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**Paradigms of Theatre as Emerging Trends in Language Learning & Teaching: Issues and Challenges
in ESL Classrooms¹**

Abstract

Language teaching involves several challenges for a language teacher. Teaching English as a second language with theatrical techniques gives numerous advantages. Theatre can be assimilated into the language classrooms efficiently to attain communicative purpose by incorporating the four language skills (LSRW). Theatre in language learning has a clear pedagogical aim concentrating on the personal and social development of the learners'. It encourages learners' to imagine, indulge, act and learn. Theatre can assist, facilitate and foster language skills i.e. listening, reading, speaking, writing, and their integrated linguistic competence by making a suitable meaningful context. Moreover, it is a powerful tool that indulges learners' into interactive responses throughout the whole class. It also enables learners to connect emotion and cognition as it enables them to make the connection between thought and action. Teaching English as a second language naturally comprises a balance between receptive and productive skills; here theatre techniques in pedagogy effectively deal with this requirement. Theatre is dynamic in enhancing learners' confidence, creativity, motivation in learning.

This paper aims to explore how theatre can be used effectively, interactively to encourage learners' to learn English as a second language and what are the major issues and

¹ This paper has been partially presented in a NCERT conference at RIE, Mysore.

challenges in the real classroom situation that a teacher has to face. It also aims that how the English language can be taught with the help of theatre techniques in the classroom to develop learner's knowledge of the language.

Key Words: Theatre, ESL, Pedagogy, Theatre Techniques, Receptive Skills, Productive Skills

Introduction

On many occasions it has been observed that the teaching of English misses the mark in terms of attaining its objectives. Despite years of English teaching and learning, the students in ESL situations do not exhibit sufficient confidence and fluency to use language in the classroom or in real life situation. Appropriateness, ideas, feelings, adaptabilities, and emotions are the key components of real-life communication. Traditional English classrooms do not give learners the opportunity of language-usage in a way that they will understand when and how to use it effectively. Thus, the main purpose of language teaching, which is to develop the cognitive abilities of the learners, is very much ignored. In such a scenario, there is a need to look beyond the established ways of teaching language. The need is not to bring in radical experimentations with the help of complex technological and infrastructural plan, as is often resorted to by the stake holders in a rush to seek solutions to the challenge of producing fluent users of English language. The need is, rather, to tweak the existing classrooms with innovations, freshness and personalized atmosphere through employment of criticality, creativity and individuality by a teacher. These dimensions of teaching are possible to be built while one turns towards theatre as a resource for teaching language. Teaching language through the help of drama and theatre provide a platform where learners can listen, think and produce natural and meaningful language, it persuades learners to use their stimulus and improves their linguistic abilities. Drama gives situation or indulges learners' for reading when enacting and writing when asked to do the particular task. It helps in analyzing style, plot and character of the literary text in teaching. It also makes the learner's participation active and positive towards the text. "The drama approach enables learners to use what they are learning with pragmatic intent, something that is most difficult to learn through explanation"(quoted in Chauhan 1). Incorporating theatre techniques to teach English can break the monotony of classrooms while relevant modifications can be made in the curriculum and syllabi to make learners competent to use the English language in real time situations. Moreover, this ap-

proach is learner-centered and can also help to fulfill the requirement of the curriculum as it enables the swift and faster learning.

Language is the medium through which people share their views, thoughts, opinion, and culture. “Drama and theatre activities can help students to learn the language well. It offers great opportunities for students to communicate with others even when they have limited vocabulary. They can use their body languages and gestures to express their purposes” (Bas 2008 Web). So the question here is how to inspire or motivate learners for active participation. Theatre and drama exercises urge them to speak with others and express themselves. Despite the fact that audiotapes and computers are practical devices that can help learners' to learn some basic phrases and common words but for this, learners' need to face the actual situation where it is going to be used. “Theatre is also used for introducing or concluding the class, and it stimulates students' interests and creates their enthusiasm for English learning” (Gaudart 231). Drama and theatre can be very helpful in developing learners' imagination. “It can make our learning process meaningful” (Guida, 1995 Web). Theatre helps learners to process new words, articulations or expressions in a proper setting. For example a teacher asked the students to write about some possible remedy for common cough and cold. One of the students writes “a spoonful of Joshanda” which, for the cultural reasons, might appear incomprehensible to other students. But, at the same time this may initiate between the students a discussion to understand the word. It is a good example of giving the students chance to explain on how to use a word according to their cultural nuances. Chauhan claims that “using theatre in ESL classes reverses our conventional English education, and it explores students' potential to learn and also improves their linguistic performance” (1). According to Schiller,

Most theatre leads young people to learn about social life actively, and it also fosters their conflict-resolution abilities and improves human relations. Theatre facilitates students to deeply understand themselves and others. They will compare the characters in the theatre and their own life, in reality, thus theatre has the potential to change students' thinking to deal with interpersonal relationships. (2008 Web)

In its essence, theatre and drama is a platform where people come together, work together and learn together. Gaudart claimed,

Theatre makes students inevitably immersed in a social milieu and creates more experience for students learning how to get along with other people. Theatre stimulates

students to come up with ideas and put them together. They work together to create the scenario with new characters. Thus, the value of theatre lies in the creative process and its effective opportunity for working with others. (232)

Moreover, theatre exclusively depends on dialogues; it is a potent tool to teach the language. Theatre and drama are oldest genres in literature. The oldest literatures are available in the form of theatre, like Bharata Muni's poetics of theatre titled *Natyashastra*. Muni had written it 3500 years ago. Drama and theatre give learners the opportunity to use language accurately in the genuine discussions, expressing them and listening to others. Repetitions of phrases and sentences give learners a kind of familiarity with the language use. For learning styles and critical understanding of language, this is an appropriate method for teaching language in ESL context. Every learner has different cognitive levels and different pace of processing information. But through involving them actively in the learning process, this method gives a way to learn the language in a natural atmosphere. Likewise, to the learners who are shy and hesitant to express their view and thoughts in the class, drama and theatre give chance to convey their emotion, feelings through nonverbal signals such as body movements and facial expression as per the requirement.

“Using drama in the ESL classroom is not a new concept. Drama provides an excellent platform for exploring theoretical and practical aspects of the English language” (Whitson, 1996 Web). For developing the communicative skills of learners in authentic and dynamic conditions, the improvisation aspect of theatre gives a better platform. The exact situation can be introduced before the learners to produce the language. Theatre has a potential to encourage and give ample exercises that make the learning process fun for learners' as it is interactive and visual. Wan Yee Sam talks about the “Communicative approach, theatre techniques, value of theatre in education, advantages and disadvantages” (9). Alan Maley and Alan Duff are “classic sources for the benefits of using theatre techniques; how it helps to learn new vocabulary, builds confidence, motivates the students and helps shift the focus from the teacher to the students” (229-231). “Theatre is a special communication situation which makes considerable demands on the flexibility and skills of the teacher” (Kao, 19). “Morrow who gives some guiding principles behind the use of the communicative activities” (cited in Larsen-freeman p. 129). Susan Holden “adds some definitions as to what theatre is and how it provides opportunities for a person to express themselves” (1-9).

Theatre is a potent teaching tool that involves learners in actual learning process interactively. The fascinating thing about this approach is the connect between thought and action which leads to the actual use of the language. Language learning is a two-way process i.e. one has to absorb the receptive skills or practice it as much as possible to produce the productive skills. The simple concept is: listening and reading serve as input that leads to the productions of speaking and writing. So in order to speak and write fluently and effectively, one has to listen and read. Researchers like Maley and Duff, Susan Holden, Tricia Evans and many more have explored and demonstrated series of activities and ways of how theatre and drama can be used in the actual classroom. However, the problem is how to organize these activities according to the classroom size, level, and nature of the learners. English teachers sometime face difficulties in controlling the class because applying these activities brings fun in the classroom instead of knowledge. Using these activities in classrooms needs meticulous preparation and a skilful teacher to handle the process. The teacher should acquire the knowledge of appropriate methods and techniques to implement these activities in the classroom.

Using theatre in teaching especially in ESL/EFL classrooms provides countless advantages. That is why it is proposed to work on this topic and share the experience, views and knowledge. "Theatre gives the chance to the participant to portray himself or another person in the imaginary situation. Theatre is necessary for developing students' variety of abilities: communication skills, physical development, and emotional intelligence. If teachers can have a good command of theatre techniques, they will implement theatre activities more effectively and efficiently. (Royka, 2002 Web)

Gaudart while giving his thought about how this technique helps teacher and learners in teaching and learning says, "Theatre techniques help teachers to organize the class well and to engage all the students more actively in the English learning process" (231).

Objective of the Study

This significance of theatre and drama in ESL classroom proposes to attain the real-life situation in English classrooms which is the primary focus of communicative language teaching. Improvising theatre and drama in ESL classroom doesn't mean to encourage parrot-like repetition in its exercises. But rather on using the text as a stimulus to generate fresh thought. Moreover, the prime focus of the study is to show ways in which learners can pro-

duce natural language in different mode or settings through different ingredients of drama and techniques of theatre. The study aims to analyze the ways to encourage the learners to learn the English language through theatre and drama as well as to improvise the incorporation of theatre by developing activities for the effective use of drama and theatre in language teaching. Finally, it foregrounds how techniques of drama and theatre are used in language teaching.

Method and Procedure

Putting up plays for the learners is not what we mean by using or improvising theatre and drama in the language classroom. The focus is to teach the core curricular areas of the syllabus through drama and theatre technique and not only acting and performance. There are many ways in which theatre and drama can be incorporated into ESL classrooms. The real-life situation can be used as contexts/plots to perform the theatre activities in the language classroom. The activities should be designed in such a way that the teacher can assess the learner's potential to learn the language. Some of these activities described below provide a practical application of some of the ideas to be used in a language classroom. These activities explicate how a simple idea can be built up through mime, question, role play, group discussion into an improvisation involving a number of people. Many other such exercises can be adapted to suit specific classrooms with language problems and can be used as the basis for further exercises which the teacher can devise. It is hoped that the themes chosen will be of interest to students from a wide variety of learners' background and age groups. It is important to note that one risk of role-playing exercises may be that students experience difficulty in imagining the situation, rather than sitting in a classroom. Each of the activities starts with one activity in which the student works alone. From there, the students progress to work in pairs or group of three and then, possibly in larger groups. The problems of interacting in a large group should not be underestimated: the larger the group, the larger and more diffused are the number of relationships. It is advisable for the pairs and groups to work together, and after some time teacher should reshuffle them.

Let us have a look at some sample activities to understand the above mentioned aspects of using drama and theatre in language teaching.

Sample Activity I

Objective

- To improve the cognitive ability and writing skills of the learners.

Level

- Undergraduates

Time 30 minutes

Group Heterogeneous

Materials required

- Video of a story which has characters like Mr. X and I.
- There should be no sound in the video.

Skills involved

- Writing Skills

Procedure

Students are asked to complete the following texts about Mr. X and I.

- a) X and I are.....
- b) They live
- c) I is
- d) X.....
- e) One day.....
- f) So.....

Variation

Verbal inputs and sheets will be distributed among students and after completing this ask them to come and read aloud. It will develop the imaginative power.

Acknowledgement: (This activity is an adaptation of the activity from *Literature and Language Teaching* by Gillian Lazar page no. 143)

Sample Activity II

Objective

- To improve the pronunciation of the learners and enhance reading comprehension.

Level

- Undergraduates

Time 20 minutes

Group Heterogeneous

Materials required

- Role cue cards

Skills involved

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading

Procedure

Divide the learners into pairs of two and three according to the size of your class. Each pair should be given one of the role cards. Ask the learners to read and rehearse carefully using the details of the role card. After few minutes they will be asked to perform that particular role for the other students of the class. But in between teacher has to take care that they will get enough time to practice the dialogues. This activity will enable students to listen comprehensively and improve the pronunciation. This exercise needs role cards which have a different kind of characters description on it. It involves both speaking and listening skills. **Variation**

As a variation of this activity learners can be asked to write a mini-dialogue using the instruction of the role card.

Acknowledgement

(The idea of this activity has been taken from *Literature and Language Teaching* by Gillian Lazar page no. 143)

Sample Activity III**Objective**

- To improve the power of imagination of the learners and to improve the pronunciation of the learners.

Level

- Undergraduates

Time 30 minutes**Group** Heterogeneous**Materials required**

- Role cue cards

Skills involved

- listening
- speaking

Procedure

Divide the students into pairs. Each pair should be given one of the role cue cards below. Tell the students to rehearse a short role-play using the role cards. After a few minutes, they will be asked to perform this role play for the other students in the class the focus are to improve the power of imagination of the learners and to improve the pronunciation of the learners. Estimated time will be 20 minutes, and listening and speaking skills will be focused.

Variation

After the activity teacher can ask the student to write mini dialogue using their own story and memory as a variation of the activity.

Sample Activity IV**Objective**

To make the learners enable to express their point of view.

Level

- Undergraduates

Time 35 minutes**Group** Heterogeneous

Materials required

- Excerpt of a drama script
- Video of the play

Skills involved

- reading
- speaking

Procedure

- Divide the class into small groups.
- Distribute the script among the learners and show video to them.
- Ask the learner to ask the question according to their imagination about the text.
Questions like...
 - a) How old are the characters?
 - b) What is their relationship?
 - c) What kind of gesture do you think they might use?
 - d) For which one do you have the most sympathy? And why?

Acknowledgement

The idea of this activity has been taken from *Literature and Language Teaching* by Gillian Lazar page no. 142.

Sample Activity V**Objective**

- To familiarize learners with the native speaker's speech and make them listen and imitate.

Level

- Undergraduates

Time 40 minutes**Group** Heterogeneous

Materials required

- Audio/Video of a play

Skills involved

- listening
- speaking

Procedure

The teacher will display audio visual of a play in the classroom with the help of a projector

(if available) and ask them watch intensively and give chance to each learner to express their views on different aspects of the particular play.

Variation

Ask the learners to conduct similar kind of short play in the classroom.

So the teacher can use and improvise these types of activities to teach the components of the syllabus. The authors have tried these activities in the undergraduate level classrooms and the result was quite interesting. The responses and feedback of the students and the teachers who proved that they were much satisfied with the improved performances of the students after employing these activities. Moreover, through these activities, a teacher acquires exposure to improvise more and more in the classroom. A teacher can adapt these according to the problem or level of the class after a needs analysis. A simple idea can be improvised into role play, extended role play, mime, and group discussion and so on.

Issues and challenges

A significant issue in this teaching is time management. Teachers must have sufficient time to invest in the activities in the actual classroom as the size of Indian classroom is generally big and there is always the burden to complete the syllabus within the time limit. Therefore, sufficient time must be allowed to facilitate such activities. But at the same time, through proper monitoring a teacher may regulate the time and manage the activities within the given time without much of a change in the existing temporality. Teachers may not be trained to manage the classrooms for such situations so, teacher training programmes and training courses should be introduced. Short term courses can help the teachers to make them

skilful. Classrooms are generally heterogeneous so a teacher needs to have an far-reaching outreach in the process of teaching which is possible through pair-work and think- pair-share, group activities and so on. Language lab and smart classroom may act as propellant to such teaching but using theatre and drama techniques in language classroom does not depend on technology and infrastructure. In fact, using theatre and drama in a classroom can be a cost-effective alternate to expensive technological ways of teaching which have flooded the markets with software platforms and gadgets. Though it can be helpful for the learners and teachers to conduct the classes with the help of computer and audio-visual aids but while using theatre and drama techniques in a language classroom a teacher may carry on with bare minimum infrastructure. Given the fact that classrooms in situations like India may not even have basic furniture to sit and electricity to light up bulbs, theatre, which does not need any of these to be implemented, surely appears to be a way of engaging the learners in a creative and innovative atmosphere of learning.

Conclusion

On the basis of the preceding discussion, it is clear that drama/theatre is a useful strategy in ESL classroom which promotes language skills and boosts learners' self-confidence. It also improves creativity and imagination among learners. Apart from these, this approach gives the practice of the suprasegmental and prosodic features of the language. However, there is a common challenge among the teachers for such situations that how to conduct the class of big groups or how to design/improvise the activities of drama and theatre to teach language. Though it is a very innovative procedure and very useful but only for those who know how to use it and where to use it. If the teacher is well informed and technically sound, he/she will use it in a better way to attain fruitful results. With an a policy level employment of theatre/drama techniques in the language classroom it is possible to make the best of this technique of language teaching which is effective and a often popular tool among the pedagogues.

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