

Teaching Drama in ELT Classroom

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This paper titled — Teaching Drama in ELT Classroom focuses that drama is a unique tool vital for language development as it simulates reality and develops self-expression. By using drama techniques to teach English, the monotony of a conventional English class can be broken and the syllabus can be transformed into one which prepares students to face their immediate world better as competent users of the English language because they get an opportunity to use the language in operation.

Using drama to teach English results in real communication, involving ideas, emotions, feelings, appropriateness and adaptability. Such activities give the teacher a wider option of learner-centered activities to choose for classroom teaching, being extremely efficient in teaching English. Drama is an active approach to learning where participants identify with roles and situations to be able to engage with, explore and understand the world they live in.

Drama draws on the natural ability of every person to imitate, mimic and express him or herself physically. Drama takes as its starting point ‘life’ not language and by so reversing the learning process that is by beginning with meaning and then moving to language.

Using Drama in the ELT Classroom There are two ways in which drama enters the language classroom. One, as a special method that language teachers can use to invigorate their classes. The other, as a part of materials used to enhance language proficiency. The first belongs to the realm of language teaching; the second to the intersection between language and literature. In both cases, drama is used as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, i.e. drama as a teaching method or a dramatic text as teaching material is used to help learners enhance their linguistic and communicative proficiency. Research in this area has been extensive in other parts of the world, and drama as a pedagogic tool continues to be

used in the language classroom by many language teachers. Nevertheless, it appears that there is still some resistance to this technique in language classrooms, particularly in India. Hence, this paper begins by looking at both, the advantages that have been tried and tested by researchers, and also the areas of resistance that have prevented drama from being used in the language classroom in a major way. The paper concludes with a plea for language teachers in India to make greater use of plays in the language classroom, particularly plays written by Indian playwrights so as to desist from blindly adopting western texts that often present difficulties for Indian learners due to cultural differences.

Among the many practitioners in this field in the west, the pioneer is generally acknowledged to be Harriet Finlay-Johnson. She was the Head teacher of Little Sompting School in Sussex, England from 1897 till 1910, and her book *The Dramatic Method of Teaching* explained her dramatic techniques in education in the English-speaking world. Johnson's work was followed by others like Henry Caldwell Cook from the Perse School in Cambridge and author of the book, *The Play Way*; Winifred Ward of Northwestern University whose ideas about the use of drama in education were influenced by John Dewey (1921), and expressed in his book *The School and Society*; Peter Slade, England's first drama advisor in education from 1947 to 1977, who renewed interest in using rhythm, dance, and drama as part of child education, and played a vital role in making drama a part of the mainstream school education in England; and Brian Way (1967) whose *Development through Drama* served as a watershed for the drama-in-education movement.¹ These are just a few names amongst a host of others in the west. In India, however, we cannot speak of a history of a movement in this field simply because there has been no movement in the first place. Why is this so? Why

is drama not used to the extent it can and should be used considering that its advantages have been tried and tested in other parts of the world?

I would like to begin by pointing out that drama has certain intrinsic advantages over other literary genres like the novel, the short story and poetry. This does not mean that drama is superior to these forms, but simply that it offers a language teacher certain unique opportunities to help enhance the linguistic and communicative proficiency of his/her learners. One of the most unique features of drama is that plot is taken forward primarily through dialogue. Even characterisation is concretised solely through what characters say on stage. As opposed to novels and short stories where the author must describe the character for the reader, in plays, by contrast, authorial interventions are mostly limited to instructions for stage settings, and the author is almost completely absent from his/her play. It is dialogue that must do all the work. Even if one needs to know what's going on inside a character's head, it has to be uttered aloud by the character in the form of an aside. As such, drama is already-expressed thought.

The famed playwright Vijay Tendulkar affirmed that dialogue distinguished drama from fiction, and commented on how playwrights capture the distinctiveness of each character's speech pattern: —The choice of words signifies the culture of the person, his or her region, profession and in short the whole background. The speech pattern likewise helps to particularise the character and to make it an individual rather than a type.¹² Looked at in this light, drama becomes an invaluable resource in an ELT classroom, not only because it exposes learners to actual usage through dialogue, but also because it gives them exposure to a variety of styles of speaking. It allows learners to encounter language in use, and exposes them to *'real'* discourse rather than isolated words or sentences. While this applies to novels and short stories as well, drama offers an unmitigated stream of dialogue that novels and short stories cannot offer by virtue of their very form. The most significant benefit of using drama would then be its focus on interpersonal communication. An extra bonus comes in the form of the fun element it adds to the language classroom, giving teachers and learners a much-needed break from monotonous classroom routines.

Then what prevents teachers from making use of this technique? One answer may lie in the fact that drama is essentially a performative art; hence, the body becomes important, and non-verbal factors such as body language play a significant role. Using drama as a teaching tool, therefore, makes certain special demands on both teachers and learners, demands that they may not be ready for. Teachers need to be uninhibited and unselfconscious when using drama as a tool, very often having to demonstrate and perform before expecting students to do so. Hence, it is imperative that a teacher's own level of comfort with this method, together with her conviction precede her confidence, for if learners sense the teacher's lack of conviction, it will be really difficult to get them to participate actively and joyfully in this method.

Apart from personality factors, there are other considerations that need to be addressed. Gillian Porter Ladousse reminds us that before embarking on any use of drama in class, teachers must first introspect and ask what our definition of learning is. For instance, do we believe in the three-tier method — presentation of an item to be learnt, introduction/presentation of that item, and follow-up/practice of the item just introduced to reinforce learning? Ladousse cautions that such *'definitions'* of learning —...do not openly acknowledge the complex business of learning which often involves *'doing'* as much as *'thinking'*. One aspect of the *'doing'* of language learning is *'talking'*.³ The opportunities drama offers for learning through talking cannot be stressed enough.

Language learning practitioners have long ago realised that learning is an unpredictable process where students more often than not, not learn what is taught, and learn much that was not consciously taught. An interesting observation made by Gary Carkin, and echoed by many supporters of using drama in the language class, is that the learning goal is approached indirectly.⁴ Some researchers use the term *'unintentional learning'*. The playwright, like a novelist or a short-story writer, creates a world, capturing characters in the midst of specific situations. Using drama requires students to enter that world and become that character. But while they are preoccupied with getting the body language, intonation, and expressions right, they simultaneously absorb the language, and make it their own without consciously attempting to do so. Thus, the invaluable

process of internalising language in use takes place, and a focus on meaning is attained along with a focus on form. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, the Russian developmental psychologist stated that — “It is only through play – and the play of drama -- that the process of language acquisition can be approached in such concentrated depth, for in the development of a character pursuing objectives and using speech to achieve a goal, the natural process of acquisition is imitated and the path to new word meaning engraved.”¹ 5

If we accept that language teaching is not to restrict itself to the mere acquisition of the structures and vocabulary of a language, then we can agree that literature provides a storehouse of precious resources. Literary texts abound with characters placed in situations where they must make difficult choices, choices that will affect the course of their own lives and even determine the fate of others around them. Adult learners, in particular, may identify intimately with the dilemmas these characters face, and the manner in which they deal with them, which, in turn, may provide a strong motivation for learners to express their views. No doubt language proficiency is the aim that we work towards; however, once our learners have acquired some proficiency, can we not integrate materials and devise activities that will involve our learners in thinking critically about people, events and issues that have affected the world and continue to do so? While Dorothy Heathcote affirmed that good drama shows human beings working from a state of desperation (—Men in a mess, she called it) to some kind of resolution, Gavin Bolton explained that —Drama is to be about meaning: meaning indicating, meaning seeking, meaning making, and meaning finding⁶. She also states that —The teacher’s role is to get the students to reason: ‘look for implications,’ ‘check the motivation,’ ‘assess the consequences,’ ‘make decisions’. Such directives guide the student’s exploration into meaning.⁷ Today, researchers and teachers alike, attach more importance to meaning-making over acquisition of the structures of a language. Among those who believe that drama can play a significant role in enhancing the meaning-making function of communication are Maley and Duff who say: —

“Appropriacy and meaning are more important than form or structure of the language. Drama can help to

restore the totality of the situation by reversing the learning process, beginning with meaning and moving towards language form. This makes language learning more meaningful and attempts to prepare the students for real-life situations.”⁸

Once meaning becomes the focus, drama can be used to aid in the development of more than just communicative competence, and can facilitate personal growth through exposure to the complex socio-political, psychological/ moral issues playwrights deal with.

When using drama as a method or as material in the language class, teachers tend to make use of foreign texts since most of the literature available on the use of drama comes from the western world. However, the texts and materials suggested for use from non-Indian contexts may not always be suitable for students in Indian classrooms. And then again, when we have such fine playwrights of our own, why should we deprive our students of the wealth of good writing from our part of the world? The works of remarkable playwrights like Mahashweta Devi, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad have been translated into English. Their works deal with issues that often relate directly to our lives, and the teacher could easily motivate students to discuss them. Instead of taking the entire play into consideration, one monologue, or one extract could be used effectively. For instance, Benare’s monologue at the end of Vijay Tendulkar’s ‘Silence! The Court is in Session’ could be used to discuss double standards in Indian society. Why is it that she alone is censured for carrying an illegitimate child? Why is the man not held equally responsible? In the case of an extra-marital affair, who is more guilty? The married man or the single woman who falls in love with him? Such potent questions could provide strong motivation for students to express their views. Mahesh Dattani’s ‘Dance like a Man’ deals with the trauma a man goes through when he is victimised for being a Bharatanatyam dancer. ‘On a Muggy Night in Mumbai’ deals openly with the issue of homosexuality; ‘Bravely Fought the Queen’ has many scenes which bring out the conflict in a middle-class Indian family where two brothers are married to two sisters. Lies, deceit and violence (verbal and physical) mark the interaction between the characters, and students could get totally involved while enacting

or simply reading out such emotionally charged dialogues.

The additional benefit of using material from the plays mentioned above is that they deal with real issues, issues that students may have experienced or at least heard being discussed outside the classroom – at home, at a social event, on a news programme or a chat show, in a newspaper or a magazine. As language teachers, we would impart great value to the lives of our students by putting in some effort at developing their ability to think critically about and be sensitive to socio-cultural issues. Why should we restrict our objectives to developing linguistic proficiency alone? After all, while our students may be language learners in the classroom, they are also citizens of the world. It is not impossible for us to work with meaningful texts and plan lessons around them such that while the overt focus of the lesson may be acquisition of an item of language or a particular communicative skill, the teacher can also draw students' attention to the issues the playwright has foregrounded for the stage. The two objectives can be simultaneously integrated into the lesson. In fact, in today's conflict-ridden world, it is imperative that we expose our students to the works of powerful writers who make us think about all kinds of human dilemmas. And drama, as has been pointed out at length in this paper, offers a wonderful opportunity to motivate our students to discuss a wide range of issues.

Jane Arnold echoes these sentiments when she says: "It would seem, then, that, properly understood, humanistic language teaching is not out of step with the main forces in education today. Quite the contrary. In a troubled world calling out for balm for its wounds, it should certainly not be seen as irresponsible for educators, whatever their subject area, to dedicate a little attention to contributing to the development of emotionally intelligent people who are better equipped to deal with the problems of modern society."⁹

She cites research by those like John Schumann and his associates who are working on a brain-based model of language acquisition, and who aver that cognitive and affective faculties work together in the human brain. Research by neurobiologists also supports the claim that emotions form an important part of cognition.

The utility of drama lies greatly in its potential to help learners understand the world around them, but perhaps more importantly, it lies in helping them understand themselves better. Among Maley's listed advantages regarding the use of drama is that — It fosters self-awareness (and awareness of others), self-esteem and confidence; and through this, motivation is developed.¹⁰ And also that it draws upon both cognitive and affective domains, thus restoring the importance of feeling as well as thinking."¹⁰

In conclusion, I would argue that the human element that a literary form like drama brings into any classroom is indispensable for the critical and emotional development of learners. I would go so far as to say that language teachers, who are particularly fortunate in that they have great freedom to introduce and work with materials and texts from a range of disciplines unlike teachers of other subjects, ignore the potential of literature at their peril and to the detriment of their students.

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