SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Theatre Performance for Oral Communicative Competence

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the process and results of an experimental study that involves the use of theatical performance as a constructive means of enhancing the communicative skills and confidence of a classroom of English language learners doing a course in Functional English. These learners come from a background where English is taught as a second language, and where language teaching is generally text based rather than focusing on the oral communicative skills. A whole class of under graduates (as the Target Group) were initiated by a core theatre team and dramatist into producing and presenting plays in English to an audience of their peers as well as to a general audience for over a period of two years. At the end of the project, their communicative competence was evaluated against a comparable peer group unexposed to the project. The results showed that the target group demonstrated much improved communicative abilities than the control peer group, thus strongly recommending a need to seriously (re)consider the use of theatre as an important technique of second language instruction.

Keywords: Awareness, competence, confidence, oral communication, pyramid performance, theatre

INTRODUCTION

Drama has always been a part of the syllabus for the teaching of English as a second language in India and elsewhere. Nonetheless, while it was the 'text' of the plays that was used to 'teach' the language earlier, the present day attempts are to bring 'alive' the text of the play to the learners through a 'performance' which involves them. Drama is perhaps the one component, where proper student involvement can convert language learning from a chore to a pleasant experience. There is also, in theatre, the 'personality' boosting factors such as competence and confidence leading

to the satisfaction of self-esteem through a compulsory exposure to the target language and the need to excel as an individual within a team for the benefit of the team. This is possible through the compulsions of a 'stage' and the rehearsals which are crucial for survival on the stage.

Since theatre is a reflection of real life, enough practice in developing presence of mind is possible through the medium of the theatre. The presence of mind is the essence of communication in real life, and hence, the relevance of theatre in language learning, especially when it comes to oral communication skills in non-native languages.

The study by Maley and Duff (1982) was perhaps the first ever pioneering work that has explored the scope of theatre in language studies. Drama can help the teachers achieve 'reality' of the target code in several ways. Students' inhibitions in handling the target language can be overcome as learning becomes an enjoyable experience, linked to their own experiences of life. Language is to be realized through real-life situations. Theatre brings alive the target language to the learners, since it is as near to real life as is possible through simulation. Furthermore, Wessels (1987) emphasizes that drama can create in students a need to learn the language by the use of 'creative tension' and by putting more responsibility on them. Besides, as Robinson (2008) states, "drama provides a cultural and language enrichment by revealing insights into the target culture and presenting language contexts that make items memorable by placing them in a realistic social and physical context".

Chauhan (2004), in the study on 'Drama Techniques for Teaching English', observes that real communication involves ideas, emotions, feelings, appropriateness and adaptability. The conventional English class hardly gives the learners the opportunity to use language in this manner and to develop fluency in it. Thus, the main purpose of the language teaching course (i.e., developing skills in communication) is unfortunately neglected.

The entertainment function of play acting has also not gone unnoticed. Boudreault (2010), in the study 'The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL Classroom', elaborates on the scope of drama in the classroom. He speaks of how effective drama is to capture the attention of the students in the ESL/EFL classroom.

IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The research focused on the effects of theatre in non-native language learning through a comparative study on the relative oral communicative competence achieved by those exposed to theatre and those unexposed to it. Such a study can be beneficial to both language teachers and learners, especially in the context of English as a second language. The qualitative and quantitative rate of progress can lend itself to further study on group dynamics and development of 'confidence - in - personality' since learning of a globally prestigious language like English is invariably connected to the inhibitions of the learner in more ways than one. Such a comparative study may open

up a field of enquiry into the as yet, i.e. unexplored issues in language learning. It could lead to a further study on the process by which 'compulsory articulation' preceded by thinking about what to speak and how to speak may 'trigger off' oral competence in the non-native language through creative linguistic involvement in a group.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

• To improve the oral English communicative competence and confidence of university undergraduates through theatre performance.

• To find out the effects of theatre performance on the oral communicative competence and confidence of second language learners of English.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Theatre performance has a significant effect of developing oral communication skills and confidence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researchers used the method of comparative analysis by choosing two groups and investigating the progress of one group chosen for the study (target group) with that of another comparable group (the control group.

The research was a study on the comparative progress of the target group due to the impacts of the theatre experience in relation to the control group who did not have any participation in the theatre experience.

Both the groups are comparable since they are of the same age group and are undergraduate students on the same educational level, coming from more or less similar circumstances and doing the same course at two different colleges affiliated to the University of Calicut in Kerala, India.

The target group consisted of 38 students of II B.A. Functional English batch 2009-10 from Malabar Christian College, Calicut, India. The control group consisted of 24 students of II B.A. Functional English batch 2009-10 of JDT Islam College of Arts and Science, Calicut, India.

The methodology comprises two tiers. The first tier dealt with the planning and implementation of the theatre performance. The second was the research study on the comparative progress of the Target Group due to the impacts of the theatre performance in relation to the Control Group who did not have any participation in the theatre experience. Thus, it is a special study of the impacts of the theatre experience on the Target Group and the absence of impacts on the Control Group.

The Entry Test

The initial oral communicative competence and confidence of the target and control groups were assessed through the Entry Test, which was administered orally, facilitating interaction with each student. The assessment technique followed roughly the pattern of the IELTS.

The Exit Test

At the end of two years, an Exit Test was

administered to both the target and control groups (an oral interview) so as to assess the respective rate of improvement in their oral communicative skills and confidence on the whole. Both the groups were graded according to their performances during the interview. Care was taken to ensure that both the groups were tested as much as possible in the same manner under similar circumstances for both the Tests.

Grading

On the basis of the Entry and Exit Tests, both the target and the control groups were graded and grouped as lower, middle and higher in terms of their competence and confidence (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
The grading procedure

No.	Percentage of score	Grade	Level
1	80 and above	A+	
2	75-80	A	Higher
3	70-75	A-	
4	65-70	B+	
5	60-65	B	Middle
6	55-60	B-	
7	50-55	C+	
8	45-50	C	Lower
9	40-45	C-	

Pyramid Performance Structure (see Fig.1)

The research was operationalized through the activities of the Indo-Anglian Theatre, which started as a departmental initiative in Malabar Christian College, for improving oral communication skills in English. A pyramid performance structure was envisaged to create and sustain the level of motivation among the students all through the period of the research.

The research made use of a strategy to motivate the target group for the theatre experience through the activities of the Theatre members and a dramatist in the college. This theatre group brought out a few productions as adaptations and translations of plays or their own dramatic creations in English. The necessary context and opportunities were then created to bring in all the students of the college to participate in an inter-department English Drama Contest as a part of the awareness campaign for the scope of theatre in ELT. This was also a strategy to get the target group ready for performing plays in English. The target group grouped themselves into different teams and presented plays in English with the guidance of the researchers and through the motivation of the theatre team. The opportunity was provided to all the students of the target group by organizing intra-class competitions.

Yet another context was created for the target group's involvement, by bringing in a team of students from the school, for performing plays in English, with the support of the members of the target group and guidance from the research team.

Thus, the pyramid structure was planned to motivate the target group for the theatre experience. The Core Team was positioned above the target group as role models, and the target group then became the role models
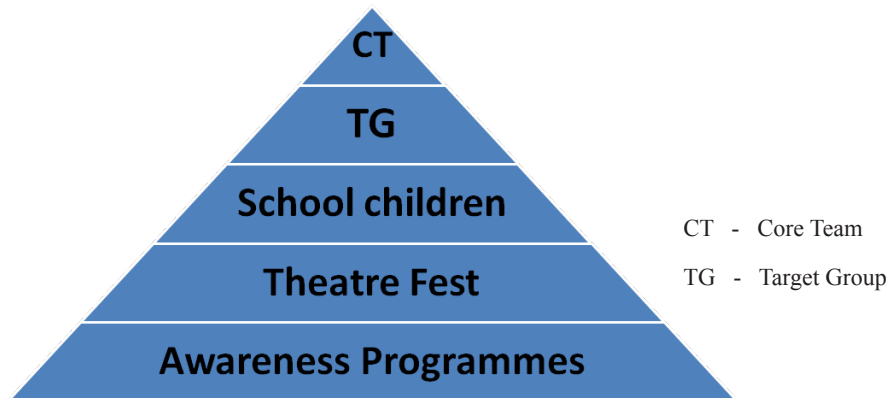
Fig.1: The Pyramid Structure

for the school teams positioned below in the pyramid structure. The target group members would gain directly from their own experiences and indirectly from the experiences of the Core Team as well as that of the school teams.

The three groups were brought together during the Indo-Anglian Theatre Fest and the Annual Inter-department English Drama Contest organized by the Indo-Anglian Theatre. Other programmes were also organized for the target group to present plays in English so that they could improve their oral communication skills and confidence.

The implementation of this pyramid structure of performance ensured the total involvement of the whole class of learners (target group) in the following set of activities:

- Formation of teams
- Selection and adaptation of plays
- Group reading of the selected plays
- Rehearsals and teamwork

- Improvisation
- Dialoguing and articulation in the target language
- Self-correction and peer group correction of pronunciation, tone, grammar, etc.
- Constant feedback from each other and from facilitators, the core team and the researchers on the progress during rehearsals
- Training in diction given by an applied linguist to the whole class
- Monitoring by facilitators (group leaders and teachers)
- Involvement in the planning, as well as execution and organization of the annual English drama contest
- On-the-spot feedback from the audience, faculty and judges after the performance (live on the stage) during the contest.

The above set of activities involving the whole class was managed more or less

by the students themselves within their own classroom during their Conversational English classes, free hours and holidays. There were only occasional chances for them to rehearse on stage. They prepared themselves for the stage performance from within the confined conditions of their conventional classroom, occasionally finding other free classrooms for more elaborated rehearsals. No extra facilities were given to them. They were made to realize that the whole process was for their own progress and confidence in oral communication in the English language. The entire process was productive, with the students taking up their roles enthusiastically, switching roles as and when the occasion demanded and rehearsing their dialogues to excel as individuals and as teams. They encountered problems of adjustment but overcame all this for the common cause of a 'team performance on stage' and the expectations of a resultant progress in their oral communicative skills. They realized the value and relevance of their theatre activities. The confidence they felt after each performance inspired some of them to take up even more challenging roles during the second year of the research study. There were other results as well. A few of them emerged as leaders of their respective teams, taking on the complete responsibility of the team and the performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected were processed, compared and presented in tables. Table 2 presents the number of samples in the lower, middle and higher categories as per grading in both the entry and exit tests.

TABLE 2
Grades obtained for the control and target groups

Grade	Control group		Target group	
	Entry	Exit	Entry	Exit
Higher	3	6	11	18
Middle	5	4	8	8
Lower	13	11	17	10
Total	21	21	36	36

Meanwhile, the comparison of the relative improvement achieved by the Control and Target Groups in the Exit Test are presented in Table 3. The study revealed that the progress achieved by the members of the target group was more in comparison to that of the control group. The Chi-square test revealed the significant difference in the improvement of the control group and the target group, since the p-value (0.0428) is less than 0.05. The difference in their growth showed the positive effects of the experiment on the target group.

Table 3
A comparison of the improvement of oral communicative skill between the control and target groups

Group	Improved	Not improved	Total
Control Group	76.19	23.81	100.00
Target Group	94.44	5.56	100.00
Total	87.72	12.28	100.00
Pearson Chi-square: 4.10245, df=1, p=.042829			

The progress from lower competence into higher areas of competence is notably higher in the target group than in the control

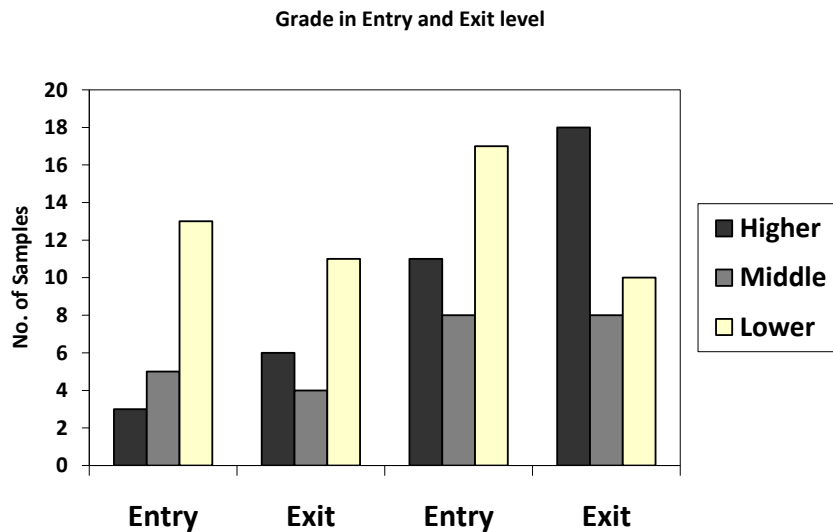**Grade in Entry and Exit level**

Fig.2: Grade in Entry and Exit Level

group. This strongly suggests that the participation in the theatre has motivated and resulted in a higher level of competence than earlier and that this movement is perceptibly higher in the target group.

Not only more people have moved into the higher level but they have also qualitatively enhanced their confidence and competence. Graphical representation of the relative progress achieved by the target group and the control group is presented in Fig.2.

This indicates that the skill and confidence of oral communication (in language learning) can definitely improve by the conscious attempt of the learners. It can improve when greater opportunities and exposure are given to the learners for self improvement. Team work, constant practice and an inbuilt desire to excel will definitely goad the learners to perform better. The

emphasis was more on 'performance through dialogue' and the language items were taken up more as tools to convey something rather than for the sake of 'learning language'.

Thus, the findings of the research appear to support the hypothesis that theatre performance can improve the oral communicative skills of learners and that it has significant effects on their oral communication skills and confidence. Theatre and the related teamwork can qualitatively enhance the level of oral communicative competence through the 'performance' mode, and thereby, raising the 'confidence' level of the second language learners who get exposed to the process of second language interaction. The process enables the learners to develop their latent skill in the spoken mode through constant self monitoring and peer team monitoring.

This is achieved by making decisions on the spot, compelled by the exigencies necessary for social networking on the stage (or in the rehearsing classroom) involving a whole team for the organized communication of an idea, a message or a story expressed through the English language.

Penny Bernal (2007) reflects on the success of using drama in her English Language Development classrooms over the past ten years. She gives various steps for preparing a play as a means of promoting language learning and literacy, such as familiarizing students with language intonations through toning activities, practicing stage directions to prompt multicultural discussions, and accessing drama games to decrease inhibitions and increase concentration. She speaks of rehearsal time as a great opportunity for natural language use and teamwork to evolve. Students are encouraged to use their imagination to enhance their performance, and to even add or change lines if they wish.

Sally Ashton-Hay (2005), in her study on "Drama: Engaging All Learning Styles", states that drama does engage multidimensional learning styles including verbal-linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinesthetic, spatial, and logical and often incorporates music, or the music of language. In addition, drama has the ability to enhance reflection in students and can be used to create powerful social learning environments where students develop improvisational speaking and emotional intelligence awareness skills. In fact, drama is an appealing teaching strategy which promotes cooperation, collaboration, self-control, goal-oriented learning as well as emotional intelligence skills. Drama is easily adaptable to a variety of text studies as demonstrated. Shy students are encouraged to speak by taking on another role. Students develop confidence in speaking from using language rhythms, expression, intonation, pronunciation and choral work.

CONCLUSION

The positive findings accruing from this research justify the need for a solid pedagogic foundation for the credibility and legitimacy in the use of plays and dramatic performance as instruments of language learning and communication. The findings of the research point to the necessity of developing a suitable methodology to incorporate the theatre experience in the ELT curriculum. The findings show how effectively and easily students team up for a verbal performance (in English) and make genuine efforts to excel in the given task. The English class hours can become more meaningful and interactive for learners through such creative team work. The theatre experience in the classroom should be given as much weightage as is at present given to project work, seminar presentation, etc. in the context of language learning.

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