

Social Issues as Contents for Language Communication in an English Classroom: A Theatre-based Study

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Language expression occurs whenever there is a need for communication. English Language Teaching is done in Sri Lankan schools to promote students' ability of expression in English. But the reality is that majority of them are unable to make oral and written communication fluently and effectively. Even with the new text books which do not reflect the students' social reality and do not provide the enthusiasm needed to the learner, teachers are unable to motivate students to communicate well. In this context, it is found that once students are made conscious of the social issues which are very much relevant in their day to day life they would be tempted to express their feelings about it in a conditioned atmosphere in a theatre workshop. This is a way to promote them to communicate well. This is well observed in an ethnographical study conducted with 38 students, a mixed group of classes 7, 8 and 9 from a school in Vavuniya, a northern city in Sri Lanka. Students were introduced to pictures, poems, stories in a theatre workshop which motivated them with warm-up exercises and games. The study was conducted for a period of three-weeks. The students were able to communicate well in the workshop as characters of a drama piece created by themselves and drafted out the scripts with full of ideas enacted in groups. This paper makes an attempt to analyse the scripts and show how the students' language development promoted and enriched by the contents which are based on social issues.

Keywords: *Language expression, enactment, social reality*

Introduction

Language expression occurs whenever there is a need for communication. Making our students use the second language, English has been an uphill task for the teachers of English. English Language Teaching is done in Sri Lankan schools to promote students' ability of expression in English. But majority of them are unable to make oral and written communication fluently and effectively. The text books have somewhat alienated the students because the new text books neither reflect the students' social reality and nor provide the enthusiasm needed to the learner and teachers are unable to motivate students to communicate well (Mosback 1990). It is argued that the methods handled were of no use at all Richards and Rogers 1986/2001). In this context, it is found that once students are made conscious of the social issues which are very much relevant in their day to day life they would be tempted to express their feelings in English, their second language (Holliday, 1994). It is to be seen whether it would be possible in a conditioned atmosphere in a theatre workshop using theatre and drama techniques (Maley and Duff 1982). This would be a possible approach to attract students towards learning English and to train them to communicate well.

Objectives of the study

The aims of the present study are to:

- Find out possible solutions to the problems in oral and written communication that Sri Lankan students face in learning English.
- Focus on the use of social themes in a classroom theatre workshop in order to make students communicate in English without inhibitions

Research design and method

An ethnographical study was conducted with 38 students, a mixed group of classes 7, 8 and 9 from a school in Vavuniya, a northern city in Sri Lanka for three weeks in order to work out the process (Lier 1989). The researcher had interactions with students in person in order to get their personal and social information. Then they were taken out of the classroom to have a free atmosphere and the workshop continued in a bigger hall in order to make them move about. Students were motivated with warm-up exercises and games to make them feel free and students from different classes were mixed up and put in various groups. First they were introduced to functions of communications and then they were asked to narrate their past incidents. After that they were given pictures, poems or stories for interpretation and communication in a theatre workshop. The students were expected to improvise and develop plots and characters which could lead to a drama piece. Once they created they were asked to perform in groups to assess their communicative skills. Later, they were asked to draft out the scripts enacted in groups (Bird 1979 & Elgar 2002). This paper makes an attempt to analyse the scripts and show how the students' language development is promoted and enriched better by the contents which are based more on social issues than the mechanical type of functions of communications.

There were nine tasks used for this study with the school students during the nine days spanning for three weeks (classes were conducted three days a week). The tasks were selected on the basis of their present level of understanding of the English language and their nature of learning (Ellis 2003). At the beginning they were introduced to functions of communication as they are familiar with this type of task in the school (Jones 1981). They are as follows:

- Asking for a seat in a bus, asking for direction and making an inquiry at the station/ bank counter,

It is followed up with narrating past incidents on the second day as this task would be feasible to express with feelings and can relate their social experience ((Halliday 1978 & Widdowson 1978).

- Narrating past experiences,

On the third day students were given pictures for interpretation and continuously other tasks similar to the ones below were used.

- Pictures for interpretations,

- Locations like school, hospital, temple, railway station and likely conversations in these contexts,
- Emotions like fear, frustration, anger & happiness - proceeding to themes,
- Objects like bag, chair, & file for developing plots,

During the last week tasks which require more imagination were utilised. First, a poem from their book was used (Edrisinghe et al. 2003). and then a short story written by a Sri Lankan for experiencing our own feelings was used for the second day. Finally, the students were allowed to imagine on any open theme of their choice to see whether they are motivated to touch social issues as contents for their lesson.

- Poems – ‘Leisure’, ‘Stopping by the woods’ & ‘Breakfast’ for creating situations,
- A short story for improvisation – (Santhan’s (A Sri Lankan writer) ‘In Their Own Worlds’), and
- On any open themes and plots – For example, ‘A trip experience’ for developing a full-length play.

Results and discussion

Students were given the above situations and contexts. The warm-up exercises provided the necessary mood for creativity and innovation. Students were able to improvise situations and create language through producing plays. Having used the pictures, the imagination ran high and the students were able to produce better language and ideas. The spelling and grammatical errors are retained as they are. One sample is reproduced here.

Traumatic experience in Tsunami

Scene 2

[tsunami affected people are in Refugee camps, Toor reports are coming and asking about Tsunami]

Shiromy: You all are affected by Tsunami. How is your experience about Tsunami?

Nancy: Oh! I loose my husband and my relations. My daughter is in a bad condition. How much even you give anything I can't forget this experience.

[Prathayini and Saranka are collecting Tsunami relief funds]

Saranga : We collected many things for you all. Get these things.

Keerthika: We loose our children and our things . but you all are like our children helping us thank you very much. May god bless you.

This is the bad experience the people faced during Tsunami on 26th of December 2004.

(see A1, T3, S1)

On the fourth day, students were asked to work on some situations related to 'locations' like 'shop'. In this piece too, it can be observed how students' moral and ethical thinking found a place in their performance along with language production. They conceived the scenes in various places like shop, school, and home and the theme was an ethical one. The one who lost the bag was able to recover it. Some extracts are from Task 4, Script 1:

Scene 2 - At a shop

Three people are coming and buying something and going to the cashier

Pratha: Here all see! Whose bag is this?

Abithra: We can open it and see what is inside

Sivaluxe: No! No! Don't open it. We can give it to the owner. [All are fighting]

Nivethika: Stop! Stop! Why are you fighting?

Sivaluxe: We found this bag on the floor. These people are telling to open it. But I am telling we can give it to the owner.

Nivethika: That is correct. You can give it to the owner.

.....
(A1, T4, S1)

On the fifth and sixth days students were given topics like 'Emotions' and 'Objects' to be developed as performances with themes related to common experiences. It was observed that the students were able to imagine and interact better than in other situations with limited experiences. There were more interactive and communicative scripts out of these themes. The Task 5, Script 2 dealt with emotion 'Hatred' and the Task 6 Script 1 with the object 'Bottle'. Their attitudinal development towards social issues, environmental issues are well revealed from these scripts. The location of the Task 5 Script 2 is a classroom and the plot is drawn from their experience. It centres around the ill-treatment meted out to a newcomer to the school. The Monitor of the class tries to bully and overpower the new student. There is a student who, however, sympathizes with the new student and the teacher settles the problem by inviting the parent of the newcomer to the school. Extracts from the Task 5, Script 2:

Sir: Good morning, sit down. Today in your class a new admission is coming. We must welcome her. You must treat her with good manner.

Latha: Excuse me sir,

Sir: Yes, come in can you identify her? She is that new admission. introduce your self.

Latha: I am latha. My father's name is Mohan. He is lecturer. My mother's name is Kiruba. She is a house wife. I have a elder brother. I came from Colombo.

Sir: Ok, go and sit. When is my period?

Latha: Sinthula? Can you give a pencil?

Sinthula: You don't know how to come to school? I will not give the pencil.

Nivethika: Here's a pencil. From what school you came?

Latha: I came from Colombo Bambalapitiya girls school.

Kirushanth: Don't talk with this girl. Come this side.

Nivethika: Ok I will come.

.....

(A1, T5, S2)

The second play, Task 6 Script 1 deals with the theme of environmental safety. The plot was developed as follows: Some girls throw empty bottles and their classmates scold them and complain that they pollute the environment. Later, the conflict is resolved by the teacher who advises them to send the empty bottles for recycling. The social responsibility of the students is well understood from this script. (See the scripts A1, T6, S1).

Canteen Scene

Narrator: Abiramee and jeyavahine are drinking the soda and putting the bottles in the surrounding. Keerthika is seeing that.

Keerthika: Abiramee and jeyavahine what are you all doing? You are putting the bottle in the ground know. It is a bad habit. Collect those bottles.

.....

Some times later

Teacher: You drank the soda and throw that on the ground know. If you put On the ground, It is dangerous for us only. We must keep our environment clean. Don't do this kind of work. This must be the first and the last ok.

Vasantharubini: Then where can we put those bottles teacher?

Teacher: We can send it for recycling.

.....

(A1, T6, S1)

Conclusion

The three week-study showed that the students could be motivated highly with social issues as contents for language communication in a theatre workshop. The warm-up exercises gave them a chance to the so called dull students to give up their shyness and inhibitions. As already noted, their confidence in their proficiency was low they initially withdrew from participating in the group work. Therefore, they were put in the company of some better students. Gradually, students started to work on the themes and situations. The tempo was high as the workshop proceeded with socially relevant subjects and children's common problems. Some of the issues discussed in the plays performed in the workshop were environmental safety, problems of people affected by Tsunami, family strife, children's psychological issues like working as a child labourer, inability to get necessary things to go to school etc. and the special problems of underprivileged students.

At the end of this three week phase, as has been shown in the examination and analysis of scripts, a lot of language learning seems to have taken place. There

were quite a few changes in the nature of language used. Some of them are listed below.

- Longer stretches of sentences with structures of simple sentences expanding.
- Co-ordination.
- Extended noun phrases.
- Use of present, present continuous and past tenses.
- Use of different pronouns.
- The chunks of language produced go beyond holophrastic constructions.
- Simple conditional clauses.
- Narrative strategies like asking questions and answering with coherence, agreement, and disagreement.
- Marking pauses, with appropriate initiality, extencitivity and concluding moves; contradictions and supporting views are observed.
- Using language appropriate to the roles and subject matter around which the dialogues were constructed.
- Absence of prepositions, linkers, logical markers, proper tense forms, interrogatives, verbs without auxiliary or supporting 'do' verbs.

The aim of the programme was to promote their written and oral communication. Attention was not paid on the conflict or the climax or the character development or the structure of the plays. Theatre games were merely employed and enactments of the plays were made at an improvised level in order to motivate the students and encourage them to produce open-ended dialogues (impromptu communication). Towards the end of the workshop students were asked to write what they performed in the form of a play script to ascertain if their writing improved in any way. Thus, the use of social themes in a theatre workshop along with games and activities leads to better results and facilitates communication in a motivated manner.

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