

Making the English Classrooms More Communicative with Theatre Tasks

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1. Statement of the Problem

English language teaching in Sri Lanka is unable to promote communication skills although there have been various methods from Grammar Translation Method, Structural and Audio Lingual Method to Communicative language teaching method that has 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 two reasons:

- lack of opportunities
- affective factors like fear, inhibition and shyness.

The study makes an attempt to explore the possibilities of using theatre for language teaching in order to provide opportunities through theatre workshops and thereby lowering the affective factors. Thus, an attempt has been made in this study is to examine whether and how theatre activities enable language competencies in young learners and try to capture the learners' achievement in both oral and written skills. The main assumption of this study is that the use of theatre 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 more insights into the learners' ability to communicate and the process of language learning in the class. Before going to the discussion of the study, the status of English in Sri Lanka needs to be presented, for that is the backdrop for this exploration and experiment.

2.1 ELT in Sri Lanka

Communicative language teaching has been in vogue in Sri Lanka since the mid eighties. 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. In the Sri Lankan situation, students hardly find a real social context to practice language speech. Therefore, the researcher is of the view that a theatre workshop using theatre tasks would provide an atmosphere to use the language meaningfully.

Littlewood (1981) suggests functional communication activities with the purpose of using language to share information and using language to process information, identifying pictures, discovering identical parts, sequences, locations, missing information, missing features, secrets, and so on under sharing and processing information. His social interaction activities treat the classroom as a social context. He suggests conversation or discussion sessions, dialogues, role-plays on school experiences, and simulations. His idea of control to creativity leads from performing memorized dialogues, contextualized drills, cued-dialogues, and role-playing to improvisation. 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 learners to spontaneous interaction. (Littlewood, 1981: 86)

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. (Littlewood 1981: 62).

Improvisation and dramatisation are an integral part 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.

2.2 Experimental Theatres in Language Education

Incorporating theatre into our ongoing classroom practice will equip us with a powerful and efficient teaching approach. Students will get new experiences and motivation. It will extend their creative awareness. In literature, there are many kinds of studies, which have experimented and practised with the use of theatre and drama. There are theatres like Story Theatre, Reading Theatre, and the Magic 'If' Theatre and studies like an EFL Course using Drama, the Play writing and Play reading Course, and 'Play' in the language teaching programme.

Hines (2005) developed a story theatre. Story theatre can be used with students of all ages and all levels of English proficiency. Students take a text- a piece of fiction, a fable, or a folk tale and act it out (Hines, 2005, pp.25-26). Martinez, Roser and Strecker (1999) maintain that Readers' Theatre is an interpretive reading activity in which readers use their voices to bring characters to life. (p. 326). The study by Martinez et al was made with pre- and post-assessments of students' oral readings of unrehearsed stories from the same or similar series used in the repertory groups.

The action research study using 'Readers' Theatre' (RT) done by Liu (2000) with 14 ESL students in an intermediate L2 writing class in a US university for 10 weeks was designed to improve writing skills. Liu used two short stories and two personal narratives in three phases. Via Richard (1987 in Rivers) speaks of 'The Magic of If' theatre and says that drama techniques are strategies to achieve either drama or theatre or both. The author based on Stanislavski's chart "the magic if" suggests to expand it to 'If I were in this situation and if I said these lines, how would I say them' (Rivers, pp.110-114).

2.3 Studies Based on Using Theatre

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. (Wessels, 1991, p.234).

ar (2002) recommends the use of play writing and subsequent play reading in English language teaching for language development. Playwriting provides a natural context for integration of all the four skills (p.24). Thus the activities of writing of plays and reading of them 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, (Heath, 1993:188). 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, 1993:189). Thus language learning is promoted through the medium of the play.

2.4 A Critique on the Studies

All the five 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 the role of L1 in 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.

A theatre workshop primarily concerned with language enabling cannot begin at zero level. Thus, it must identify the proximal task zone for development to take place. It also needs to keep in mind the social dynamics of the classroom and identify ways in which the learning community can co-construct language, make meaning, take part in a shared dialogue and grow linguistically as a result of this experience (Watkins, 2005:16). With these aims in mind, it is necessary to examine the notions of scaffolding, dialogue, culture sensitivity and learning communities.

2.5 Scaffolding in Theatre Tasks

According to educational psychology, learning is a process in tune with the cognitive maturation of an individual (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Bruner (1986) sees language learning as one dimension of learning, and his theory of Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) is the network of social relations that enables cognitive maturation. The social relations who help humans to learn and who guide them through this learning are elders, peers and teachers.

Since language is a facet of cognitive maturation this can also be developed in a theatre workshop where tasks can be initially negotiated between the students and the teacher cum facilitator and worked out in groups with the help of the teacher and more able peers. Furthermore, the knowledge of L1 culture, literature (poems, plays and stories) and theatre aspects and techniques would act as a scaffold for the play production.

2.6 Providing Space for Oppressed Voices

Through conversation and dialogues students can participate in a meaningful discussion and become active and dynamic in their participation. Such participation is dialogic in nature. As Bakhtin states:

To be means to be for another and through the other one's self. A person has no sovereign internal territory, he is wholly and always as the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another (Bakhtin, 1981, p.287).

In the theatre workshop visualised for Sri Lankan students, this Bakhtinian concept of providing space to the other is dovetailed with the Freirian concept of 'Dialogue' where silenced voices of the classroom are given an opportunity to be heard. It is felt that a theatre workshop can function as a place for oppressed voices to be heard. Rather than adopting a banking concept of education a negotiated liberating pedagogy will result, which in turn will lead to more communication and more opportunities to later use the language so acquired in society for genuine meaning making. In Freire's words: "Without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education" (Freire, 1972: 81).

2.7 Culture-sensitive Features of a Theatre Workshop

All classroom tasks in general, and theatre workshop tasks in particular, need to be extremely culture-sensitive. Thus an adaptation of CLT tasks into theatre- tasks must take this idea also into account. Holliday (1994) argues for the existing communicative approach to be enhanced with culture-sensitive features to achieve the appropriate methodology for a particular group of students (p.160). Thus, the teacher should be able to understand the classroom culture in order to motivate the students and tap their natural resources for communicative competence.

3.1 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 at secondary level classrooms in Sri Lanka.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

- To find out the possibilities of teaching English through theatre to make students proficient in oral and written communication
- To see if theatre can lower the affective factors and provide motivation to communicate in English in a fear-free and culturally friendly situation.

3.3 A Thick Description of the Target Group

The subjects of the study were a homogenous group of twenty four students of around 11-12 years from Class Six of Vn/ Vavuniya Tamil Madya Maha Vidyalayam, Vavuniya, Sri Lanka, during the period from 5th May 2006 to 27th July 2006. All the students had their primary education in the mother tongue, Tamil. Out of 24 students, there were two Christians, one Muslim and the rest of them 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.

3.4 Use of Theatre Tasks

Twenty tasks were designed for the study, which lasted three months. Tasks were graded from controlled to semi-controlled and open and common themes. These were maintained as four phases of the workshop. The researcher met the students three hours a week.

The first phase was based on familiar language and familiar dialogue. This was experie: 1. The second phase was based on visual pictures, poems and songs. Visual materials activate their imagination and poems and songs would kindle their imaginative and creative ability. The third phase was based on using stories narrated by the students and the stories given by the researcher. And the fourth phase was conducted with common themes selected from the students' own experiences. During this phase students would be motivated to improvise plays creating characters, moving on to a plot and conflict resolution within the short duration given for production.

3.5 The Tasks used in the Workshop

First phase – Functions of communication	
No.	Talking about oneself
1	Asking for a seat in a bus
2	Asking for directions
3	Asking for information
4	Narrating past incidents
5	Discussing future events & offering help, accepting & refusing
6	Describing things and incidents at different places
Second phase – Use of Pictures, emotions, a poem and a song	
7	Mind pictures for creating scenes - (Imagining a picture as told by the facilitator: You are going to the Junction and you are stopped by the police. Imagine the reasons and ...)
8	Pictures for interpretations
9	Expression of emotions such as anger, fear, happiness, sadness etc.
10	Creating scenes on the above emotions
11	Use of songs for productions
12	Use of poems for productions
Third Phase – Use of stories and plays	
13	Narrating stories
14	Improvisation of stories
15	Reading of a story- “A Bundle of Sticks”
16	Reading of a play – “Two boys and an old man”
Fourth phase – Use of common themes	
17	Discussion of common themes – classroom problems
18	Working on domestic problems
19	Street problems to be discussed
20	Discussion of open productions (students’ own)

Table 1: Tasks used in the Workshop

3.6 The Theatre Workshop

The researcher cum facilitator ran the workshop with warm-up exercises and games followed by 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). The twenty tasks were developed in negotiation with the students in the workshop in order to give them a sense of interest in their activities. From the textbook, some areas were selected for the content of the workshop (‘The wind and the sea’ a poem from the grade six English textbook). 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 brainstorming 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 are 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 in 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. Put together, there were 98 scripts that evolved twenty tasks out of the workshop. These were used for analysis to capture their progress and language growth.

4.1 An Analysis Based on Grammatical Categories

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. The use of holophrases, phrases and clauses and the shift from simple to complex sentences, 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 by words and phrases to simple sentences and then from simple to compound and complex sentences, students' 'linguaging' developed quite surprisingly in the short span of three months.

1. Simple sentence:

"Go straight along the station road. You will see the clock tower. Turn right. You will see the Bus stand." (A3, T2, S2)

2. Compound sentence:

"I will go to the forest and kill and bath on that blood then". (A3, T13, S)

Note: The students used the word 'bath' for bathe. The character says that he will kill and bathe in the blood. The reference might have been taken from *Mahabharatha*.

3. Complex sentence:

"If I bite those will finish. Don't quarrel another time". (A3, T15, S6)

They 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*(A1, T8, S1) & *bomplash* (A3, T8, S2) for bomb blast

2. *lilinciness* (A3, T9, S4) for license

3. *yallas* for jealous

4. *rabbish* for rubbish (A3, T11, S1)

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).

➤ From the first phase simple sentences and 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 n*(A3, T2, S5)

2. N: *Why do you go to Colombo?*

S: *To my aunt's wedding ceremony* (A3, T3, S9)

➤ **From the second phase use of compound and 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 ((A3, T8, S2)
2. *No problem you will pass another exam. You go and rest in your bed room (A3, T10, S3)*
3. *If you live in harmony no one cant win you If you separate enemies will win you (A3, T14, S3).*
 - **Use of comparative forms were also noted:**
 1. *A: No! our religion is bettr than in the world. (A3, T11, S2).*
 2. *Jim: Thank you oh, it is very smaller than for your half (A3, T15, S1).*
 3. *Ram: your apple is bigger than his apple can I eat this two apples. (A3, T15, S4).*

➤ **From the third phase use of more compound and complex sentences**

1. *P: ok. I will go o forest and kill and bath on that blood then I am world fighter ha... ha... ha...(A3, T13, S1)*
2. *F: don' qurraled I will go to froest if qurraled I will go to forest*
if you are oupped own enemy is kill you (A3, T14, S1)
3. *S1: I am also passed go and study in Colombo (A3, T3, S2)*
4. *Old; OK I must bite too If I bite those will finish Don't quarrel another time (A3, T15, S6).*

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. From another perspective, it is interesting to find that class 6 children, all of 11 years old, were worldly wise and dealt with domestic abuse, faced violence from parents and in some cases even faced authoritarian treatment and support and excuses from members of the family. These issues were reflected in the 'themes' chosen by students during the workshop when they were asked to expand on 'house' problems.

Similarly, when asked to work with 'street problems' the variations and development were equally 'adult' and dealt with violence, theft, murder and court of inquiry, along with police and prison scenes. The only 'normal' dealing seemed to be with reference to school, which dealt with day-to-day problems of students' misbehaviour in the class and punishment by teachers and principals. Thus, the social consciousness of the students is extremely high, and it is obvious that they were able to accommodate the social issues, which had an impact on their lives, in accordance with the 'Grips Theatre' (2008) perspective that says that it is natural for children to reflect on what they experience in their lives.

The themes of the workshop were developed through negotiations with students. The researcher had some basic plans to start with, which included introducing each other, functions of communications like asking for a seat, inquiring for 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, including bomb blasts, road blocks, displacement, development of a school, accident, violence, 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 was perpetually on. The people, including the students lived in a terrifying situation. They were inspired therefore, to work on social issues.

4.2 Students' Language Growth

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 back 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.

5. Conclusion

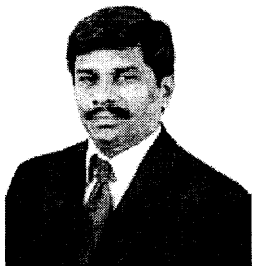
The Sri Lankan traditional classroom could be described as a 'banking' one, with the teachers' instruction the classroom session moves on. There is not even construction and therefore, co-construction cannot be dreamt of. In the workshop, students were introduced to different tasks of the same mode arrived at through pre-tasks related to the topics discussed. The negotiation was done in groups. This made them to be at ease with the entire work format. Gradually, they started to work on the themes and the situations and even suggested modifications. The tempo was high as the workshop proceeded with functions of communication, interpretations of pictures, emotions, locations, poems and songs, which were developed as theatre tasks. Stories were narrated and then converted into plays. When they were given a common story for play production each group interpreted the story differently and even the language of the performance scripts differed from group to group. This variation/modification was also reflected in the performance script that had to be read and interpreted differently. Here too, their interpretations were different and the language creatively modified. Later in the workshop, socially relevant themes and children's common problems were discussed and plays put together, performed and then scripted.

These productions also reflected the originality of their creation. There was no imitation, only creation. Students, during the enactment of the play, (which, it should be remembered is prior to the actual written-down script) searched for words and phrases to make meaning; this is captured in the 'yes, ok,' and in the fillers like 'ah.. mm' etc. that preceded the use of new words. Such 'creation' I realised would not have happened in traditional not-so-active classrooms, with a normal dogmatic syllabus. The modifications are needed. Therefore, there is a need for a new syllabus based on students' socio cultural aspects. The use of theatre tasks would be one of the new methods the teachers could rely on for making the classroom more communicative.

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