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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Exploring Academic and Tutorial Tenets: Using Theatre as an Authentic Resource for Teaching Language

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Abstract:

This paper aims at emphasizing the use of theatre for providing students an opportunity to experience language through a more authentic medium. In recent years, the role of theatre as a basic element and a source of authentic material in the English language curriculum have been gaining momentum. A few drama activities can bring an ELT classroom into life. English Language Teaching leans largely towards communicative and authentic language use. In this regard, theatre provides a variety of immediate resources and is fun for both the teachers and students. Although there has been some research on the merits of theatre as a language teaching resource but it is not generally implemented in ESL. Theatre although pre-written, it shows spontaneous communication and can be an effective strategy to teach language. This study serves two functions. First, analysing performance theatre as an authentic tool in ELT. Second, the study will provide an observation on the benefits of integrating theatre in the language classroom.

Keywords: theatre, improvisation, authentic material, ELT, classroom

Introduction

Most countries today require English language teaching within their education system. As a global language, the study of English has the potential to open academic and professional doors to the students that may otherwise remain closed. However, in spite of the economic and political reasons for promoting the English language, many young learners are not aware of the benefits. To them, English is just another subject. This lack of interest is aggravated with low motivation due to un-engaging classrooms and an emphasis on grammar study through reading and writing. While it is true that in an Indian context, students have a very little need for utilizing the language outside the classroom, the absence of support they receive from the outside environment significantly impacts their language acquisition. With the prevalence of non-native English speaking teachers teaching the language, students are at a little disadvantage. Although it takes a thorough study to become a teacher in any language, there will always be some nuances and errors sustained by virtue of being a non-native speaker. It can be transferred easily to students inside the classroom. There are several cultural and non-verbal cues linked with a language. Non-native speakers often fail to appropriately impart these to the students. Due to this, language presented to the students is not a true representation of the situation they will encounter in an authentic English language environment. (Fleck 2014:1)

With the emergence of Communicative approach, the focus has shifted from prescribed textbooks and material to authentic resources. Teachers believe in exposing students to a variety of materials and resources not to confuse or dazzle them, but rather to engage students with language. The use of authentic materials can bring a lot of interest and make teaching and learning process more effective. By definition, "Authentic material is any kind of material taken from the real world and not specifically created for the purpose of language teaching. It can be text, visuals, or audio material; it can be realia such as tickets, menu, maps and time-tables; or it can be objects such as products, equipment, components, or models." (Ellis & Johnson, 157)

In this regard, Theatre is one of the most authentic medium when it comes to teaching language. Using theatre in a classroom can be a productive way of helping students to learn a language because it involves active teaching and learning styles that will motivate and sustain the attention of a large cross section of people. This research paper aims to emphasize the use of theatre for providing students with an opportunity to experience language through a more authentic medium. It has two purposes. First, to analyse theatre as an authentic tool in ELT. Second, the study will provide an observation on the benefits of integrating theatre in the language classroom.

Theatre as an Authentic Tool in ELT

Theatre can be defined in a number of ways. It could be viewed as a blanket term that covers "a wide range of oral activities that have a component of creativity present" (Hubbard et al 1986: 317). Susan Holden defines drama or theatre as any kind of activity where learners are asked either to portray themselves or to portray someone else in an imaginary situation. In other words, drama is a mode of fiction that is portrayed in performance. It requires the learner to present himself imaginatively into another context, outside the classroom, or into the character of another person. The students can do this on their own or with other fellow students. It allows the students to interact with other people and respond to what they do and say, using their own personal store of language so as to communicate in a meaningful manner.

Drama has been used for teaching language since the middle ages. About ten years ago, many teachers used to scoff at the idea of using drama to teach a second or foreign language. The change in attitude towards the use of drama in language teaching came due to a greater prominence on meaningful communicative activities instead of mechanical drills. (Hall, 2003) As quoted by Zafeiriadou, traditionally 'theatre' has been taken to refer to performance whereas 'drama' has referred to the work designed for stage representation, the body of written plays (Elam, 1980). In the context of drama teaching, however, the terms have been used differently. 'Theatre' was thought to be largely concerned with communication between actors and an audience, whereas 'drama' was largely concerned with experience by the participants, irrespective of any function of communication to an audience (Way, 1967). Theatre can be used for various purpose in language teaching but it becomes more useful in the classroom due to its authentic nature. Although most theatre scenes and acts are pre-written, they are intended to mirror spontaneous communication. It provides students with an opportunity to experience language through a more authentic medium, where learners

encounter with colloquial jargons, non-verbal cues and emotional content. While learners may not have the support of a native speaker, with the incorporated theatre activities they will still be able to acquaint themselves with the nuances of the language. As a result of this, students will learn the implications of the language that are not easy to teach, as well as the grammar which is rigorously taught.

In ESL settings, students have the benefit of using English outside the classroom: at the library, in other classes, at the grocery store, etc. Regardless of whether they desire to learn, they receive automatic reinforcement from their environment. Students in EFL contexts, on the other hand, have little, if any, support outside the classroom. Their language use is limited to the conversation exercises used in their classroom, which largely tests vocabulary acquisition and grammar. By using theatre, students are exposed to several different forms of authentic language. They exercise the forms through performance, they display their knowledge of the forms through improvisation, and they practice grammar and vocabulary through writing.

It has been observed that using theatre in the classroom can enhance students' motivation of learning. Incorporating theatre activities may enhance the learners' levels of on-task behaviour, involvement, and concentration in the target activity more than any other material. Gilmore stated that "authentic materials are inherently more interesting than contrived ones because of their intent to communicate a message rather than highlight target language" (2007:106-107). By allowing students to experience real-world language mimicking application, they acquire valuable skills that are absent in traditional teaching materials. Through training of these Theatre-Based skills, and by allowing students to employ them in various situations, learners gain confidence and cultivate a desire to learn.

Integrating theatre in the language classroom

The use of theatre has significant implications in an ELT classroom. Specifically, drama has been found to increase learners' confidence and self-esteem, general literacy skills, oral proficiency, and to promote purposeful learning. Since dramatic texts are created to flow like natural language, they are a great source of linguistic aid in areas lacking opportunities for students to engage in authentic language situations. The use of drama gives students a chance to explore language not only through verbal communication but also through the expression of emotions and non-verbal communication.

Like all language activities, theatre must be well prepared and conceived before the lesson gets started. The teachers need to decide why they want to use dramatic activities with any specific class in order to be able to justify the decisions taken. A few reasons for using theatre could be its relevance to the syllabus, linguistic accessibility, the chance to increase awareness of paralinguistic features, practicability in terms of lesson time, intrinsic interest, space and strength of the students, and the chances of using theatrical activities in the future, thereby providing continuity. The teachers should have a clear idea of what they want to achieve in both general and specific terms. The teacher must, therefore, inquire what the students will need to do in the language to effectively carry out the activity, ask whether the

students know any of the phrases they will likely be needing to express these functions and ask which functions will be called upon.

Butt (1998) discovered that improvisation activities were a powerful tool in advancing confidence within the classroom. Ideally, these exercises accomplished two particular goals. First, full participation by the students in a setting that allowed them to produce language without correction or assessment. Second, increased risk taking in an environment where a definite level of trust has been built. Improvisation games that demand students to tune into their classmates, teach them to focus on one another's behaviour and attitude, teaching them how to respond properly. The beauty of exercises done without prepared scripts is that, in giving students a specific topic to address, the teacher allows them to discover the language by themselves, in a low-stake environment, within the context of a game.

Ernst-Slavit and Wenger (1998) believed that using drama in an ESL classroom involved greater opportunities to use oral communication/speaking skills. Typically, oral communication in the EFL/ESL classroom is related to learning vocabulary and practicing grammatical structures. However, theatre, improvisation in particular, allow students to use their oral proficiency skills for meaningful communication. This is particularly important in EFL contexts where the classroom provides the only opportunity. Moreover, through learner-generated theatre texts, students are able to express themselves creatively, using the language for reasons other than structural language drilling.

Miccoli (2003) found using theatre in the language classroom is a means of providing learners language-related cultural information not conventionally provided in the classroom. As stated by Miccoli, language does not only contain words that are spoken but also incorporates how native speakers interact with one another, hold their bodies, shake hands, etc. If we use theatre in the classroom, these aspects are introduced in a more natural way. Besides, Miccoli's investigation showed that trust and confidence were effectively built in the theatre-language classroom. It allowed the students to function and assist one another as a cohesive unit.

Charlyn Wessels (1991), an EFL teacher at Stevenson College in Edinburgh, uses material generated by the students (recordings, videos, essays etc.) as an authentic resource for future classes. These materials can be adapted for different levels of language proficiency, and include the main language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and pronunciation).

Scripts created from the teaching materials used in an ESP language program are the most significant piece of the puzzle. These scripts include vocabulary, grammar, conversation strategies, key phrases and speaking areas, mixing the language and theatre content. The sample script is titled as 'Vacation' and it includes the following conversation strategies: discuss schedules and book travel services, checking into a hotel, talking about services, etc. Teachers could shoot videos that showcase staged performances of the script, complete with cultural, emotional and non-verbal content, specific to native English speakers. This will allow students to observe proper pronunciation as well as expose them to authentic language.

Conclusion

English language has become a widespread necessity all across the globe. Even after years of teaching English, the learners do not have the confidence of using the language in and outside the class. By employing an alternative method for teaching language, teachers can create a more engaging and interactive environment. The benefits of using theatre in a classroom is twofold. One of its greatest benefits is that it helps in building motivation among students. If the students are motivated to study, they will learn the language faster. With a theatre-based approach, learners are offered an opportunity to acquire language through exploration, creativity and fun.

Another vital benefit is the authentic use of language. When a teacher use theatre in a classroom, students are exposed to several different forms of authentic language. They exercise the forms through performance, they show their mastery of the forms through improvisation, and they practice vocabulary and grammar through writing. Theatre-based teaching is clearly a universal method for teaching a language.

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Appendix

Vacation

(This script is taken from "Creating Theatre-Based Curriculum for use in the ESL/EFL Language Classroom: A Model")

(Lights up. Sasha arrives at the Citadines hotel in Paris, in the 16th arrondissement. She is checking in for her six-night stay.)

Receptionist: Bonjour Madame. Welcome to Les Citadines. How can I help you?

Sasha: Hi. I would like to check into my room. I'm a little late. There was a problem on the metro.

Receptionist: Was it the grève again?

Sasha: The grève—? Oh, a strike. No, I think a train broke down.

Receptionist: Ah, yes. That's alright. Can I have your first and last name please?

Sasha: Sure. Sasha Wilson.

Receptionist: (typing) And can I please see a photo ID and a credit card?

(Sasha digs into her purse and removes her wallet. She takes out her ID and credit card and hands them over.)

Receptionist: Thank you. (types some more) Hmm. I see we have you down for a total of six nights. Is this correct?

(Sasha nods.)

Receptionist: (types some more before looking around with a frown) Uh-Oh.

Sasha: Is something wrong?

Receptionist: Are you traveling alone?

Sasha: Yes. Is that a problem?

Receptionist: Not exactly. It just seems all we have left are king size beds.

Sasha: (frowning) Well, I made these reservations a month ago. So I don't mind, as long as there's no extra fee involved...

Receptionist: (typing furiously) It does seem to be an error on our part – busy season and all. I'm sure my supervisor won't mind me waiving the standard charge—

Sasha: Thanks. I appreciate it.

(Sasha's phone rings.)

Sasha: (answers) Hello, this is Sasha? (Listens) Oh, hey Paul...I'm doing well, and you? Actually, I'm on vacation...I'd love to, but I'm traveling. In another country...Yeah, I'm in Paris! My first time...Hopefully...When I get back? Sure, why not...Sounds good. Talk to you later...Bye (hangs up) (to receptionist) Sorry about that.

Receptionist: (nods) Of course. (Presents an envelope to Sasha) You are all set. Here are your keys. You will be on the seventh floor, room 7150. You're free to take your luggage with you now, or we can have it sent up. There is a complimentary breakfast from six to eight-thirty daily, as well as coupons for our in-house restaurant.

Housekeeping cleans between the hours of seven and noon unless specially requested. If you don't want them to come in, just hang the sign provided outside your door. (Hands her a map) Here's a map of the centre-ville – center of town. If you have questions about fine dining, museums, etc. please do not hesitate to ask.

Sasha: (beams from ear to ear) Wow, thank you!

Receptionist: (smiles and nods) Enjoy your stay.

(Lights down.)