last phase of the activity the first student repeats the micrologue to the class by looking at the visual aids on the board. Finally, the teacher corrects any errors on the blackboard or projector done by the second student.

“Hanover is a small town in the State of New Hampshire. It is located on a hill, on the east bank of the Connecticut River. The entire town depends on Dartmouth College. When students are in session, the population of the town doubles. It is also a popular resort town: people come from afar to admire the multicolored foliage in the autumn: in the winter it is a popular skiing resort because it is very cold and it snows a lot; in the spring the temperature is mild; in the summer many tourists come here to escape the heat of the cities. Hanover
is also a cultural center: the Hopkins Center is a Mecca for summer theater and musicals.” (J.A. Rassias 1997)

(c) **Macrologue:** Though a teacher-controlled technique like the micrologue, the macrologue further arouses the students’ imagination and perception as follows: The teacher selects a cultural object of genuine interest to the class, e.g., a coin, a stamp, etc. and then encourages each student to talk about it. The aim of this activity is to use any cultural object as an expanding textbook. For example, one of the principal industries of the Ivory Coast is lumber. An appropriate lesson in that context would be the study of a box of matches: the match stick, the sulphur on the match, the striking surface, the design on the box, the price, the colours used on the box, etc. Taking a stick from which the match is made as his assignment, a student will research the subject as thoroughly as possible: he/she will discuss the types of trees found in the region, the role lumber plays in his society, the role of the lumber industry in the economy, where match sticks are made, the number of people employed in the industry, why matches are important, the value of fire, the dangers of fire, and so forth. The possibilities are clearly inexhaustible. The student should be encouraged to speak without reading his notes, although in the beginning he may use notes sparingly.

(f) **Construction and presentation of reinforcement drills:** mainly accuracy oriented drills ranging from simple substitution to progressive substitution drills as well as Transformation Exercises. The innovation is that the teacher has to create his own drill scripts rather than practise the ones in the textbook.

(g) **Fantasy and fulfilment:** An extremely effective technique to practise all four skills. The teacher has the whole class create their own texts and invariably remember their contributions and those of their classmates. For instance, concerning the conditional, the teacher has one half of the class write the “hypothesis” and the other half write the “result” on small slips of paper which are later exchanged by both groups and read out. The teacher should encourage the “hypothesis” group to express a fantasy while the “result” group to express what they would consider their greatest fulfilment. It is quite possible that several of the sequences might fit logically: “If I were all powerful…” “I would create a peaceful world.” This activity is both entertaining and instructive.

**Fluency oriented techniques**

(a) **Miming:** This includes alphabetization and waves, applicable at all levels. In alphabetization, students are asked to communicate only through the alphabet to convey their emotions through gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and intonation. For example, a male student wants a woman to go out with him; she wants nothing to do with him. Their only means of communication is the alphabet. He tries to be seductive: a, b, c, d?; she answers forcefully: e, f, g, h, i. He tries again: j, k, l, m, n, o, p; she responds angrily: q, r, s, t, u, v. Undaunted, he continues: w, x, y; she states with finality: z!

In waves, for example, students practise new verbs by acting them through gestures. Individuality and self-expression are fostered here to a great extent. Moreover, this technique helps students overcome shyness and break down their self-consciousness, e.g.,

- **Student 1:** They buried me alive.
- **Student 2:** They buried me alive and took my skin off
- **Student 3:** They buried me alive and took my skin off and cut me to pieces
- **Student 4:** They buried me alive and they my skin off and cut me to pieces and burnt me in hot oil
student 5: They buried me alive and took my skin off and cut me to pieces and burnt me in hot oil and here I am ........ a french-fried potato!

(b) First two letters: This could be characterized as a kind of improvisation technique, ideal for checking vocabulary acquisition. The procedure goes as follows: A student is asked to draw five or six objects on the blackboard beginning with the same first two letters (e.g., chair, chain, church, chicken, cherry, etc.). Another student goes to the board and identifies each object, and then makes up a story involving each. Then more students are asked to improvise a new story after the order of drawings on the board has been rearranged.

(c) Comic strips: An improvisation technique where students have to create their own script on comic strips in which the words have been blotted out. They have to act out their scripts to the class. The original copy may be read later by the teacher. The benefit of this activity is that students act out their own colloquial speech. The drawback is that it lasts long and the difficulty is that the language of cartoons is usually quite idiomatic and calls for a wide-ranging vocabulary.

(d) Ball game: This activity calls for spontaneity and surprise as the students have to be on the alert to respond quickly and accurately. The procedure is as follows: the teacher starts telling a story and then asks students to continue it by tossing a small handball at each one of them randomly. If a student makes a mistake the ball is tossed back to him/her indicating that an error has been committed. Although students actually create their own story this technique could also be characterized as one of accuracy rather than fluency as the students keep corrected by the teacher.

(e) Presentation - animation of dialogues: This is what has already been referred to in the previous section, as creative drama. The innovation with Russias is that the teacher himself will be the first to act the scenario -actually to 'deliberately overact for mutual fun' (Rassias 1997:18). The whole activity takes place in four steps. In the first step, the so-called precognition step the teacher sets the stage, introduces the cast of players and provides a scene description of the play. She then reads the dialogue material while first acting it out and then having the students look at a cartoon or other serial illustration of the action that is unfolding. The written text should be keyed to the cartoon drawings or illustrations. The aim of the first step is for comprehension. It's only in the second step when students are asked to repeat the dialogues through the backward build-up technique, first chorally and then individually always in a randomized manner, thus creating surprise and alertness.

The procedure is as follows: The teacher says the cue (voice), he then makes a noise (snap), then he indicates a student (point) and finally he looks at the student who will respond (look). In the fourth step students listen to a taped version of the scenario which they later act either by using the script as much as possible or by improvising their own words. In this step also, students are introduced to reading. This step serves as a reading and vocabulary expansion exercise.

(f) Press conference: In this kind of simulation exercise, the teacher himself or a student plays the role of a dignitary while the class act as journalists, each group of them representing a designated newspaper and start interviewing the dignitary person. The ‘journalists’ then write up their articles and submit them to an ‘editor’, another student who together with the whole group writes the headlines and submits them to the teacher. In this technique both listening and writing skills are brought into play.