



## USING DRAMA IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING CLASSROOMS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

English as a language has a dominating presence in the world. It enjoys the status of being the most studied Second Language in the world. In India too, it enjoys an official status and is the most preferred second language. It serves as a link language in a nation as diverse as India. India has also emerged as a global leader in providing skilled manpower for various sectors. However recent findings reveal that India is losing ground to countries like China as Indian graduates lack poor communication skills in English. While there are multifarious reasons for this, this article details the lack of practise and a practical approach to English Language Learning as a main cause for poor English skills. It studies the need for improving communication skills amongst Indian learners. It further delves into the study of using drama as a tool for language teaching. It outlines the benefits of using drama in English language classrooms. It further details the methodologies it employs and highlights the role played by the teacher for ensuring the success of this method.

Keywords: ELT India, poor speaking skills, Communicative Approach, Drama, Interactive Learning, student- centered

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### ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

English is a global language. English is the third most spoken language after Mandarin and Spanish. English is no longer restricted to the shores of England. It has spread its influence far and wide and it currently enjoys a dominating presence amongst all world languages. The status of English as a global language rests not only on having a high number of people speaking the language but also on the fact that continually, year after year, more and more speakers are attempting to learn English as their preferred second language. There is an ever - increasing demand amongst learners for learning the language. This stipulates the need for quality English Language Teaching.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGIES

English Language Teaching has also evolved over years to meet the changing needs of its learners. From age old methods like Grammar Translation Method to the current Project Based Learning Methods, the methodologies used for teaching the language have been constantly evolving. Similar to the language's ability to assimilate new words into its vocabulary, English Language Teaching Methodologies have also been incorporating changes and using modern methods to reach out to its learners.

### LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION AND SELF EXPRESSION

Effective communication can only take place with the help of language. A language equips

the user with the ability to communicate one's feelings, thoughts and ideas. It helps the user to engage socially with those around him. It empowers the learner to describe a variety of things ranging from the mundane of information to highly personal thoughts and emotions. Hence, language isn't just a tool for communication. It also paves way for self expression and creativity.

When a language serves the above said purposes, it is only ideal that the learning of the target language results in the ability to use the language for these purposes. Therefore the learning of any language must result in the ability to use the language effectively and efficiently as a tool for communication and self expression. Hence, English Language Teaching Methodologies must empower its learners to be independent users of the language. They must be able to use the language confidently for purposes of communication and self expression.

#### **POOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN INDIA**

English isn't native to India and is learnt as a second language. Year after year, research done by various organisations, reveals the poor language skills plaguing the students who graduate from schools and colleges. A recent survey conducted in the year 2015 by Aspiring Minds, published its findings in 'The National Employability Report'. The survey was conducted for 30,000 students across 500 engineering colleges in the country. It reveals the alarming situation of poor English skills amongst graduates across the country. In spite of learning the language for over a decade in schools and colleges as part of their curriculum, students lack the ability to communicate confidently in English. The findings of this survey were detailed in a newspaper article written by Apoorva Puranik, titled "97% engineering graduates cannot speak English fluently: Survey" published in *The Hindustan Times*. The article listed out the findings of the survey. They are as follows.

As many as 97% engineering graduates in the country cannot speak English, which is required for jobs in corporate sales or business consulting, revealed a new survey. The survey also found that 51% of them are not employable based on their spoken English scores and of the 6 lakh engineers

that graduate annually, only 2.9% candidates are fluent while speaking English. Pronunciation and fluency were found to be major barriers in effective spoken English. According to the results, engineers show a larger gap in elements of spoken English, pronunciation and fluency. Only 6.8% engineers show ability to speak or respond spontaneously. These candidates can speak fluently, with good pronunciation and proper sentence construction.

In another article titled "Lack of English skills haunts Chennai graduates" in *The Hindu*, the author Kavitha Kishore presents the results of the same survey but focuses only on the performance of the students from Chennai. The survey has revealed that only 0.2% of the graduates from Chennai were able to express themselves correctly in English.

In a 15-minute automated phone-based test that measures fluency, pronunciation, listening and comprehension of English language, Chennai had the least mean score in all parameters. "Around 30,000 graduates across the country took the test, and around 35 per cent of the participants from Chennai performed very poorly and 59 per cent could only speak very basic English," Varun Aggarwal, co-founder and CTO of Aspiring Minds, said. "Of the total participants from the city, only 0.2 per cent was able to express him/herself spontaneously, fluently and precisely, with the ability to differentiate finer shades of meaning in complex situations," he added.

#### **NEED FOR PRACTISE AND A WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH**

These recent findings shows the dreadful levels of English skills amongst students in India. The cause for this point to a variety of reasons. The main causes can be distilled to the lacuna in the syllabus and teaching methodologies which ignore the need for practise. The student isn't encouraged or motivated to use the language outside the classroom. He prefers to use his native tongue. Even during classes, the learner is not emboldened to use the language independently. The focus is mainly on

completing the syllabus and preparing them for a written exam. The students lack the opportunity to practise the language that they have diligently learnt from the prescribed textbooks. English is taught as a subject just like History or Geography. There are prose lessons, poetry excerpts, vocabulary and grammatical exercises based on the text. Language is taught in rigid compartments as components such as vocabulary, grammar, prose, poetry and supplementary reader. The connection between them is never highlighted or stressed upon.

The lack of a 'whole language approach' in the teaching learning process has led to a dearth of language skills being developed amongst the language learners in India. Communication skills must be the primary focus for students of higher grades. He must indulge and engage in meaningful communication independent of memorised textual answers. He must be able to practise his language skills independently and confidently. The teaching learning process and the methodology used must ensure adequate practise for improving communication skills. The Communicative Language Approach is best suited for these desired results. Drama or dramatization of texts can prove highly beneficial for this purpose.

#### **DRAMA AS A TEACHING - LEARNING TOOL**

Language learning must employ practical methods to ensure student participation and give him ample scope for using the language. The students don't have much opportunity to use the language outside the school premises. He can't practise the language at home, as the native tongue is spoken informally. A lot of inhibition surrounds the English language learner in India. Hence, practising the language must also be a part of the teaching learning process.

While there are many tools and techniques that the teaching learning process employs to enhance the learner's experience, this article studies the way drama can be effectively used as a teaching tool for learning English. Using Drama as a teaching tool can be very effective if it is planned and executed optimally by the teacher.

The use of drama in teaching English or any foreign language for that matter is not a new approach. Its origins can be traced back to the

19<sup>th</sup> century. When the world started adopting a Communicative Approach to language teaching, using drama as a tool for language learning consequently became very popular.

Drama encompasses many aspects of language learning. Drama ensures student participation. It provides exposure to the language and improves communication skills as it is usually a group activity. It also develops listening, reading, speaking and writing skills (LSRW). It augments vocabulary and instills proper sentence structure in the minds of the learners.

Sara Phillips in her book, *Drama with children* details how drama engages the students in an appealing way and how the children learn the language at a subliminal level. In her book, she states:

They are short, fun, easy to set up and can be adapted for use with different language content. Many of the activities focus on mime so that children can work on using their bodies for language learning: The children acquire the language at a more subconscious level because they are not thinking about what they are saying, but how to show the meaning. (24)

Claudia E. Cornett and Katharine L. Smithrim, in their book titled, *The Arts as Meaning Makers* explain many beneficial aspects of using drama as a teaching tool in class. They are summarised below.

#### **i. Drama's connection to the curriculum and beyond**

Drama can enhance the teaching learning process in myriad ways. It connects the contents of the curriculum and its learning objectives by engaging the students in an entertaining and interactive activity. It creates effective learning strategies which can augment classroom teaching. It provides complex activities for further developing skills such as reading, writing, listening and comprehension. It extends its benefits beyond the framework of a curriculum by helping in developing a well-rounded individual. It improves problem solving skills, decision-making skills, promotes empathy and builds cooperation. It boosts learner confidence and paves the way for self expression and creativity.

**ii. Drama improves student participation and boosts student empowerment**

Drama is a group activity which puts the spotlight on the student. It moves the focus away from the teacher and puts the student at the centre. It is a practical approach for teaching language skills as the students subliminally absorb a multitude of skills. It is an active teaching-learning strategy which relies on better student participation. Story telling is an incredible medium for language learning. Enacting the story goes a step further in engaging the students. Stories aren't just read out. Dialogues aren't simply delivered. The student is a part of the story and becomes the character. When he makes such a connection, he is motivated to work hard in bringing out the best of the character. This emboldens him and he takes charge of presenting it in the best manner. His participation ensures his empowerment and results in extensive improvement in his language skills.

**iii. Drama develops communication skills**

Drama is an interactive activity which presents the students with a fantastic medium to practise and further develop their communication skills. When they perform as characters, they get to use their language actively without just being mere passive listeners. They are provided with the opportunity to sharpen both their verbal and nonverbal communication skills. They learn various aspects of communication which includes essential skills such as intonation, pronunciation, dialogue, improvisation, body language, facial expressions and use of gestures. Drama also paves way for aesthetic development as it heightens their sensory awareness by thinking through the minds of the characters and understanding the inner conflicts of other characters.

**iv. Drama develops social skills**

When students participate in drama, they are not restricted to simply memorising the dialogues and quoting them. They get to engage with other students who play different characters. They practise their social skills as they work together in a group. It brings the students together and helps them identify the different characters that they can play. They work together in comprehending the script and in understanding the emotions that lie

behind the words in the script. Working together in a safe environment builds cooperation and promotes their social skills.

**v. Drama mimics real life**

Drama allows students to role-play and prepares them for real life situations. Since they play different characters and express emotions, it builds empathy and gives them an understanding of their own personal ideas and feelings in those situations. Drama, in its purest form can open several avenues to self awareness. They understand how they feel when faced with new situations, situations they necessarily may not have faced earlier. It helps them understand the complexities of life and helps them become aware of the human condition. It promotes empathy and sympathy. It lays open to them a completely different perspective, a brand new way of looking at the world around them. Drama thus helps them and makes them better suited to handle emotions when they are faced with similar situations in real life.

**vi. Drama is entertaining and effective**

It is a known fact that students remember and retain what is taught, if it is entertaining for them. The element of fun goes a long way in retaining student attention and encouraging their willingness to learn. Drama is an entertaining way to engage the students in effective teaching-learning process. As students are focused and interested, their overall understanding of the language increases manifold.

**DRAMA – A FUSION OF TEACHING-LEARNING STRATEGIES**

Using drama in English Language Teaching fuses many methodologies and techniques. They are discussed below.

- As stated earlier, the Communicative Approach to language teaching encouraged the use of drama as an activity that encouraged student participation. It was also seen as a fun and entertaining method to garner student attention and retention.
- It is a student-centred approach to language learning. The teacher plays the role of the facilitator. As student participation is high in this activity, the students absorb a lot of language skills

subconsciously. They become responsible for their own learning.

- It encourages Interactive Learning. Drama or dramatizing a text encourages Interactive Learning. Interaction is the fulcrum around which this technique is used. It bolsters students' confidence in interacting with those around him even after the activity is over.
- Drama follows a Whole Language Approach. It doesn't focus only on a few rigid skills. It focuses on improving the language skills on multiple levels. It includes many language skills like vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, intonation, nonverbal communication etc.

#### **ROLE OF TEACHER IN DRAMA BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Though using Drama in Teaching English takes the focus away from teacher centred learning and puts the spotlight squarely on the student, the teacher's role isn't diminished or sidelined. A teacher is the key to ensuring the effectiveness of such an approach. It is her responsibility to ensure that the students derive the maximum benefit from this teaching learning process. She plays a very important role in optimising the learning opportunity. She can be called as the director-initiator who plays the crucial facilitator role.

She has to first explain the rationale behind using such activities and the purpose for which the activity is being done. When the students realise the importance and benefits of such an activity, it motivates them further to participate more willingly and with more interest as it is different from the routine traditional methods. She then has to give clear instructions to make sure that the students know what is expected of them. She must also provide ample time for preparation and practise so that students aren't pressured into making mistakes. A lack of preparation time and minimal practise would end up diluting the entire purpose of the activity. Poor rehearsals might end up creating poor performance and may consequently weaken the student's confidence in using the language. Once the activity is over, it is important to get

feedback and also give constructive feedback to the students who performed.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Drama is a powerful tool for language teaching as it truly enriches the student's learning experience. It encourages the students to speak and communicate his views, thoughts and ideas. It bolsters his confidence as it gives him ample practice to use the language with his own expressions. It helps him communicate with others even with limited language, by using nonverbal communication. It motivates the students more as it is an active hands-on approach to language learning. It caters to students with diverse learning styles as each one internalises the learning in the best way he can. Drama can thus provide the much-needed platform for learners to practise and improve their language skills. It greatly improves their communication and social skills. It empowers them to be confident users of the language.

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