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Use of theatrical techniques in enhancing communication skills: an experience

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ABSTRACT

This article concerned with the importance of theatrical technique in literature class for the enhancement of communication skills. The investigative study was conducted on M.A English students divided into controlled and experimental groups, 50 each, by giving them role play/drama/performance (theatrical technique) of different situations taken from G.B. Shaw's 'Arms and the Man' that followed written test/assignment on the presented situations. The results reflected the importance of theatrical technique in the teaching of literature to enhance communications skills as experimental group performed and showed, in written form, better understanding of the text as well as was more communicative, seemed encouraged and motivated during role play. Role play/drama brings life not only to the classroom environment but furthered the learning and use of English language both in social and academic situations as the results manifest. The study suggests that teachers should use role play/theatrical technique of teaching to generate friendly environment, deep understanding of literature and enhancement of language skills in literature classes at tertiary level.

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Introduction

English is taught from grade 1 to higher education in our educational institutions as a compulsory subject but it is believed that main focus remains on writing skill which is assessed in the exams. It leaves much to be desired for the learners who wish to understand and use English in their academic and social life. But after 14 years of schooling most of the students are found reluctant or shy while using English both in and outside the classroom because of lockstep teaching techniques applied to enhance communication skills. On the other hand there are plenty of teaching techniques meant to engage students to learn and use English in a natural way and theatrical technique to teach literature to enhance communication skills is one of them. Undoubtedly, English language is a language of communication throughout the whole world and at the same time it has got a rich cultural and firm literary background. If a foreign language learner is not in touch with the trunk of this language, he/she can in no way have the mastery over it. But there has been a general feeling that literature can be taught only to those FL (foreign language) learners who are skilled in language (Deeba & Sultana, 2008).

Role-playing (theatrical technique) is a teaching strategy that fits within the social family of models (Joyce and Weil, 2000). These strategies emphasize the social nature of learning, and see cooperative behavior as stimulating students both socially and intellectually. Role-playing (theatrical technique) as a teaching strategy offers several advantages for both teacher and student and it is generally believed that student's interest in the topic is raised. Research has shown that "integrating experiential learning activities in the classroom increases interest in the subject matter and understanding of course content" (Poorman, 2002, pg. 32). Fogg (2001) tells of a college professor who felt that his history classes were boring and not involving the students. After trying out a role-playing type

game one semester, he observed that students were much more interested in the material.

Aronson and Carlsmith who "described the role playing study as 'an as-if' experiment in which the subject is asked to behave as if he [or she] were a particular person in a particular situation' (1968, p. 26). Learning to participate is an important skill for humanities and social sciences students to learn in today's multi-stakeholder world. The role play method (theatrical technique) develops a greater understanding of the complexity of professional practice and enables students to develop skills to engage in multi-stakeholder negotiations within the controlled environment of the classroom. Role play in the classroom can be implemented in a number of ways. It can involve online elements as well as face-to face interactions. The length of the process can also vary according to the aims of the activity (Brierley *et al*, 2002).

The Role Play/Drama method (theatrical technique) of teaching/learning is taken as one of the good techniques not only at early levels but is considered equally good at tertiary level to enhance communications skills of the students/second language learners studying at tertiary level .

Rationale and Research Questions

There are number of teaching techniques available to teach literature but we feel it's appropriate to write that 'Role Play/Drama' (theatrical technique) is also an effective technique of teaching English literature at tertiary level to enhance communication skills. Hence, the study was designed with a focus on the statement: "In 'Arms and the Man' Shaw has exposed the fallacy of the romantic conceptions of war, love, marriage and class-consciousness. Substantiate". Different situations/events were given to students to play role or dramatise them that followed a critique on the presentation of those situations/events. In the light of above stated procedure the research questions of the study aimed to answer: 1) Is role

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playing (theatrical technique) an effective method of teaching literature at higher education, 2) Does role play/drama (theatrical technique) prove meaningful to the students of higher education? and 3) Does role play/drama (theatrical technique) pave way to students to learn how to express their understanding of literature in spoken and written form?

The purpose of the study was to answer the research questions as well as to find out whether or not role-playing/drama (theatrical technique) is a useful teaching method for teaching literature at higher education for the enhancement of communication skills (oral & written).

Review of Related Literature

Role-playing (theatrical technique) exercises come in many forms and educators should not be reluctant to experiment with their style and structure. Many a time the teaching of English language falls short of fulfilling its goals. Even after years of English teaching, the learners do not gain the confidence of using the language in and outside the class. Their output in the language is limited to writing run-of-the-mill answers for literature chapters and producing grammatically accurate, but, isolated sentences. Real communication involves ideas, emotions, feelings, appropriateness and adaptability. The conventional English class hardly gives the learners an opportunity to use language in this manner and develop fluency in it. Thus, the main purpose of the language teaching course, i.e., developing skills in communication, is unfortunately, neglected (Benefits of Using Drama in the Language 1).

Collie and Slater (1987) focused on the positive contributions language learning through literature could make in that literary texts constituted valuable authentic material as it exposes the learner to different registers, types of language use. Writers such as Maley and Duff, (1978) and Wessels, (1987) have pointed to the values and uses of drama: 'Drama can help the teacher to achieve 'reality' in several ways. It can overcome the students' resistance to learning the new language by making the learning of the new language an enjoyable experience, setting realistic targets for the students to aim for, creative 'slowing down' of real experience, linking the language-learning experience with the student's own experience of life. And drama can create in students a need to learn the language, the use of 'creative tension' (situations requiring urgent solutions); and by putting more responsibility on the learner, as opposed to the teacher.' (Wessel: 53-54).

By allowing reading and the adding of some characterization to a drama/theatre text, learners became personally and fully involved in the learning process, in a context in which it is possible for learners to feel less self-conscious and more empowered to express themselves through the multiple voices (Vygotsky, 1987; Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) of the differing characters.

McDaniel (2000) says there are four basic elements that are essential for the success of any role-playing activity; the activity builds on knowledge the students already possess about a particular historical context; the second element is to design the roles yourself to maximize student involvement and student conflict; the third element is to set up a specific situation. Do not let the students go without giving them a focal point for debate; and the last element is the instructor's limited involvement and willingness to be flexible. The instructor needs to guide the students along, but not overbear the conversation and let the students take their own path to understanding.

In a literature class role play and drama (theatrical technique) can be considered as an effective technique of teaching/learning language skills both from the teacher's and student's point of view. We as human beings play a number of roles in the real life from dawn to dusk. Therefore, role play is an acceptable and appropriate classroom activity which gives the student the opportunity to practise the language (Deeba & Sultana, 2008). In their analysis of the theoretical base of communicative language teaching, Richards and Rodgers offer the following four characteristics of a communicative view of language:

- "Language is a system for the expression of meaning;
- The primary function of the language is for interaction and communication use;
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses;
- Literature is one of the best ways of teaching language; and
- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.161).

It is also the job of the teacher to utilize students' emotional behaviour in literature class that is focused on language learning as (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.6) say: "Teacher's excellence here is to use "as fully as possible the emotional dimension that is a very integral part of literature, though it is so often lacking in more neutral language learning texts."

This approach is student-centred and therefore, activities like prediction, cloze, ranking tasks, role play, poetry recital, forum, debate, discussions, can be used to create opportunities for language use in the classroom (Carter, 1996; Rosli, 1995). Since role/drama (theatrical technique) is primarily based on students' response to the text and in this context Rosli (1995) asserts that the reason behind it is to motivate and encourage students to read by making a connection between the themes of a text and his or her personal life and experiences.

It is believed that literature inculcates moral values through its teaching and I have mentioned that study focused on the statement: "In '*Arms and the Man*' Shaw has exposed the fallacy of the romantic conceptions of war, love, marriage and class-consciousness. Substantiate". We find that students were able to reflect what they have learnt based on their readings of a particular literary text and at the same time their communication skills naturally were enhanced through role play/drama. According to Rosli (1995), this approach proclaims the worthiness of moral and philosophical considerations behind one's reading. Activities for this approach could be the incorporation of moral values at the end of the literature lesson, reflective sessions, getting students to search for values whilst reading (Wang, 2003) and eliciting students' evaluation on what they should do or not do based on their readings (Parwathy *et al.*, 2004).

The role-playing (theatrical technique) approach can be used in a variety of settings, including the classroom. The principle behind role-playing is that the student assumes a particular personality of a different person, such as a historical character (Jarvis *et al.*, 2002). According to Jones (1982), students "must accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions, and do the best they can in the situation in which they find themselves". Poorman (2002) observes that "true learning cannot take place when students are passive observers of the teaching process" (p. 32).

Table No. 1 Showing the results of controlled and experimental group on pretest on focused areas

Sr. No	Focused areas	60% & above marks		50 to 60% marks.		40 to 50% marks	
		C. Group %	E. Group %	C. Group %	E. Group %	C. Group %	E. Group %
1	Key concepts in the play	13	12	22	20	66	68
2	Important events/situations in the play	17	18	11	12	72	70
3	Listening, speaking and writing skills	12	12	18	20	69	68

60% & above marks: Understanding & display with high Score in Language Skills

50 to 60% marks: Understanding & display with Average Score in Language Skills

40 to 50% marks: Understanding & display with Below Average Score in Language Skills

C.Group: Controlled group

E.Group: Experimental group

Table No. 2 Showing the performance of experimental group on posttest

Sr. No	Focused areas	60% & above marks		50 to 60% marks.		40 to 50% marks	
		C. Group %	E. Group %	C. Group %	E. Group %	C. Group %	E. Group %
1	Key concepts in the play	18	62	24	26	58	12
2	Important events/situations in the play	16	76	36	18	48	6
3	Listening, speaking and writing skills	20	78	22	16	58	6

There are other educational disciplines where role play is effectively utilized to achieve objectives. Role-plays and simulations (realistic role-plays) are frequently used for workplace training (Silberman, 2007).

Methodology

The following method was adopted to find out the effectiveness of role play/drama (theatrical technique) in the understanding of literature as well as the enhancement of communications skills.

Participants

100 (50 in experiment group and 50 in controlled group) students of master degree program.

Procedure

A pretest was arranged before the experiment, after two weeks' teaching, the results of which manifest that almost all the respondents' performance was alike. '*Arms and the Man*' by G.B. Shaw was taken as sample and two groups were made, controlled and experimental (50 students each), for the study. The controlled group was taught the text through lecture method with the objective to submit written assignment based on the asked question whereas the experimental group was taught with an aim to present different situations/events identified in the text through role play/drama (theatrical technique) that followed written work on the given task.

Process Design

The learning objectives of the study were both theoretical as well as practical such as:

- Focus on the key concepts in the play;
- Focus on the important events/situations in the play; and
- Enhancement of Listening, speaking and writing skills.
- The following Manorum & Pollock (2006) checklist has been used during the study:
 - Ensure students understand how the role play will work, especially how they will interact with other players.
 - Explain the mode of interaction for each stage of the role-play.
 - Assign roles and distribute resources/reading materials accordingly.
 - Communicate deadlines for the first task (i.e. writing a description of your stakeholders' position, or approaching another stakeholder for support etc.,

Results & Findings

The data was collected to know the impact of Theatrical Techniques in enhancing the communication skills among students. The table no.1 reflected the results of pretest on focused areas.

The data showed the comparison of both group on pre test. The results indicated that the performance on pretest on three focused areas is relative similar between both groups.

The results show that students who were taught with an aim to play role/drama on the selected text performed better than those who simply listened and undertook a written test on the proposed statement. Not only their score is lesser than the students who performed and than wrote a critique but their language skills' understanding and display also proved comparatively better than the controlled group.

This theatrical technique has been exploited for interpretation of the literary text and, especially, for understanding a fictitious characters and then shape the asked question in written form on experiential learning. In this particular technique, the learner gets into the skin of the character and thinks from his/her point of view. We have seen, as results reflect, that experimental group not only performed different roles with complete understanding of the text/situations but also produced pieces of writings/essays giving accounts of the characters they performed in light of their personal experiences. Whereas the controlled group felt shy, less motivated and encouraged and performed in a confused manner. But the most important point to mention that controlled group re-produced some crammed material with grammatical flaws as well as with very meager understanding of the text.

Discussions and Recommendation

The results further throw light on the importance of the role play/drama in the teaching of literature to enhance communications skills as we have noticed that students who perform and write have better understanding of the text as well as are more communicative because they seem encouraged and motivated during role playing in the learning of English language skills in a literature class. Role play/drama brings life not only to the classroom environment but furthers the active learning and use of English language both in social and academic situations as reflected in the results. The findings of the study seem to answer the following research questions set for the study as we have seen that the subjects, experimental

group, not only dramatized the situations in a befitting manner but also produced encouraging results while presenting the role played events/situations in writing.

In the light of findings of the study the following recommendations are made: 1) Teachers may use role play/drama technique (theatrical technique) of teaching to generate friendly environment for the enhancement of literature and language skills, 2) Maximum time should be spared in literature oriented courses, at tertiary level, for role play/drama technique (theatrical technique) because it generates participation which enables students to understand and embed concepts, 3) Since the academic material is mostly descriptive or theoretical; role play/drama injects liveliness to the recommended material/text in the classroom, 4) Role play/drama (theatrical technique) promotes deep understanding of the text instead of surface learning; it should be given emphasis in literature class to enhance communication skills of the students, 5) Ample time should be given to collaborative learning by focusing role play/drama technique (theatrical technique) in the classroom at tertiary level, 6) Institutional support to teacher in terms of freedom in adopting role play/drama approach (theatrical technique) should be given as it allows variety of more activities in literature class to enhance communication skills, 7) Role play/drama (theatrical technique) plays a vital part in producing 'we feelings' among the students which is very important in the global village in the present international educational scenario. Hence, it could also be used by the teachers to provide comfortable educational environment in the classroom.

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