

The role of drama in teaching English: Towards the Enhancement of students' communicative skills at the University of Namibia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of drama in teaching English to enhance students' communicative skills at the University of Namibia. The discussions of the research focused on assessing the benefits of using drama in the teaching of English to increase students' motivation and self-confidence, as well as to enhance their communicative skills. Research findings revealed the effectiveness of drama oriented English lessons to the benefits of students' speaking skills, motivation, self-esteem and confidence in their abilities to communicate in English. In addition, the findings revealed that drama activities aided students develop a community and foster group cohesiveness, which helped in building students' confidence when speaking English in front of their classmates. Moreover, the study results revealed that motivation is linked to self-confidence as the drama activities accorded students the opportunity to use the target language in real life situations.

Keywords: Drama techniques and strategies, communicative language teaching, skills, educational drama, language acquisition and zone of proximal development

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Introduction

There has been very little research conducted in the African context and Namibia in particular, to explore the role of drama in teaching English to enhance student's communicative skills. Thus, this research is of great significance as it adds to the African repository of knowledge, best practices and lessons learned on the subject. Several researchers have attributed students' poor English proficiency level to multiple factors, however only a few have made feasible suggestions to improve the academic underachievement at schools in Namibia. The targeted interventions (drama activities) designed for this study have the potential of intervening positively in this problem and proffering significant contributions towards the enhancement of students' communicative skills at any educational level. Furthermore, the research findings from this study are anticipated to provide guidelines to the English Access Course curriculum designers at the Language Centre at the University of Namibia to incorporate drama in the teaching of literature and grammar as the course main components.

Methodology

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study was primarily a qualitative study with a quantitative data set to statistically help inform the descriptions of the of the participants' responses to the entry and exit questionnaires. This study also employed the purposive sampling procedure to select 45 students out the 210 students enrolled for English Access Course in the Language Centre, at the University of Namibia, Khomasdal Campus 2014. The study used 4 data collection instruments, namely: questionnaires, focus group interviews, students' reflective notes from the students' portfolios and the researcher's reflection notes to collect data.

Findings of the Study

The study findings revealed two particular elements perceived by the majority of participants as sources of low level English proficiency as: shyness, lack of motivation from the teachers and confidence in speaking English. This implies that in teaching English speaking skills, the focus should be on strategies aimed at motivating students, boosting their vocabulary and confidence which would effect a significant improvement on students' English communicative skills. The study findings on whether participants were motivated to speak English by their teachers also revealed crucial research information. In the entry questionnaire, 44.41% indicated that the teachers motivated them to speak English sometimes, with 35.6 % always motivated, and 20 % revealing that they have never been motivated to speak English by their teachers. It is interesting to note that in the exit questionnaires after the English drama oriented lessons, there was a drastic change in results as the results revealed that 88% of the participants were always motivated to speak English. Only 2.2% reported that they were not motivated to speak English. These findings imply that teachers as driving forces in education should always motivate students to speak English whether inside or outside the classrooms.

Findings on effectiveness of drama oriented lessons on students' interaction, motivation and confidence

Interaction

Interaction is one notable theme that emerged from many responses from the pre and post focus group interviews. The findings derived from the focus group interview, participants' reflective note and the exit questionnaire also revealed that EDOL (English Drama Oriented Lessons) promotes interaction among the students. In particular, participants indicated that they learn well when interacting with others during lessons. The research findings further revealed that the EDOL has accorded participants opportunities to interact and socialize with each other effectively. Furthermore, the results revealed that participants were more at ease when taking part in drama activities which resulted into cohesiveness of community building. Consequently, the theoretical

basis for this study is provided by 3 renowned researchers in cognitive (Krashen, 1985), educational psychology (Vygotsky [Malik, 2008]), second and foreign language acquisition (Bruner, 1978). Vygotsky as one of the tenets of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as cited in Malik (2008), notes that the sociocultural theory maintains that learning occurs through interaction. Malik states that Vygotsky introduced the concept of ZPD, which is the notional gap between a.) the learner's current developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving ability, and b.) the learner's potential level of development as determined by the ability to solve problems under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. Malik further posits that acquisition of knowledge and skills occurs as individuals participate in society through interacting with, and receiving guidance from more capable persons.

In relation to Vygotsky's theories of language acquisition is Krashen (2004) who devised a similar notion for language acquisition with his five hypotheses. Krashen further asserts that "acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding" (p. 128). Krashen further asserts that the kind of input that is one step beyond an ESL/EFL student's current stage and which a student needs in order to make progress in acquiring English language. He calls this gap $i+1$, where (i) is the current level of proficiency. When a student is exposed to comprehensible input, acquisition takes place. Indeed, Krashen further states that comprehensible input is a sufficient condition for language acquisition, and he suggests that natural communicative input is key to designing a syllabus ensuring that each learner will receive some 'i+1' input that is appropriate for their current stage of linguistic competence. However, Krashen (2008) denounces that language will not be acquired in the presence of the affective filter. This simply means that a student who is nervous or bored in class will learn neither subject content nor new language, even if the input is comprehensible. Furthermore, it is in this aspect where drama techniques become relevant especially in acquiring the language. In relation to this study, it was evident from the beginning, especially the first two weeks of the drama oriented lessons that participants were extremely quiet and shy to talk.

The participants in this study became more articulate and free to engage in activities as the EDOL progressed. The EDOL helped participants overcome their fears in speaking English and they were the catalyst to their change in behaviour towards speaking English. To this, Bruner (1978) coins the term scaffolding as a description for the kind of assistance given by the teacher or more knowledgeable peer in providing comprehensible input and moving the learner into the Zone of Proximal Development. Scaffolding is the term given to the provision of appropriate assistance to students in order to achieve what would have been too difficult for an individual student (Bruner, 1978). Bruner clarifies that scaffolding includes all activities that teachers engage in when they predict varied difficulties that the class or individual students will have with a given task.

During the English drama oriented lessons, the researcher who was the lecturer in this study, designed cooperative learning activities aimed at promoting interaction among the participants. It is worth noting that most participants grouped themselves as per their gender and language group in the first few days when they were instructed to sit in groups. The researcher then realized that for a cohesive classroom community to be created, cooperative learning activities were imperative. In relation to the reviewed literature, teachers and lecturers in ESL environments should emphasize group dynamics as students work together in small groups to achieve their goals. A cooperative learning environment is structured so that students' success is interdependent on each other (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). In addition, Pica (2007) asserts that "participation in verbal interaction offers language learners the opportunity to follow up on new words and structures to which they have been exposed during language lessons and to practice

them in context” (pp. 59-60). Teaching which takes place in the classroom is described by O’Gara (2008) as “an interactive process, primarily involving classroom talk, which takes place between teacher and pupils and occurs during certain definable activities” (p. 20).

Motivation

Motivation is an internal state that initiates and maintains goal-directed behaviour. It is an inducement to action (Murray, 2010). Murray states “when students are motivated to learn, they try harder to understand the material and thereby learn more deeply, resulting in better ability to transfer what they have learned to new situations” (p. 459). If students can use the language themselves, then they become aware that they have learnt something useful and are encouraged to continue learning, perhaps the most important factor is to maintain motivation in the learning process itself (Hedge, 2011). Many researches (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Hayes, 2010) in the motivation field proved that there is an inseparable relationship between motivational strength and oral English proficiency. So, using any kind of good methods in the oral English class is very important to students speaking skills.

Results from this study prove that EDOL had an impact on participants’ motivation towards speaking English. Most participants in their entry questionnaires indicated that they find it crucial to learn to communicate appropriately in English; even though in the same entry questionnaire 20% indicated that they were never motivated to speak English by their teachers. The latter was then rejected in the exit questionnaire after the participants took part in the English drama oriented lessons. The participants’ claims are therefore proven in Wagner “drama is powerful because of its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning exciting, challenging, relevant to real life concerns, and enjoyable” (2009, p. 9). Wagner further states that drama has the potential to provide students an opportunity to practice their English speaking skills in a setting where they feel safe. Research suggests that drama holds the potential to lower anxiety and increase motivation for English Language Learners (ELL) (Stern, 2008). Stern’s study posits that drama helped ESL students gain self-confidence, and they felt less nervous speaking English in front of the group as they were motivated to speak English through drama activities.

According to Emel et al. (2010):

It is easy to see why motivation is of great importance in SLA. It provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force needed to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) presuppose motivation to some extent (p. 65).

English language learners have varying degrees of motivation based on their beliefs, such as their beliefs in the importance of learning English and their beliefs in their abilities which is not far from the participants’ assentation and behavioural change after attending the English grammar lessons. It is therefore important for language teachers to know that certain teaching methods and tasks can have a positive or negative affect on student motivation. Even though 88.90% of the participants indicated that they were motivated to speak English through the English drama lessons in the exit questionnaires, one cannot rule out the fact that 8% of the participants viewed it differently. The participants who indicated that they were not motivated expressed their views that they felt the drama activities were boring. Another aspect that was mentioned was that students were shy and it was difficult for them to face other classmates and communicate freely in English. To this, Emel et al. (2010) suggests that group dynamics may also have a profound effect on the motivation of L2 students and it is crucial for language teachers to be aware of the dynamics in their classes.

Confidence

Regarding the participants' confidence as per their pre-focus interview responses, participants endorsed that they were shy to speak English and most importantly they felt more comfortable speaking their native languages even during English lessons. Some students were extremely quiet during the first days in English drama oriented lessons. It is important to note that there was significant change in the participants' behaviour and perceptions after two weeks into the English oriented drama lessons. Participants significantly gained confidence and expressed themselves freely during the drama exercises. Regarding confidence, Cohen (2012) points out that self-image is an important factor to be considered in the learning and teaching arena. Self-image refers to a person's beliefs about themselves. A person with a positive self-image will usually be more self-confident than a person with a low self-image. Interpreting the pre-focus group interview, entry questionnaire and few of the students' reflective notes in the early days of the English lessons, one could conclude from the participants' responses that they had low self-image and did not believe in their capabilities of speaking English in front of others. This might be ascribed to students coming from English classrooms where teachers do not motivate them to speak English. According to Cohen (2012), confident language learners with a positive self-image actually seek out meaningful input, and are more able to acquire a second language.

Discussion

A framework for the discussion related to the role of drama in teaching English to enhance students' communicative skills is provided by revisiting theories regarding language acquisition specifically on the basis of drama in teaching English, or drama in education and the findings from this study. By revisiting these theories, it is important to keep in mind that, as mentioned above, most researchers focused on L2 speakers and writers. It is therefore crucial to discuss the extent to which English drama oriented lessons would enhance the participants' communicative skills in accordance with L2 speakers in the context of a multilingual country such as Namibia.

Based on support in the literature reviewed, Krashen and Terrell (1983), state that "the most important goal of the early stages of the natural approach is to lower the affective filter" (p. 91). The findings of this research suggest how drama could be effective in increasing motivation and confidence and reducing anxiety for the English language students who participated. At the same time, these findings also revealed that drama may be more beneficial for some English language learners than others, and that different drama activities are more appropriate for different English language learners. The results arrived at in this study were not very surprising since overall, significant change in the group's motivation, anxiety, and confidence were observed during the lessons, and as indicated in the students' reflective notes and focus group interviews.

The study findings have brought to light that some participants who did not like drama oriented lessons were observed to have changed as the drama oriented lessons progressed. There were some impressive changes observed in individual participants for instance, the male participant who threw tantrums the first day of English drama oriented lessons, arguing that he did not like drama activities, later enthusiastically exclaimed that English drama oriented lesson helped him become confident in speaking English. Drama in English language classrooms is ultimately indispensable because it gives students the chance to use their own personalities and draw upon their natural abilities to communicate effectively in a given situation as per the study findings. Furthermore, the study indicates that English drama oriented lessons put language into context by providing students the experience of success in real-life situations and arming them with confidence to communicate effectively outside the classroom.

Reverting to the participants' behaviour during lessons before the English drama oriented lessons, most participants were extremely quiet and only spoke when spoken to, or answered in yes or no to questions posed to them. This is one of the factors behind the research motive to integrate drama techniques in teaching English with the aim of enhancing students' communicative skills. Tan (2007) postulates that the students' silence in class does not mean that they do not like the lesson. It is evident in the study findings as the participants revealed in their entry questionnaire that they were always afraid that others would laugh at them when they made grammar errors when speaking. Participants also noted that time allocated to prepare or do activities might be a contributing factor to their muteness as they need more time to structure their thoughts and respond to what is required of them. Most participants affirmed that the English drama oriented lessons helped them improve their speaking skills. Considering that in the entry questionnaire, only 13.6% liked speaking skills, the participants' behaviour towards speaking English changed to 65% of participants liking English speaking skills compared to other English skills. In addition, when asked if they think the drama oriented lessons helped them improve their English speaking skills, participants had this to say during the post focus group interview: *"Drama lessons are fun when you are enjoying the lessons you tend to learn more". "Yaaaa, drama lessons have really helped us improve our speaking skills because we are now used to speaking English more with each other than before."*

The study findings show positive effects of drama on students' self-confidence and motivation towards speaking English. In accordance with Stern (2008) findings of which in this study indicate that the English drama oriented lessons helped students gain self-confidence as they felt less nervous and more confident when speaking English, unlike before the intervention programme. Most of participants indicated that they enjoyed the drama activities and were motivated to participate more actively as the lessons progressed. Stern (2008), in his study, reported that most of the students perceived the drama activities as helpful in making them less nervous and motivating them. Students in a Korean EFL study by Coleman (2010) also reported that they felt more relaxed and confident speaking English as a result of drama-based English.

During the drama activities, students had numerous opportunities to practice speech in the target language meaningfully which significantly helped the group become cohesive. Research observations showed that the participants' motivation and confidence towards speaking English increased and their anxiety decreased. Furthermore, the researcher observed that the participants appeared to be more at ease speaking English and spoke much more after the drama oriented lessons than they did before. In their reflective notes, the participants confirmed the researcher's observation that their confidence in using the English language and their motivation to engage in more English speaking activities increased. The researcher concluded that English drama oriented lessons provided participants an opportunity to use the target language (English). With reference to the students' role, Ayers (2007) emphasizes that recognizing students as sources of knowledge is a crucial component for creating a classroom environment in which language learners are empowered and given significant opportunities for language practice. The latter is evident in the current study findings that students indicated in the exit questionnaires and the focus group interviews that they learned from one another. Participants also revealed that the interaction with their peers accorded them an opportunity to learn cooperatively. To support these findings, Maley and Duff (2005) assert that when students work together, they share knowledge. They recommend that it is the teacher's role to moderate, direct discussion, probe, foresee, and analyse the implications of student interactions during language classrooms.

Conclusion

The findings from this study demonstrate that drama techniques and strategies can be successfully implemented in ESL, EFL and ELL classrooms and coordinated to reinforce the

regular curriculum. The findings support results from other studies showing that drama in education has positive effects on English language learners' anxiety, confidence and motivation towards speaking English (Coleman, 2010; Stern, 2008; Stinson, 2006). While the sample of the participants is limited and the time frame constrained to draw any generalisable conclusions, the findings indicate that drama significantly built the participants' confidence and motivated them to use the target language more. The participants needed not to feel uncomfortable as some would in the case of ordinary classes. Some students are shy and are not able to perform well, whereas English oriented drama lessons would have them to work within their teams and allow everyone to participate even when mistakes were made. Moreover, the drama activities took place in a stress-free situation. The participants became more comfortable in speaking English regardless of the grammar mistakes committed. Drama activities clearly fit Krashen and Terrell's (1983) definition of acquisition activities providing meaningful input. Although the results from this study cannot be generalised to other populations, these results could likely be replicated with similar populations whose English comprehension is already quite advanced. Consequently, the researcher's classroom observations revealed that the interaction between teachers and students typically takes the form of a one-to-one exchange between the teacher and students in a whole class setting, instead of other possible patterns of interaction, which do not develop from exchanging ideas, feelings and thoughts. Based on this research finding, the students' perceptions and attitudes including their responses during the focus group interviews show positive effects of drama on students' interaction, involvement, anxiety, self-confidence and motivation towards learning English. Ayers (2007) accentuates that the traditional teaching methodology does not promote optimal learning.

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