

Drama and Teaching of English

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Abstract

Children are by nature imaginative and creative, and take delight in acting out roles or pretending to be some one else. Role-play and other drama activities consequently lead to the active involvement of children with a text. The use of their bodies, voices, and emotions to make the language their own, comprises the Total Physical Response of the learners and this ensures their complete involvement in language learning. The following article explores how both receptive and productive skills in the second language can be taught through drama in education. Drama as an educational tool helps in fostering the social, intellectual and linguistic development of the child. Through the use of drama activities learners get to use whole phrases or chunks of language which enables holistic engagement with the second language.

Introduction

Input rich communicational environments are a pre-requisite for language learning. There is a need to build the learners' familiarity with the language by providing them with meaningful situations in contexts they can relate to. Children are by nature imaginative and creative, and can easily get into a make-belief world. They take delight in acting out roles or pretending to be someone else.

Role-play or dramatisation leads to the active involvement of children with a text. They use their bodies, voices and emotions to make the language their own. It is this Total Physical Response of the learners that ensures their complete involvement in language learning. Personalisation makes language more meaningful when compared to mechanical repetition. As Kerry Boorman (2009) observes,

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“...in teaching English as a Second Language the balance of receptive and productive skills is an important area to address. Drama effectively deals with these requirements. Through drama a class will attend to, practice and integrate reading, writing, speaking and listening.”

Drama in education

It was in the 1950s and 60s that the distinction between drama in education and theatre activities arose. Peter Slade and Brian Way stressed the developmental aspect of drama and how it could be used to increase awareness, self expression and creativity. Slade (1958) saw drama and ‘play’ as natural to children and believed that it could be used to help the child develop through various stages to maturity. Way (1967) was concerned with realising the potential of the individual, ‘the individuality of the individual’ as he put it.

The value of drama as an educational tool comprises fostering the social, intellectual and linguistic development of the child. Heathcote (1984) has listed the following characteristics as being particularly significant:

- drama demands the cooperation of the participants;
- it draws on previous experience;
- it creates situations in which there is a need for precious communication;
- it is experiential, thereby affecting

students in other than a purely intellectual way;

- it challenges students to discover new truths or insights by confronting them with previously unknown predicaments.

Drama activities can be used in education to enhance the language skills of the learners. Teachers need to develop and devise activities as per the age, interest and cognitive development of the learners.

Drama activities and language learning

According to G. Bolton (1984), “drama is a unique teaching tool, vital for language development.” Role-play and drama activities have clear advantages for language learning. They encourage children to speak in the second language and give them the chance to communicate in meaningful contexts. Even with their limited language using non-verbal communication, such as body movements, children begin to use the second language. This in turn motivates the learners further and ensures the participation of the entire class.

Dramatising is part of children’s lives from an early age : children act out scenes and stories from the age of three or four. They like to imitate adults in various situations like buying vegetables, conducting a class etc. Make-believe encourages their creativity and develops their imagination, and at the same time

gives them the opportunity to use language in different contexts. English language teachers can use this natural desire to act out situations to teach the language. However, we need to remember that role-play/drama activities are not the end product, but are part of the process of language learning. The advantages are listed below:

- **Language in context:** In classrooms children are often introduced to small bits of language, whereas by using role-play/drama activities they get to use whole phrases or chunks of language. They are not only familiarised with different structures of language, they also become more confident in the use of the second language by getting to experience the language in operation. The Position Paper on Teaching of English (2006) also advocates that 'Input-rich theoretical methodologies (such as whole language, the task based, and the comprehensible input and balanced approaches) aim at exposure to the language in meaning-focused situations so as to trigger the formation of a language system by the mind.'
- **Confidence building:** Dramatisation is useful with children who are shy about speaking English or hesitant in participating in group activities. If they are given a special role, it encourages them to

speak, especially when one uses puppets and masks.

- **Group work:** Role-play or drama activities help learners to work as a team and build on human relationships. When children work in pairs or groups they learn to take responsibility for their work, make decisions as a group, listen to each other as well as comprehend and value each other's solutions. They also learn to cooperate with each other and at the same time find ways to accommodate diverse opinions. Another advantage of this method is that large classes can be easily managed as pair and group work involved can cater to any number of students.
- **Scope for inclusive education:** Such activities have tremendous scope for involving all types of students : mixed ability and even specially able children. Drama and role-play have an immense potential to break our stereotypes about what a disabled child can or cannot do. Different dramatic modes and activities can be used keeping in view the respective disability of each child. Developing an activity in which their abilities can be used optimally is the first challenge. For example, choosing a story with animal characters usually works best, allowing the wheelchair to be 'transformed'

into flower petals or the wings of a bird...providing opportunities for those who cannot speak, to dance and move in their own way to the music and giving simple dialogues to those who can master and deliver it with sufficient 'chorus' lines for all to pitch in.

- **Language across the curriculum:** Drama and role-play not only help in learning the language but also help in understanding concepts related to EVS such as the life cycle of a flower, obeying traffic rules, waste management etc. Since learners can be made to act out scenes from a story, drama also has the scope of introducing learners to diverse cultural contexts. For example, while enacting they can be made to wear different costumes, sing folk songs etc.
- **Going beyond the textbook:** For language learning, learners can be made to enact real life situations like requesting for something, interviewing somebody etc. By doing so, they will be able to connect language items and vocabulary taught in the class to the world outside.

The learner and drama activities

NCF-2005 also advocates a learner-centered approach to education. "Child centred pedagogy means giving primacy to children's experiences, their voices, and their active participation. This kind of pedagogy requires us

to plan learning in keeping with children's psychological development and interests." In fact, Stevick (1980) argues that language teaching must appeal to the creative, intuitive aspect of the personality as well as to the conscious, rational part. The games, miming and acting of drama activities provide a means of involving a learner's whole personality and not merely the thought processing part.

As, the Position Paper on Teaching of English (2006) states, 'drama and the enacting of plays is a traditional route to such pseudo reproduction in authentic, comprehended contexts. Beginning with action rhymes, simple plays or skits, theatre as a genuine class activity can promote the child's engagement with language and its performance. At later stages, this can develop in to the study of rhetoric along with grammar.'

Introducing role-play and drama activities

When you plan any role-play or drama activity keep the objectives of English language teaching in mind:

- To develop in learners the competence to understand what they hear;
- To harness the ability to read with comprehension;
- To facilitate effortless expression and coherent writing;
- To develop control over different registers;
- To foster creativity and inculcate

sensitivity.

Mime is a non-verbal representation of ideas with the help of gestures, expressions and some movements. Since it doesn't involve language, it can be used as an ice breaker. Later on children can use the same act with language. For example:

- Guess the situation — Students can be asked to guess an activity/event like a stomach ache, riding a bicycle, peeling a banana, brushing teeth etc.;
- Who am I? — Students can mime anything (like animals, birds etc.) and the rest of the class can take turns to guess;
- Word family — Two related items can be given to two groups and they can be asked to mime and guess in turns. This can involve antonyms or words belonging to an umbrella adjective like sports (running, swimming, badminton etc.);
- Enacting adjectives — Emotions like happy, angry, hungry etc. can be enacted with expressions;
- Listen and act — A story can be narrated while students enact it;
- Look at a picture and enact — This activity can be developed as an individual exercise. For example, a child carrying a very heavy bag.

Songs and rhymes are a rich source for acting especially for young learners as songs and rhymes have universal appeal. Rhythm and melody make language easier to learn and

remember, and movement and gesture help illustrate meaning. Songs and rhymes help learners learn stress, rhythm, pronunciation and intonation. They also ensure the Total Physical Response of the learner.

Role plays help in recreating language in various situations that the learners are likely to use outside the school. According to Heathcote (1984) 'role-taking is so flexible in its application in education that it will work for all personalities and under all teaching circumstances.' The main benefit of role-play is that it enables a flow of language and by simulating reality learners can also prepare and practice for possible future situations. For example: inviting and accepting/declining the invitation to a birthday party or a picnic. The learners can also be given a situation wherein they can be asked to improvise and convert it into a role play. This input can be given to learners who have reached the upper primary stage and are more comfortable with the language. A younger group can be shown a picture and asked to prepare a dialogue. This may lead to discussions among the learners, giving them an opportunity to express themselves. Thus, it also enhances their creativity. Through role plays a problem solving attitude, sharing resources, assigning tasks etc. can also be achieved.

Short plays are a useful device for senior classes. Learners can be asked to perform a play, based on the story that they have read. For example,

students 'reading a play together, making notes for its production... [this activity] involves all the skills in conjunction.' This also allows the learners' scope for reflection and self-evaluation. However, one must remember that the process is as important as the product.

Props such as puppets, posters and regalia can be used to ensure maximum participation of the learners. It is a good idea to involve the learners while preparing puppets, posters etc. Instructions given by the teacher during the prop making process will also help them imbibe the language. Let us take the example of puppets. Children are fascinated by puppets and are willing to suspend disbelief and react to the puppet as if it were real. The teacher can also create a puppet that speaks only in English. This way, the learners will automatically try to speak the language. Another usage would be to have colour-coded puppets where one puppet says 'no' and another 'yes'. This way various language items can be covered. Props can also be used with songs, rhymes and of course for role plays.

Feedback

It is important and essential that all learners participate irrespective of their abilities or circumstances. Drama activities serve both educational as well language aims and the teacher needs to give feedback not only on the end product and the language items learnt, but also the processes that the learners go through i.e., critical thinking, problem solving,

language learning, cooperating with each other etc. Teachers must always have something positive to tell her/his students whenever they give feedback. At the same time, learners should also be encouraged to assess themselves by asking them to comment on their own performance.

In conclusion

Drama activities should be both enjoyable and rewarding, bringing alive the concept of 'joyful learning'. As you have seen, the main advantages of utilising drama activities are-

- They provide a framework for communication;
- They allow for unpredictability in language use;
- They provide a bridge between the classroom and the real world;
- They allow for creativity and involve the 'whole person';
- They provide physical involvement and release;
- They develop confidence and can be motivating;
- They help cater for mixed ability classes and large numbers. (Dougill, 1987).

Thus, drama activities help activate the learners' language resource, stimulate her/his imagination and enhance their creativity. Using drama and role play like activities brings the text alive, stimulates memory and encourages learners to participate

and improve. This further leads to development of the learners' language skills in a controlled manner. At the end of the day, however, as W.Y. Sam (1990) states, "drama should not be used in isolation but... in an integrated

approach for language teaching... It should be part and parcel of the classroom methodology in teaching English as a second language."

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