

The Use of Drama in Language Learning

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Universally, since time immemorial, storytelling has played a dual role of being used for didactic purposes while providing entertainment with its mesmerizing tales. Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of recounting literature in its various forms and continues to be so to date. It has the innate ability to change with its power to weave a spell of magic by stimulating connectivity and empathy. It comprises the element of creativity which is recognised as a powerful tool of cognition. Man's desire to overcome his daily mundane life and escape to a period in time and land where he could transform himself found a conduit through story telling. The ancient storyteller was a good raconteur of heroic events and people. He was greatly revered for his skills with vocabulary as it could conjure imagery in the minds of listeners. Inventive storytellers were greatly respected and many became famous and even found a place for themselves in the courts of kings. Such is the impact of storytelling.

Listeners were enthralled by these tales of chivalry, fabled lands, magic, tales with moral messages, beguiling mysteries and heroic adventures. The enchanting sagas were told and retold to audiences who were eager to devour new information. They were transported to other lands, narrated to new audiences and in turn, fresh stories of exotic places and people returned home and fuelled people's imagination. Arbuthnot in his book *Children and Books* says that "folktales have been the cement of society. They not only expressed but codified and reinforced the way people thought, felt, believed and behaved." (Arbuthnot 1964:255) A resourceful storyteller shares his tale will recount his narrative depending on his audience.

The native drama evolved from the accomplishments of minstrels, storytellers and entertainers who performed outside the boundaries of traditional theatre. They would use the town square or the *platea* (Latin word meaning open acting space) for their dramatic renditions. With the advent of the printing press, "They ceased to be a living folk literature and became instead, specimens of folk art." (Arbuthnot 1964:2)

Soon the art of oral storytelling waned and legends found a new medium by way of print but with the advent of technology they lost some of their hypnotic qualities as they now had to be modified for a new type of narration. They lost their power to ignite the imagination with new productions. However, storytelling is a creative experience and a good story teller does not evaporate amid new methods and modern technology because he uses this art with renewed voice modulation, image-provoking vocabulary and a mesmerising body language to cast a spell on listeners. Among these listeners are children who are familiar with stories told to them in their native language and these children naturally develop an interest to listen and participate in the enactment of stories in English as they begin attending

school as they are provided an opportunity for language development which is a part of the academic curriculum. As children develop their ability to understand, retell, act out and/or create their own stories in English, this also boosts their self-esteem.

Since drama is the performance-based dimension of storytelling it is endowed with the twin benefits of creativity and language learning and wields the power to appeal to both the audience and learners. Whether the purpose is entertainment or didactic, orally told conveyed stories have a great significance both to the imagination and for imbibing values.

An effective approach for bolstering articulation skills in English skills is through oral language practice combined with nonverbal communication which is best channelized through the creative dramatization of stories. This kind of a practical learning is especially useful for students hailing from different language backgrounds. Since the degree of exposure to English and level of knowledge of the language is varied among these students, drama effectively provides them with the vocabulary and content needed to use English as a language of speaking, writing and thinking.

The community of English Language learners today is a burgeoning one and teachers today are confronted with a bigger challenge than in the past since language learning is directed towards specific outcomes such as employability and global migration. The approach in an EFL classroom today is more student-centred and teachers in ELL classrooms endeavour to find innovative approaches to teaching language in a manner that fosters language acquisition. Furthermore, they have the additional challenge of identifying struggling English language learners who may not be at par with the rest of the class due to various reasons. An effective way to teach language learners is to offer them opportunities to learn English by using the inventive quality of drama.

Drama is a very effective tool in developing communication as it educates and entertains. The turn of the millennium marked the high point for theatre to improve communication and facilitate the exchange of diverse forms of information. As the emphasis on a 'communicative approach' fast gains momentum, language today is going beyond linguistic competency. A close relationship can be observed between drama and contemporary language learning as both include people in a social context. Drama provides a larger canvas for language development. Unlike the restraints of a conventional language classroom where language learning is restricted to the use of rules and application drama offers ELL students a platform to freely use emotions, facial expressions and movement in order to communicate while simultaneously promoting learning. Wan Yee Sam states that "Drama is thus concerned with the world of 'let's pretend'. It provides an opportunity for a person to express himself through verbal expressions and gestures using his imagination and memory." (Sam, Wan Yee 1990) Drama is a holistic method of developing responses to learning contexts and by virtue of being based on stories it can harness the learner's imagination imaginatively and kindle an enthusiasm to learn. Chris Boudreault says that "The improvisation aspect of drama gives students opportunities for developing their communicative skills in authentic and dynamic situations." (Boudreault 2010)

Drama liberates students and gives them the opportunity to mimic and express without being ridiculed or misunderstood. Simultaneously, it paves the way for literary analysis which is crucial for an apt understanding of the story and its ensuing portrayal. It enriches the personalities of students and reenergises them as it exists in an atmosphere which is inspiring and enjoyable. The dialogues and role-playing combine to provide a rich language learning experience as it builds confidence levels, communication skills, fluency of vocabulary and expression, and even social skills. Owing to its dynamic nature, drama has the inherent versatility to dispel mental barriers to language learning and precipitates an engagement with literature and social contexts. It also fosters cultural awareness and encourages an appreciation of other cultures as the stories may not be native legends and stem from a varied repository. Concurrently, the students also gain a better understanding of their own learning abilities.

Language learning in the orthodox ELT classrooms and course books do not particularly hold any special appeal for they do not call for any emotional and artistic engagement in the learners. Existing ELT course books do not include drama-based activities and this brings into sharp focus, the need to incorporate them for effective language learning. It nurtures the development of verbalisation in a relaxed manner and along with encouraging articulation skills it also reduces feelings of inhibition. It also works to alleviate the stress of language learning as there may be many students who may find it quite a daunting task. While students are collectively compelled to follow instructions in the classroom, drama is usually optional, and they personally decide whether to participate or not. It is twofold in its outcome because if the students chose to participate, they are not only communicating in English but also assimilating the language, understanding texts and contexts better and best of all, enjoying all this without the strain of the traditional approach.

Drama can be used to teach grammar or literature. The teacher is only a facilitator in it. To enhance performance and simultaneously facilitate learning about voice projection when speaking to audiences, a teacher will instruct on how to produce a resonant result on stage and the learner would then build upon this to improve the skills learnt by practising independently. Drama incorporates improvisation and encourages fluency as it requires a careful attention to both pronunciation and enunciation as any deviation could result in an incorrect rendering of meaning. Drama further motivates the learner to put his best foot forward for he is aware that he is being observed but not tested.

Derived from a Greek word, the term ‘drama’ refers to action intended to make learning more meaningful. Pedagogically, drama seeks to provide a distinctive learning experience that engages students physically and emotionally during the learning process, thus making language learning more impactful. Kinesics and prosodic elements fuse to sculpt drama as a significant tool in language teaching. Incorporating drama into a language course sets the stage for a stimulating and inventive environment where students use their imagination to navigate English through various forms.

The usage of drama in language classrooms is progressively growing. Notwithstanding other sources such as books, films or television shows, drama has the potential to infuse life into stories. Students delight in this activity and this enjoyment paves the way for an improvement in their academic

grades while simultaneously enhancing their communication abilities. And while it might have its own shortcomings, drama transcends due to its innately creative nature.

Speaking is the most important constituent of any language acquisition but lack of self-confidence, apprehension about feedback of listeners, and other blocks may thwart language learning quite critically. It is a cognitive skill that requires cultivation and practice and drama appears to be the best method for it includes activities that encompass a person’s whole personality. Drama is a particularly effective tool for pronunciation teaching because it speech modulation and aspects of non-verbal communication in a holistic way. Drama not only teaches syntax but is also transformative as it holds the potential to help both the audience and the actors to understand the nuances of language. Joseph Agofure Idogho says “Drama improves oral communication. As a form of communication methodology, drama provides the opportunity for the student to use language meaningfully and appropriately.” (Joseph Agofure Idogho 2018:12)

Thus, it can be seen drama is an invaluable teaching tool for it holds greater appeal than conventional modes as it not only contextualizes language but also mixes verbal and non-verbal features of communication to help achieve competency. Theatre will continue to remain a significant instrument due to its participative and adaptive nature. A significant reason for the uniqueness of drama in improving communication skills is its power to encompass myriad learning styles of people on account of their intellectual and emotional differences. The situations pencilled into drama lend to the building and practicing of skills in storytelling, describing and analysing for optimal comprehension.

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