Using Theatre to Teach English to Sri Lankan Students

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Introduction

In the present context, English language teaching in Sri Lanka is unable to promote students' communication skills although various methods from Grammar Translation to Communicative Language Teaching 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 fail to communicate satisfactorily 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 are not valid and reliable.

This study attempts to explore the possibilities of using theatre for language teaching in order to provide students opportunities to filter affective factors and evolve new strategies to assess students' language growth in communication. Thus, an attempt has been made in this study to examine whether and how theatre activities can be used to enhance language competencies in young learners. The main assumption of this study is that the use of theatre activities motivates students to express their feelings in contexts developed in a theatre workshop. An ethnographical approach has been adopted to investigate the research issues so as to gain insights into the learners' ability to communicate in the class.

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching has been in practice in Sri Lankan English classrooms for twenty odd years. However, in the Sri Lankan context it has not been able to fulfil the communicative needs of the second language learner in a meaningful manner. Students hardly find a real social context to practise speech. Therefore, the researcher is of the view that a theatre workshop using theatre activities would provide an atmosphere to use English meaningfully (Shriganeshan, 2009). Littlewood (1981) suggests functional communication activities to share and process information, identify pictures, discover identical parts, sequences, locations, missing information and features. Reconstructing story sequences and pooling information to solve a problem are also recommended. Littlewood's social interaction activities treat classroom as a social context. He suggests conversation or discussions, dialogues, role-plays on school experiences, and simulations. His idea of 'control-creativity' stems from reciting memorized dialogues, contextualized drills, cued-dialogues, and role playing to improvisation. He writes:

> 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. (62)

However, memorising and reproducing dialogues, drills, cued dialogues, and role-playing keep students in an artificial and monotonous situation. Although Littlewood points to the creativity aspect, the imaginative power in an "impoverished" second language context is limited because cued dialogues in a semi-communicative

context may not be helpful to lead the learner to spontaneous interactions. In his/her social interaction, he/she 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 practically no fun for the learner. He/She will be dragged into a monotonous learning situation. Instead, imitating an everyday scene, adopting a particular personality, improvisation based on a photograph to perform impromptu, etc. are likely to be beneficial to the learner.

A workshop using the concept of a full-fledged theatre within a CLT orientation was conducted to motivate the learners. The shift was from simulation to improvisation and beyond. Improvisation and dramatisation are an integral part of task-based teaching which is an offshoot of CLT. The full-fledged theatre activities visualised in this paper are largely based on tasks that students have to perform.

Using Theatre for Language Learning

Incorporating theatre into on-going classroom practice will equip teachers with a powerful and efficient teaching approach. Students will get new experiences and motivation and this will broaden their creative horizons. Wessels (1991) gives an account of an EFL course for upper intermediate and advanced students. The course, based on drama techniques, includes classes on pronunciation, spoken communication skills, theatre activities, and production of plays. With a range of group 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 mime and improvisation, students are prepared to think about the type of play and the kind of character they like to do. They discuss in pairs and then in groups and eventually as a whole class. Discussion of plots and characters is done through brainstorming.

Improvising a play is done scene-by-scene and the script is transcribed by another set of students. Blocking of the scenes and repeated actions will help them learn the language. Once the full script is completed, the teacher can edit it. Students themselves can direct the play to reduce the dominant role of the teacher. At this stage, pronunciation, stress, intonation and rhythm can be checked along with the revision of the script. Finally, for the performance, photo and video recording can be organized (Wessels 234). Elgar (2002) recommends the use of play writing and subsequent play reading in English for language development. Play writing provides a natural context for integration of all the four skills. Elgar used playwriting as a method of language learning activity with tertiary-level students and suggests a methodology for the composition of plays that followed by dramatized reading (24). Thus the activities of playwriting and subsequent play-reading helped to improve the learning of the language.

A Critique on the Studies

The studies discussed above are based on the communicative approach. However, no theoretical concept has been articulated with regard to the nature of language and language learning. The authors have not talked about the role of L1 in language teaching, the influence of socio-cultural factors and classroom social dynamics. Wessels' "Drama Course" makes use of relaxation exercises, improvisation and writing scripts mechanically without taking into consideration students' interest. "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 dynamic accommodating 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 themes and plots, accommodating moral, psychological, social and spiritual reflections through characterisation and sketching characters and fixing them in a proper context and using music and spectacle for mood creation and visual effect respectively are possible through 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 some space in the use of theatre in English classrooms.

The Present Study

The present study was carried out from an ethnographical perspective in order to examine the use of theatre for language teaching in secondary level classrooms in Sri Lanka. The study aimed at finding out the possibilities of teaching English through theatre to make students proficient in oral and written communication and examining how theatre can lower the students' affective factors and provide them motivation to communicate in English in a fear-free and culturally friendly situation.

The study involved a set of homogenous group of twenty four students of around 11-12 years from Class VI of a school in Vavuniya, Sri Lanka and was conducted for a period of three months. All the students had their primary education in their mother tongue, namely, Tamil. Situated in the northern border of the Northern Province in Sri Lanka, the school is a predominantly Tamil school. Out of 24 students, there were two Christians, one Muslim and the rest were Hindus. All the students were from a lower middle class background. They were exposed to some English through the elders in the community, newspapers, radio, and television. Some had a little support from their elder siblings and parents but many of them managed with just the teachers' help in the school.

Twenty tasks graded from controlled to semi-controlled and open were designed. The researcher met the students in four phases 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 activated their imagination and kindled their imaginative and creative ability. The third phase used stories narrated by the students and the researcher, and the fourth phase introduced common themes chosen from the students' own experiences. During this phase, students were motivated to improvise plays. They created a plot and a few characters with some conflicts to be resolved within a short duration. 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 involved in conflicts.

The workshop began with warm-up exercises and games followed by pre-tasks which led to the main tasks. Students worked in pairs for producing dialogues and for role plays and got into groups of three or four depending on the nature of the tasks. They had a brainstorming session 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 they progressed gradually from imitating the dialogues given as input to creating their own language. Finally, they were asked to write down the script as a collective production in order to capture their improvement in language capability. These were used to assess their progress and language growth.

Conclusion

The workshop themes were developed through negotiations with students. The researcher had some tasks in mind before the commencement of the workshop. They included introducing one

another, tasks such as asking for a seat, seeking information, giving directions and using pictures and poems, stories and plays to be used as prompts for play productions. But the plays developed by the students themselves had different themes such as bomb blast, road block, displacement, development of a school, accident, 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 was perpetually on. The people, including the students, lived in terrifying situations. They were, therefore, inspired to work on social issues.

Students showed a remarkable growth both in their conceptualization and conversion of themes into texts to be rehearsed and then transformed into written scripts. In the conversion of themes into productions which later became scripts, characters were more in number, and issues were genuine and down-to-earth. Nearly all dialogues were context appropriate.

In the third phase of the workshop, students were given a play titled "An Old man and an Apple" to be read aloud. They were asked to interpret the theme and create different plays. All seven groups developed the play further and produced 'new' plays. Another marker of growth and development was the way in which students were able to learn from one another and were able to not only interpret creatively, but take off from each other's performances and come up with their own performances. This workshop proved that theatre is an effective medium to teach English

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