



NEW STRATEGIES TO ASSESS ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF SRI LANKAN STUDENTS: A PROPOSAL

Kandiah Shriganeshan

Abstract:

Learners' language development has generally been assessed by conventional methods by the maintenance of reliability and validity. Teachers check students' knowledge of spelling, appropriate use of vocabulary, grammar through spelling tests, filling in the blanks, vocabulary test, and syntactical structures through jumbled sentences, and reading skills through reading comprehension with 'Wh' questions, and written skills through guided and unguided compositions. However, students' responses based on the socio, economic, cultural and psychological aspects are not taken care of. Today's modern classrooms where students from various backgrounds gather for the purpose of learning do not have any consideration for the poor and slow learner. To aggravate the plight of the students the testing system too, does suppress the feelings of the learners whose living conditions and psychological motivation are poor. This situation leads to a state where students' interest in learning an alien language has become deplorable. In this context, the researcher is of the view that a methodology using theatre workshop to teach English would be useful in motivating students to learn English better. The present study conducted with a group of students, twenty-four in number from a Sri Lankan English classroom employing the ethnographical methodology was able to promote the speaking and writing skills of the students who came from a poor background in a war-torn city as was evident from the video-recorded classroom activities and the scripts written by the students after the performance. This paper concentrates on how the assessment was made to prove that language growth occurred because of the use of theatre workshop rather than conventional methods.

Key words: *Theatre workshop, new strategies, assessment methods, motivation*

Introduction

English language teaching in Sri Lanka has been unable to promote communication skills although various methods from Grammar Translation Method, Structural and Audio Lingual Method to Communicative Language Teaching Method have been in vogue for years. Most of the Sri Lankan students learn English as a second language for eight years and seem to know grammar rules in isolation but they fail to communicate well mainly due to four reasons:

- lack of opportunities
- loss of interest due to poor motivation
- Non-inclusion of Oral Test in the exam system
- affective factors like fear, inhibition and shyness.

Further, the strategies to evaluate the language growth of the students followed the same old methods of proficiency tests which may not be suitable to assess communication skills. Therefore, the study attempts to explore the possibilities of using theatre for language teaching in order to provide opportunities through theatre workshops and lower the affective factors and evolve new strategies to assess the students' language growth in communication. Thus, an attempt has been made in this study to examine whether and how theatre activities enable language competencies in young learners and tries to capture the learners' achievement in both oral and written skills. The main assumption of this study is that the use of theatre tasks motivates students to express feelings in contexts developed by them in a theatre workshop. An ethnographical approach has been adopted to investigate the research issues so as to gain better insights into the learners' ability to communicate and the process of language learning in the class.

Literature review

Communicative language teaching has been in vogue in Sri Lankan English classrooms for over three decades. However, in the Sri Lankan context it has not been able to fulfil the communicative needs of the second language learner in a motivating and meaningful manner. Students hardly find a real social context to practice speech. Therefore, the researcher is of the view that a theatre workshop using theatre tasks would provide an atmosphere to use the language meaningfully (Shriganeshan, 2009). Littlewood (1981) suggests functional communication activities with the purpose of using language to share and process information, identifying pictures, discovering identical parts, sequences, locations, missing information, missing features, secrets and so on. Reconstructing story sequences and pooling information to solve a problem are also recommended. His social interaction activities treat classroom as a social context. He suggests conversation or discussion sessions, dialogues, role-plays on school experiences, and simulations. Littlewood's idea of 'control-creativity' leads from performing memorized dialogues, contextualized drills, cued-dialogues, and role playing to improvisation.

Improvisation is simply one end of the 'control-creativity' continuum on which the whole discussion of role-playing has been based. It is the form of role-playing in which learners can be more creative, because they are most able to act out personal interpretations of the situations and their roles in it. Indeed, they have more freedom than in situations outside the classroom, where they have to obey stronger external constraints on what they say and do (Littlewood 1981, p. 62).

However, memorising and reproducing dialogues, drills, cued dialogues, and role-playing keep students in an artificial and monotonous situation. Although Littlewood points out the creativity aspect, the imaginative power in an “impoverished” second language context is limited. This is because cued dialogues in a semi-communicative context may not be helpful to lead the learner to a spontaneous interaction. In his social interaction activities he accommodates large-scale simulation activities and improvisation. But in the Sri Lankan context, it is felt that simulation will develop into an artificial activity because there is no fun for the learner. He will be dragged into a monotonous learning situation. Instead, using improvisation in the classroom implies that a stimulus situation can be interpreted and exploited by the learners. Imitating an everyday scene, adopting a particular personality, improvisation based on a photograph to perform impromptu etc. are likely to be much more beneficial to the learner. As such an attempt was made to develop a workshop using the concept of a full-fledged theatre, within a CLT orientation, to increase imagination and motivate the learners. The shift is from simulation to improvisation and beyond, to improvisation for dramatic effect, for a particular purpose. Improvisation and dramatisation are integral parts of task-based teaching which is an offshoot of CLT, but has also been adopted and adapted by other practitioners. The full-fledged theatre activities visualised in this paper are largely based on tasks that students have to carry out and perform.

Studies based on using theatre

Incorporating theatre into our ongoing classroom practice will equip us with a powerful and efficient teaching approach. Students will get new experience and motivation. It will broaden their creative awareness. In Literature, many kinds of studies are experimented and practised with the use of theatre and drama. Wessels (1991) gives an account of an EFL course for upper intermediate and advanced students. The course that is entirely based on drama techniques includes classes on pronunciation, spoken communication skills, theatre workshop activities, literature and production of plays. With a range of group dynamic activities, both verbal and non-verbal, such as warm-up and relaxation activities, name games, pair games and group games and learning through a range of theatre workshops with movement, mime, improvisation, scene work and drama voice-production etc. Students are prepared to think about the type of play and the kind of character they like to do. Then, they discuss in pairs, then in groups, and then as a whole class. Discussion on plots and characters is done through brainstorming. While improvising the play is done scene-by-scene and the script is transcribed by another set of students. Blocking of the scenes and repetition of actions will help them learn the language. Finally, once the full script is completed the teacher can edit the scene checking grammar and vocabulary. Students themselves can direct

in order to reduce the dominant role of the teacher. At this stage pronunciation, stress, intonation rhythm can be checked along with the revision of the script. Finally, for the performance, photo and video recording can be organized (Wessels, 1991, p.234). Elgar (2002) recommends the use of play writing and subsequent play reading in English language teaching for language development. Play writing provides a natural context for integration of all the four skills. He used this method of playwriting as a method of language learning activity with tertiary-level students and suggests a methodology for the composition of plays followed by dramatized reading (p.24). Thus, the activities of playwriting and subsequent play-reading helped to improve the learning of the language.

Heath (1993) introduces two theories of multiple voices and cognitive apprenticeship which could be enabled by the medium 'Play' to be used in the language teaching programme. According to Bakhtin (1981), people speak through many voices, i.e. they listen to others many times and store the language and make it their own when they use it. Therefore, they talk through the world of themselves and many others when they listen to. In the second concept of apprenticeship, young tutors who are engaged in tutoring are asked to report on the way their students do their learning. This reflection helps the older ones to decompose what is involved in learning a language. Youngsters become something other than their usual student selves within the cross-age tutoring frame. They must play new roles as teachers, mentors, evaluators and planners: they are accountable in new and different ways to themselves, to their young colleagues and to the adults with whom they must communicate about their achievements. The play enables both multiple voices and cognitive apprenticeship. It is the unit of interaction of learning that changes students. The play that involves full performance including verbal display arrests the attention of cognition that enables the number of communicative skills (Heath, 1993, p.188/189). Thus, language learning is promoted through play.

A critique on the studies

All the studies discussed above are based on the communicative approach. However, there is no theoretical concept articulated with regard to the nature of language and the nature of language learning. The authors have also not mentioned about the role of L1 in the language teaching, the influence of socio-cultural factors and classroom social dynamics. In addition to this, a full-fledged theatre is not utilized in these studies for promoting language learning with personality development. Wessels' (1991). 'Drama course' makes use of relaxation exercises, improvisation and writing out scripts mechanically for a course without incorporating students' interest and the 'Play writing and play reading course' of Elgar (2002) for language development does not utilize the performance part vigorously to provide the essence of the theatre. The Theatre form is full of vigour and activities, accommodating all the literary and cultural elements. Imitating,

acting, creating, criticizing, interpreting and expressing views and ideas through the use of language, making use of space for discussions, debates and establishing points of view, incorporating social, political, cultural and economic aspirations of the participants into the themes and plots, accommodating all the possible moral, psychological, social and spiritual reflections through characterisation and sketching out characters and fixing them in a proper context and using music and spectacle for mood creation and visual effect respectively can all be possible in the use of theatre. Besides, students' affective and social factors, cultural patterns, norms and social conventions, previous knowledge of local culture and drama and theatre forms, and the use of first language/mother tongue could find a space in the use of theatre in English classrooms.

The present study

The present study, therefore, is carried out from an ethnographical perspective in order to examine the use of theatre for language teaching in the secondary level classrooms in Sri Lanka and how new strategies of assessment could be developed through theatre tasks.

Aims and objectives

- *To find out the possibilities of teaching English through theatre to make students proficient in oral and written communication.
- * Theatre to lower the affective factors and provide motivation to communicate in English in a fear-free & cultural friendly situation.
- *To evolve new strategies of assessment for language development.

Research design and method

The subjects were a set of homogenous group of twenty four students of around 11-12 years from Class Six of a school in Vavuniya, Sri Lanka for a period of three months. All the students have had their primary education in the mother tongue, Tamil. Situated in the northern border of the Northern Province in Sri Lanka, the school was predominantly a Tamil school. Out of the twenty four students, there were two Christian students, one Muslim student and the rest of them were Hindus. All the students were from a lower middle class background. They were able to watch television programmes and were exposed to some English through the elders in the community, newspapers, radio, and television. Some students also had a little support from their older siblings and parents but many of them managed with just the teachers' help in the school.

Twenty tasks designed were graded from controlled to semi-controlled and open and common themes. In four phases the researcher met the students three hours a week. From familiar dialogues used in the first phase, the workshop moved to the second phase based on visual pictures, poems and songs which would

activate their imagination and poems and songs would kindle their imaginative and creative ability. The third phase used stories narrated by the students and the researcher and the fourth phase introduced common themes selected from the students' own experiences. During this phase students were motivated to improvise plays creating characters moving on to a plot and conflict and to resolve within the short duration given for production. The ultimate aim of the tasks was to enable communication through the use of theatre. The objective of the task was to see whether students were able to communicate through characters moving in conflicts discussed in groups and succeed in communication.

The workshop began with warm-up exercises and games followed up with pre-tasks which led to the main tasks. The pre-tasks were planned to develop the tasks designed for the workshop (see Prabu, 1987 & Vygotsky 1978). Students worked in pairs for producing dialogues and role played at the beginning and got into groups of three or four or five depending on the nature of the tasks. Students had a brainstorm session to get into discussion which led them to act out the dialogues introduced by the facilitator. Some of the while-rehearsing performances and while-improvising performances were recorded for analysis. Starting from controlled productions to semi-controlled productions students progressed through the open and common themes which were social in nature.

From imitating the dialogues given as input to creating their own language, the students got into trance-like performances (students acted their roles and parts in an unconscious manner) which motivated them to engage more of communicative activities (Diary notes, 24/05/2006).

Finally, they were asked to write down the scripts as a collective production in order to capture their improvement in language capability. These were used for analysis to assess their progress and language growth.

Results and discussion

An analysis of the written scripts based only on grammatical categories is attempted here to test and categorise explicit language growth in the learner. The categories of changes indicate the improvements of the students' language growth.

Assessment strategies

Strategy I: Ability to find out new vocabulary

Students' exceptional development in producing new vocabulary learnt from the environment generated out of the workshop and projected through performances. The teacher's inputs were sentence patterns like:

- * *What's your name? My name is ... Where do you live?*
- * *Students produced questions like*
- * *"What is your hobby?, What is your favourite food"*

Students' output

They provided answers of different kinds with a variety of vocabulary.

*** For example:**

- *"my hobby is reading story books, collecting stamps playing cricket.*
- *How many brothers and sisters have you? ..*
- *What is your native place?..*

Students' use of new vocabulary**-Use of nouns**

* *bread, Thosa, baby rose, sunflower and picture.*

- Names of places

* *Veppankulum, Thonikkal*

- Use of verbs

* *Reading drawing , playing, gardening*

- Proper names

* *Kaviranjana, Kumudinidevi , Sivagowri & Alagathurai*

-Kinship terms

* *Brother, sister,*

Strategy II

Ability to develop further from the use of words to phrases:

Responses were made naturally in phrases and led to natural flow of language: No need for ice-breakers.

In their dialogues, Students added phrases like:

- *'thank you', 'thank you for your information', 'you are welcome'*
- *and 'good bye'.*

Students started to use:

- simple sentences like "I'm going to zoo"
- questions like 'Where are you going?','What's your father's name?'
- evaluative expressions like "Oh, how nice" . and
- additive phrases like "good bye, welcome, see you.

Strategy III: Ability to learn from others for expression

- Teacher's diary notes could be utilised to prove students' progress in learning from the peers.
- Students' natural tendency could be noted to move from phrases to sentences to communicate.
- Their ability to use simple sentences can be recorded to assess their growth in learning.

In Task 2 the function was asking for a seat. The teacher's input was as follows:

A: Excuse me, can I sit here?

B: Yes please/ Sorry, my friend sits here.

Students proceeded to inquire more personal information about their peers in English using simple sentences.

With the teacher's introductory sentences students were able to produce their own dialogues with their pair partners. More enthusiasm was observed as they included introduction parts which they learnt in the previous tasks

-(Diary notes by the researcher)

Strategy IV: Ability to create new concepts can be used as another strategy

Students innovatively included new reasons for the journey. The reasons given by them:

- *"To get plane tickets to Colombo."*
- *"To see aunty's baby."*
- *"To celebrate Christmas."*
- *"To attend wedding."*

Strategy V: Ability to use appropriate structures

Students went further to achieve continuous flow of language. They moved from simple to compound and to complex sentences making speeches in paragraphs. The use of a range of words and word length all capture the language growth of the students. Students' expressions moved from simple expressions formed with words and phrases to simple sentences and then from simple to compound and complex sentences, students' 'languaging' developed quite surprisingly in the short span of three months.

1. Used simple sentences

"Go straight along the station road. You will see the clock tower. Turn right. You will see the Bus stand."

2. Moved to compound sentences

"I will go to the forest and kill and bath on that blood then".

3. Explored complex sentences:

"If I bite those will finish. Don't quarrel another time".

Strategy VI: Ability at manipulating the contexts using holophrases

Students began with holophrases, and even attempted new formations of language to express what they felt about a particular situation. This implies that they were able to internalise what they were able to gather from what they heard and used it effectively to communicate.

Eg: 1. *Bamp Blastet & bomplash for bomb blast*
 2. *lilinciness for license*
 3. *yallas for jealous*
 4. *rabbish for rubbish*

Strategy VII: Use of language principles- Gricean Co-operative principle

Students' use of brevity of expressions in some contexts and full-fledged expressions in certain other contexts prove that the students unknowingly follow the Gricean cooperative principle of quality, quantity, manner and relation (Grice, 1975).

➤ Brevity of expressions

It is to be noted that the ability of students to use language with brevity itself is an indication that they have captured the maxim of quantity of the language (Grice, 1975).

1. Y: *Where are you go?*
 J: *I am going to church.*
 Y: *Which church*
 J: *Soosayapper church*
2. N: *Why do you go to Colombo?*
 S: *To my aunt's wedding ceremony*

➤ Use of complex sentences

1. Ya: *Stop stop you can't go this way if you wait here I will shoot you*
 Kaki: *Why not*
 Ya: *The bomb blast you don't know*
 Ka: *I don't know sir*
2. *No problem you will pass another exam. You go and rest in your bedroom*
3. *If you live in harmony no one cant win you If you separate enemies will win you.*

• **Use of comparative forms was also noted:**

1. *A: No! our religion is better than in the world.*
2. *Jim: Thank you oh, it is very smaller than for your half*
3. *Ram: your apple is bigger than his apple can I eat this two apples.*

➤ **Use of more compound and complex sentences noted**

1. *P: ok. I will go o forest and kill and bath on that blood then I am world fighter
ha... ha... ha...*
2. *F: don' qurraled I will go to froest if qurraled I will go to forest
.....
if you are oupsed own enemy is kill you*
3. *SI: I am also passed go and study in Colombo*
4. *Old; OK I must bite too If I bite those will finish Don't quarrel another
time*

Thus, one finds that with reference to many aspects of language, including syntax, semantics and even pragmatics, as reflected in grammar, students were able to use language appropriately by the end of the workshop.

Strategy VIII

Thematic and conceptual growth: Use of Social issues

- The themes developed through negotiations with students. Started with introducing each other, and some pictures and poems stories and plays.
- But students developed the following: Bomb blast, Road block, Displacement, Development of a school, accident, Violent, riots, Theft/ Burglary, Army round up.

Conclusion

The themes of the workshop were developed through negotiations with students. The researcher had some basic plans to start with. They included introducing each other, functions of communications like asking for a seat, seeking information, giving directions, and using some pictures and poems, stories and plays to be used as prompts for play productions. But the plays developed by the students had very different themes from the ones planned namely bomb blast, road block, displacement, development of a school, accident, violent, riots, theft/ burglary, help, army round-up, social harmony etc. This was because the students faced a lot of hardships and difficulties in their real life where a war is perpetually on. The people, including the students live in a terrifying situation. They were inspired therefore, to work on social issues. Across the development of the different phases of the workshop, and sometimes even in one day, students showed remarkable growth, either in their conceptualization or in their conversion of themes into texts to be rehearsed and then into written scripts. Moreover, in this conversion

of themes into productions which later became scripts, characters were more in number, and issues were genuine and down-to-earth. Nearly all the dialogues were context appropriate.

Growth can also be assessed through how students interpret the texts given for production creatively and differently although they do borrow language from others and the given text. In the third phase of the workshop students were given a play titled 'An Old man and an Apple' to be read and the script was taken away by the teacher. They were asked to interpret the theme and create different plays. All seven groups developed the play further from what had been given to them and performed 'new' plays. Another marker of development and growth was the way in which students were able to learn from each other and they were able to not only interpret creatively, but take off from each other's performances and create on their own new performances which can only be called, (for the want of a better term) as 'inter-textual' growth. Thus, eight strategies were identified to assess students' language growth. Rather than using traditional methods of assessment, one needs to go beyond and evolve new strategies to assess students' performance.

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