

The Theatre and Its Magic in Language Teaching & Learning

Zainal Abd. Latiff

University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

So far little has been done to exploit the obvious advantages of theatre as an instrument of language teaching and learning in schools. Part of the reason why theatre has received little attention in our education system is perhaps the confusion regarding the term 'theatre' itself. To parents, 'doing theatre' is playing, and playing is bad for learning. Children should stop playing and start learning, once they start schooling. To many teachers and headmasters, theatre is nothing more than the annual presentation of the School Play in conjunction with Speech Day or Canteen Day. This often results in poorly performed plays which are embarrassing, for the audience as well as the actors. And certainly, except for the few chosen to act, the majority of the children do not gain much linguistic skills. Thus theatre is shunned away and teachers are apprehensive about using theatre as a teaching method. This paper will therefore try to show the potentials and the magic of theatre in the teaching and learning of language. What we need to do, is to re-define what is meant by the word 'theatre', and how it can be used creatively for our learning purposes. Hopefully, after this delivery, teachers are not only motivated to try and use theatre, but also know how to use it effectively.

Keywords: Theatre, Creative Drama, communication, plays, education

"Art can also be viewed as "an eagerness for truths" expressed in "symbol systems" other than those used by science (words and numbers). As expression of an "eagerness for truth" they are identical to the scientific process of discovery and represent an equally powerful measure for exploring the relationship of man to nature. The arts awaken the "craving to comprehend" – as does scientific exploration. This craving is the motivating force behind all learning". Eric Oddleifson

Introduction

For want of a better way to begin this paper, allow me to express my gratitude to the organizers of this Seminar, for inviting me to share my thoughts and experiences in using drama/theatre in the educational field.

Usually in the schools and academic institutions, the teaching and learning aspects are being conducted based on cognition, psychomotor and pedagogical considerations. Seldom do educators or teachers think of approaching teaching and learning through the affective domain and through the senses and 'feelings'. The teaching normally emphasizes on logic, and the rationale. Everything is calculated by numbers and figures. Productivity is measured by quantitative and academic (paper) qualifications. The question worth asking is:

1. What about the qualitative aspects?
2. What about the feelings and emotions of the educators and learners?
3. What about the educators' and learners' creativity?
4. Don't the arts have a role in educating, enhancing creativity or the development of a human being?

Therefore we should have a paradigm shift in our teaching and learning activities. What about using the Arts in our education? Must it be always be scientific based? Do not forget that we are training Learners, and Learners are Human Beings, and human beings are

not robots. Besides having brains and physical abilities, they do have emotions, feelings, intuitions and creativity. Do not belittle feelings and hold on to the myth that when one is emotional than one loses the rational. As a matter of fact, there is rationality in feeling, as put forward by Professor David Best in his 1994 book "The Rationality of Feeling".

It is in this context that teaching and learning using a dramatic approach, is proposed. Considering that the educator and the learner are 'actors' in his/her own right. The educator and learner play different roles in his/her life. He/She is a son/daughter to someone, father/mother to the children, husband/wife in a marriage set-up, employee/employer in the working place. He/she 'acts' differently in those given circumstances, and his/her 'dialogues' would be different, befitting the situations or scenarios he /she is in. As Shakespeare has put it beautifully "...the world's a stage, and we are mere players".

As a preamble, allow me to paint the picture of the Role of Drama/Theatre in Education in Malaysia. (Things might be different here in Padang, and I hope my talk today would benefit the audiences in one way or another). For several years I have been advocating the role and functions of drama and theatre in education, be it as a tool or as a method in teaching subjects in the schools across the curriculum. Many working papers on the above topic have been presented in seminars and conferences in Malaysia, but sad to say, only the papers were working, but not the relevant parties or people entrusted to follow up with the necessary actions. Therefore it was a wish come true for me, when the Ministry of Education had approved the setting up of two pilot schools - Sekolah Seni (Arts School) in Johor and Sarawak, in 2007. Although it is a bit too late for my country, it is better late than never.

In comparison with USA, Winifred Ward introduced such a course at the University of Northwestern in 1918. The university had also introduced drama courses for their trainee teachers in the faculty of education. Creative Drama was introduced into the curriculum of Evanston Public Schools in 1924. In Great Britain, as early as 1913, Mrs A.T. Craig, the Principal of the New York Ethical and Cultural School, was proposing that drama was of value to all aspects of the curriculum. Caldwell Cook, a teacher of English at Perse School, Cambridge, was another early pioneer of using play/drama as a method for teaching (the Playway Method). People like Peter Slade had begun introducing Drama in education and therapy as early as 1932. In 1954 he produced a book entitled "Child Drama" after more than twenty five years of working with children using drama. Another towering figure in using drama and theatre with children is Brian Way, a theatre director, administrator and writer. His influential book "Development Through Drama" emphasized the use of drama in the personal development of the child. By the end of 1950's, a few training colleges were running educational drama courses. Trainee teachers were compelled to take one or two drama courses in their Teacher Education programmes. In 1967 the Department of Education and Science issued a special report on drama, which made it clear that Drama was recognized as a subject. I do not know the situation in Indonesia, but in Malaysia my hunch is that Teacher Training Institutes do not offer theatre courses to their trainee teachers. At USM, in 2003, students from the School of Education were required to take classes in Acting. I am not sure about the other universities, but my guess is that theatre courses are not being offered by the Education Faculties. I strongly believe that trainee teachers should take at least one theatre course before they graduate. They are 'actors' and they must possess the 'acting skills' in order to perform effectively in their classes. My hope is that those who are involved in Teacher Education, should take the necessary steps to introduce theatre courses in their programmes.

Definitions of Drama and Theatre

Before we go on any further, let me first define the medium that we are dealing with. In the world of the Academia, academicians quarrel about the meanings of drama and theatre. For those who receive training from the United Kingdom, they define Drama as the larger entity, and theatre is a component of the Drama field.

For those who came back from the United States argued that Theatre is the bigger entity, and drama is a component of Theatre. The third group of people who study in Malaysia,

and who normally do amateur theatre work, prefer to accept that there is no difference between Drama and Theatre, therefore they are the same. Here are also those who see drama as literature and theatre as performance. Then there are others who claim that drama is used for activities carried out in the classrooms for didactic purposes, and theatre means formal presentations on stage.

Therefore teachers often use the term drama, and theatre practitioners prefer to use the term theatre. For our purpose today, and for convenience sake, let us agree that the term 'theatre' that I am using today, also means drama. Theoretically, drama derives from the Greek word 'dran' which means 'to do'. Theatre originated also from the Greeks, the word being 'theatron' meaning 'to look or to gaze at', or a building to house performances. We can safely summarize that drama and theatre consist elements such as action, reaction, participation, active, and energetic, that can be experienced either by being performers on stage or as an audience watching a performance.

Misconceptions about Theatre

So far not much has been done to exploit the advantages of theatre as an instrument of language teaching and learning in schools. Many could not see the magic of theatre. Part of the reason why theatre has received little attention in our education system is perhaps the confusion regarding the term theatre. To parents, for their children to be involved in 'doing theatre' is playing, and playing is bad for learning. To them when a child reaches schooling age, playing should stop, and learning should start. What a misconception between play and learning. They cannot comprehend that while the child is playing, he or she is learning, at least learning about life and living. It is only through 'play' that the child learns about himself and the world around him. These parents do not realize the potentials and the magic of playing. They also cannot understand why is playing important for the child's being and development. They just could not envisage the importance and the magic of playing or doing theatre. To them, theatre is mere playing, frivolous and wasting time. Little do they realize that if education is concerned with the individual, theatre is concerned with the individuality of the individual.

To many teachers and headmasters, theatre is nothing more than the annual presentation of the School Play in conjunction with Speech Day, Canteen Day, or Teachers' Day. The director of the play, who is usually the language teacher, is told to do a play, for various reasons: to give a chance for the kids to practice using the language, to occupy the children after the exams, to help the children understand the drama text contained in the literature syllabus, or to raise funds for the renovation of the library or the school canteen.

These are noble aims, but they have obviously done nothing to create any real interest in theatre, or to appreciate the magic that theatre possesses. Many thousands of children have gone through our schools over the years, but we have not created even one internationally known playwright, director or actor. A theatre play cannot draw a crowd of more than a few hundred spectators, sometimes not even at the Istana Budaya (National Theatre), what more of the smaller and not fantastic stages around Kuala Lumpur. The situation is worse in smaller towns in Penang, Perak and Johor. (This may not be true in Indonesia, for I have heard that when Rendra performed *Kasidah Berjanzi*, the stadium was filled with audience).

The experience of putting up a play a year cannot do much good due to its very nature. The traditional way of producing a play from a script limits the number of children who can be involved. Even the most ambitious play cannot cater for more than twenty children at a time. The question to be asked then, is it fair to spend so much time, effort and money for the sake of a few children? In any case, the choice of the play is very often not suitable for the understanding and the capability of the student actors. The choice of plays are usually limited to the works of Shakespeare, Moliere, Shaw, Arthur Miller or Ibsen. For the Malay repertoire, we have "Kerusi", "Jangan Bunuh Rama-Rama" or "Tok Perak". These plays are written for adult actors and audiences, and therefore it is unfair, or even absurd to expect the student/child actors to fully comprehend and exploit the adult conflicts and emotions that these plays explore.

Thus, often these endeavours result in poorly performed and under-rehearsed plays which are embarrassing not only to the audience, but as well as the actors. If the aim of the production was to enhance linguistic skills through the production, only a limited and chosen few will benefit. What about the rest of the population?

Now, this is not to belittle the tireless efforts of the many language teachers who have worked selflessly to produce school plays. Many of them were given the nearly-impossible mission, and they have no choice but to carry it out. On the top of that we come across headmasters who feel that they can only justify spending a few dollars on a production, if the production can 'make a profit'. The success of the play is judged not by how much creativity was engendered or how beneficial it was for the kids, but by how many tickets were sold. We can only console ourselves with the knowledge that even in the developed countries, the same kind of narrow thinking persists.

The Magic of Theatre

Therefore, what we need to do, is to redefine what is meant by using drama or theatre in schools. We need a formed activity that will not only help every child in the class to use language to the best of his ability, but also release his creative energies, give him the confidence to express his ideas freely and encourage him to look at the world around him with greater sensitivity and to describe that world with all the language skills he can command. And theatre has the magic to accomplish it. By using theatre, the teacher has many opportunities to develop the convergent and divergent functions of the intellect. To develop divergency of thinking in children is to develop their creativity. In the creative teaching of the language arts, children will not only speak the language, but invent new poems, stories, patterns of poetry and word combinations.

If we are concerned with the teaching or learning of a second language, we must recognize that most scripts written in that language are unsuitable for the learner, because of the high literary standard of the plays and also because these plays deal with cultural values which are alien to the learner. Hence when we wish to teach a foreign language through theatre, we must be careful that the material must be able to provide a situation which is not too far removed from the learner's own cultural background or experience. This then would give the learner ample opportunity to express freely in the new language.

The play must help him express his own feelings and thoughts without being hampered by the complicated and often bewildering cultural differences between himself and the native speakers of the language he is learning.

As an example, a Malay student learning English, should be encouraged to express himself as a Malay in the English Language, rather than asking him to be Mr. John or an "Irishman" in the play "Juno and the Peacock". He will encounter more than language problems to deal with. Theatre in language teaching must provide the opportunity for the learner to use language as a living organism. Another example is of a non-Malay learning the Bahasa Melayu. It would be inappropriate if the teacher chooses a play like "Membujur Lalu Melintang Patah" by Mustapha Kamil Yassin. The learner would have to know about the Adat Papatih, in order to make sense of what he is saying. Or if the teacher chooses the play "Matinya Seorang Pahlawan" by Usman Awang for his or her first introduction to a Malay drama. The dialogues are in a poetical structure and it would not benefit the student if he/she has to utter these words "Dayang, siapakah di antara kamu dapat mengatakan kepadaku dan melagukan seperti pada rajamu"

Theatre is a living experience, and therefore it should deal with things or situations that the learner is familiar with. For example, for the Malay learner who is learning English, it would be easier for him if the situation is set in a kampong, the local post office, or the local market, and not what happens to Mr. Jonathan in London. When the learner is given the opportunity to talk about things that he is familiar with, and which affects him personally, he is more comfortable and free to talk without inhibitions. According to Frank Whitehead, in his *The Disappearing Dais*, if a learner has to imagine a situation that he is not familiar with, his

vocabulary will be restricted, he gets lost in his new role, becomes more self-conscious, and would not be able to move gracefully and easily.

During a theatre lesson, the learner is able to use all the sentence patterns he has learnt in the formal class freely and at random. However a free flow of language will not occur unless the learner has “something to say”. Language is the most obvious means of communication but before it can be used effectively, the speaker must have something to communicate, he must have ideas. James A. Smith, in his book *Creative Teaching of The Language Arts in Elementary Schools*, states that the basic objective in building effective communication skills is to keep in mind that “Each child needs to experience language in dynamic and relevant ways all day, everyday, so he can communicate comfortably in every way open to him, and without unnecessary pressures.” It is here where magic of theatre can play a part, i.e. to encourage the development of ideas through observation and imitation. Through theatre games and improvisations, the learner builds his confidence and becomes creative. By being observant and through imitating he adapts.

A language learner must understand very clearly that in any language people communicate not only with their vocal organs but with their bodies as well. Theatre teaches the student to express himself through action and speech. And through theatre, the learner can be taught not only to speak, but to listen, because listening is a vital link in communication. Through theatre, the learner can be trained to be aware -- aware of himself, aware of other selves, aware of his environment, aware of his tempo, and aware of his movements. These awareness are very important not only in acting but also in “living”. Students are made to be aware of ‘the moment’.

The kind of theatre activity that can help every child use language effectively therefore is not the annual school play, but creative playing or more popularly known as Creative Dramatics. The annual play can be equivalent to Children’s Theatre, which is product oriented and for the pleasure of an audience. But Creative Dramatics is concerned with the process, and the beneficiaries are the participants themselves. Let me dwell further into Creative Dramatics.

Creative Dramatics Defined

Creative Dramatics is the process of extemporaneous situation and story playing under the guidance of a ‘leader’. It is different from a formal theatre presentation, in that in Creative Dramatics we are concerned with providing a situation where the child will be motivated to use spoken and body language in order to communicate with other members of the class. It is not concerned with the result or performance or the audience, but with the process, because it contains special value to the language learner. As a matter of fact there is no ‘performance’ or show, and there are no audience. Everybody participates and everyone benefits.

Creative Dramatics is concerned solely with the participants and his growing ability to describe his surrounding and his experiences. The greatest value in language learning is not the end product, the production of a play, but the process he has gone through. The situation being acted out may never reach a polished performance standard, it does not matter. What matters most is the experience the learner accumulated via the process.

The annual presentation of a play which represents the theatre activity of a school is at best a sporadic affair. The teacher decides to put on a play, a lot of interest is generated, the work reaches a frantic pace, there are two or three performances, there is a cast party and after that everyone breathes a sigh of relief and the drama is forgotten until the following year. Obviously the serious drama teacher cannot effectively gauge how much learning has taken place. With Creative Dramatics however, the teacher is able to programme his activities to cover the whole year. He can emphasize language learning as his primary aim, and he can tackle the problems of the slow learners. He can test the effectiveness of his teaching by watching his work and the progress of his students over an extended period of time.

Through Creative Dramatics we can provide a ‘safe’ environment for a student among other learners of comparable linguistic ability to practice his language skills, and we can provide him with the motivation to want to express himself. We can build a ‘scaffolding’ for the learners to feel ‘safe’ while trying. We can therefore provide him with a chance to use as

many structural elements of the language as freely as possible. At the beginning he can use a limited range of structures with confidence. One of the greatest advantages of this kind of activity is that the learner sheds his initial embarrassment, he begins to enjoy working with his fellows. It encourages team work and he learns from other members of the class rather than from the teacher only. Learning becomes a group effort centered around the learners with the teacher taking a back seat, making himself available for advice but not directly controlling the activity. The learner also becomes sharply aware of the need to increase his vocabulary and the range of sentence structures at his command. He begins to see the new language not as neatly arranged series of tables in a text book but as a multi-faceted gear throbbing with vitality.

So far we have been examining the role of theatre in language teaching on a theatrical level. Now let us look at a few ways in which a course in drama could be conducted in a class.

Drama in the Classroom

The first thing to clarify would be that we need to take into account about the ages of our group of learners. Obviously when working with younger children there will be less inhibition and a greater willingness to participate. However older learners can also respond wholeheartedly if their confidence is built in the early sessions. The 'safe stage' must be set in order for them to 'act' safely. Adult learners of a language can select their own materials more suited to their greater maturity when enacting a scene. Unlike when working with a common text book, different age groups could deal with different situations provided that the experiences being explored appeal to the age groups we are working with. In most cases, after the first few lessons, students suggest their own situations and work independently to create a scene that interests them.

Our primary concern, especially at the beginning, would be to create an atmosphere in the class aimed at relaxing the students. It should be stated at the outset that the scenes to be enacted are not aimed at developing acting ability but language skills. It should be clear in their minds that they are not performing but trying to use language in a natural context.

In the early stages, let the students work in large groups, repeating sentences together rather than individually. This releases tension and gives them safety in numbers. Do not pick out individual mistakes but address yourself to the whole group.

Initially, there will be a lot of giggling and apparent lack of concentration. In many cases, this is caused by embarrassment and it is best to allow this to wear itself out by constantly changing the activities and by paying attention to different members of the class. At any rate, never show irritation as this may create a barrier between you and the student who finds the new experience alien to anything he has done before.

Remember too that the class can easily be taken over by the brighter or more extrovert students, who are ever eager to perform. Encourage the shy ones to participate by giving them attention and building their confidence without at the same time dampening the enthusiasm of those who are keen. Constantly reassure them that you are not seeking a 'performance', and change roles often so that everyone gets a chance to be heard.

As their confidence develops and almost everyone is willing to participate, break the larger groups into smaller ones and give each group an idea to develop into a scene. Allow them to select the characters and give them a few minutes (about ten at the beginning, progressively reduce the time for rehearsal as they become more competent) to discuss and prepare the scene. Then each group can enact the scene while the others watch and listen.

During the scene the teacher can help by providing an odd sentence or two if the speaker is having too much difficulty. The main concern should be to get the speakers to communicate even if the sentences are grammatically incorrect. Make notes of very glaring mistakes and point them out after the scene is completed. Do not stop a scene to correct a grammatical error. Discourage the class from laughing at others when mistakes occur either in acting or in speech.

After each scene, encourage a little discussion about the new words the listeners heard, about new sentences and finally put in a few words of praise about the way in which the scene was handled. Then ask for suggestions as to how the scene can be improved (do not ask

what was wrong with the scene), how it can be made longer and maybe more interesting. Then ask the group to rehearse the scene again for presentation for the following week, incorporating the suggestions made by the class. After two or three weeks change the grouping and suggest new situations so that learners work with fresh faces and interest is maintained.

The art of teaching language through the medium of theatre may be unfamiliar to many but the earnest teacher can bring great enjoyment to the learning process if he is willing to try out new ideas and he himself learn from previous mistakes. Given time he/she will adopt and adapt. He will provide his students with opportunities to speak, listen and use their bodies. I sincerely hope that when you return to your classes, you will try this method and convince others about the tremendous value and magic of theatre as an instrument for teaching language. Children like to learn but do not like to be taught. So, happy trying, happy learning and happy teaching.

References

- Fleming, Mike. *Starting Drama Teaching*. Great Britain: David Fulton Publishers, 2003.
- Jackson, Tony, ed. *Learning Through Theatre: Essays and Casebooks on Theatre in Education*. Manchester Univ. Press, 1980.
- Mc Caslin, Nellie. *Creative Drama in the Classroom*. New York: Longman, 1980.
- Mc Gregor, Lynn, Maggie Tate, and Ken Robinson. *Learning Through Drama*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977.
- Robinson, Ken, ed. *Exploring Theatre and Education*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980.
- Siks, Geraldine Brain. *Drama With Children*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- Slade, Peter. *Introduction to Child Drama*. London: University of London Press, 1958.
- Smith, James A. *Creative Teaching of The Language Arts in the Elementary School*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1978.
- Via, Richard A. *English in Three Acts*. USA: The University of Hawaii Press, 1976.
- Ward, Winifred. *Playmaking With Children*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957.
- Way, Brian. *Development Through Drama*. London: Longmans, 1967.
- Whitehead