

The Impact of School theatre on developing children's linguistic Abilities

Dr.MAROUF Nawel

Department of English , Faculty of Letters, Languages, and Arts,University of Saida,Algeria, Email address, :nawelomar2@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The present research paper aims at investigating the impact of school theatre and its role in developing the child's linguistic abilities. We are notably interested in highlighting the importance of this literary genre in the context of language learning for children. Despite of its obvious dynamic nature(Audet and Mercier,2004), theatre is neglected as a valuable tool that should be used in developing children linguistic abilities either to acquire their mother tongues(L1) or in learning other foreign languages. This paper tends to shed light on how theatre can help children to enhance their four language skills namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Keywords: child, four skills, linguistic abilities, school theatre.

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1.Introduction

According to researchers in the field of child development and learning, children's success is tightly related to the nature of formation and opportunities they have received in their early ages of education. Researches prove that a good education during the first years of development has long time lasting influence on the child's intelligence, personality, behavior, and acquisition/learning of languages. From birth, the child is endowed with perceptual schemes which underlie the linguistic categories. Indeed, the newborn would select from the first months of his life the discriminating sounds of his mother tongue. However, this natural baggage only develops thanks to interactions with the family environment at first and then at school. Being in the 21st century, curriculum designers and policymakers need to break away from the idea that learning can only come from books and theory. Putting things into practice mainly for young learners proved to be the best method to assimilate and learn languages and remember facts quickly. Thus, an artistic activity paired with a language activity will allow students to develop a multitude of skills (Meirieu, 2002; Sousa, 2004; St-Coeur, 2004), for example, to exercise critical judgment (Aden, 2009), implement creative thinking (ibid.), Communicate appropriately (Fonio * Genicot, 2011; Magalhaes dos Reis, 2008), etc. More particularly, activities which make use of the theater as a means of education are likely to contribute to the development of these skills. Consequently, theatre allows a practice of language in all its dimensions, at the level of speaking and at the level of body engagement, on verbal and non-verbal signs, it also allows work on self-confidence. In fact, "Everything is language in the theater: words, gestures, objects. It is not just the word" (Eugène Ionesco)¹.

2.Education Theatre

¹ Eugène Ionesco, born Eugen Ionescu, (November 26, 1909 – March 29, 1994) was a French-Romanian playwright and dramatist, one of the foremost playwrights of the *Theater of the Absurd*.

One of the most outstanding occurrences in education —particularly from the fifties theoretical developments have occurred at the level of methods and methodologies of education, represented in the constructivist model of learning and developmental psychology.

In Great Britain, the climate of social change which followed the post-war years led to child-centered, 'progressive' methods of teaching and learning, mixed-ability grouping, and topic work (Valerie Halstead 384). The Education Act of 1944 established the foundations for a more egalitarian school system and paved the way for the introduction at the end of the fifties of Comprehensive Schools. Education is then viewed as the means for personal improvement and social transformation, and its primary aim is the whole development of individuals, who should be provided with meaningful experiences as a way to help them make sense of the world around them. The traditional model involving the mere transmission of information is replaced by a more dynamic teaching practice in which children are exposed to active contexts and situations to help them acquire new skills and knowledge as well as explore their personal and social identity.

The origins of the movement and 'theatrical method' that has come to be called Theatre in Education can be traced back to some projects carried out by some actors and teachers in Coventry in 1965 which led to the establishment of a permanent theatre in the education unit at the Belgrade Theatre. Soon the initiative spread over the country and was supported by regional boards and local education authorities. Since then, varieties of theatre in education have developed worldwide, opening doors to a range of possibilities, resulting in fruitful assets that should not be underestimated. In fact, After the Second World War, people became aware that drama or theatre techniques might be useful as a way of fostering effective learning in schools.

2.1 Theatre and language acquisition/learning

In the 1960s, researchers became increasingly interested in studying language development in children. Teachers used the 'theoretical' findings of British researchers, for example, Wilkinson (1971), Halliday (1975), and Wells (1986) in their classrooms (see Bolton 1993, 39), but they were not concerned with the use of drama and theatre.

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However, according to Bolton (1993), only a small number of influential linguists, such as Hourd (1949), Britton (1972), Dixon (1975), Rosen (1973), and Moffett (1968) took interest in using theatre particularly, drama as a tool for developing children's language abilities. Moving from theatre for general education to theatre for acquiring and learning first and foreign languages.

In James Moffett's opinion, drama and speech are "central to the language curriculum, not peripheral" (Moffett 1968, 60 - 61). He described the drama as "the matrix of all language activities, subsuming speech and engendering the varieties of writing and reading." Moffett created a model for classroom theatre in language education. In the following section, the key features of this model are summarized by Verriour (1993, 44 - 45):

- (1) recognition that the *dramatic pedagogical approach* to teaching language is superior to an *expository teaching methodology* in so far as children have to *use* language to learn *about* language, rather than being told about it;
- (2) an emphasis on the importance of the *improvised dialogue* is 'the major means of developing thought and language,' and involves the kinds of operations among participants that are responsible for this development;

As already pointed out, Mofett's model emphasized that the child should not be seen as an 'isolated' creature, but instead is regarded as a 'social being who learns through interaction. The 'active' (not passive) and 'cooperative' use of language is important and should take place at the same time as the child is acquiring the syntactical structures of his first language. This also holds for second and foreign language learning.

As highlighted above, theatre may be considered as one of the most affecting social factors that enable children not just for performing before an audience, but also the best sphere for reinforcing linguistic skills in L1 and other foreign languages. In the following section, we will highlight how theatre helps the child develop good language skills.

3.The listening skill

The primary and most essential skill that should be mastered is the listening skill. Indeed effective communication cannot take place without a good listening ability. Theatre activities help the child to respond intelligibly to what he listens to. Moreover, such tasks teach the child to be an effective communicator through listening actively, commenting critically, and reacting appropriately.

4.The speaking skill

Both in language education and theatre arts, we use 'language' as the essential means of communication. Pronunciation and intonation in speaking are two important elements that may perfectly be developed and practiced through theatre. While performing, the child is unconsciously developing his speaking abilities. On stage, the child's pronunciation should be clear and expressive for the audience what increase motivation for learning in such an interactive atmosphere.

Moreover, specialists link oral language to the child's future reading ability, academic success, and social dispositions(Spira, Bracken, and Fischel, 2005). It is the intrinsic part of theatre that helps the child articulate words correctly through speaking aloud while memorizing the playwrights and practicing dialogue delivery.

5. The reading skill

Reading the scripts, comprehending the scripts, reading the scripts in a group, reading more than just one play are all useful activities that may equip the child with a considerable vocabulary that he may use in different situations. Other activities mentioned in (Dubois and Tremblay,2017) such as an activity known as the 'theatre readers' which consists of reading aloud

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and in a group a text or an extract of a text from the theater, either presented or not in front of the public, would have an impact on students' reading fluency (Kararuddin * Kamarul Kabilan, 2010; MacFadden, 2010).

Another study conducted by (Smith, 2011) has shown that the activity of the Readers' Theatre, without claiming to be the most effective means of improving students' fluency in reading, greatly facilitates its development. In this quasi-experimental research, two groups were exposed to a Readers' Theatre activity over ten weeks. During the same period, two control groups participated in a repeat reading activity. At the end of the experiment, the learners in the experiment and control groups significantly improved their performance in terms of fluency in reading. More specifically, the students in the experimental groups showed an improvement in their attitude to reading for pleasure, that is, non-compulsory reading.

In the same context, research was done by MacFadden (2006) also looked at the practice of Readers' Theatre. For 9 weeks, once a week, three guest artists took turns leading an activity in an experimental class for approximately one hour. During this same period, the control group did not have access to these activities. This experiment led to the following results: (1) the students who took part in the artistic activities had better feedback skills, that is, the formulation of comments following an activity; (2) all the students except one said they liked the activities; (3) the teachers noted, by observation, that their pupils seemed to have developed their skills to use a richer and more varied vocabulary.

Finally, according to La Von Bridges (2008), the practice of Readers' Theatre has a great influence on the development of oral competence, and their reading abilities, having positive repercussions on motivation, pleasure in the task, performance, in addition to learners' sense of personal effectiveness.

6 .The writing skill, grammar, morphology, and syntax

Writing is best practiced through scriptwriting. The child rewrites the script repeatedly the fact that reinforce his technical writing abilities by respecting the conventional standards of language. The theatre employs words creatively within the boundaries provided by these standards. Rehearsals and repeat performances will help children master these conventions in a creative and hands-on manner.

7.Conclusion

According to experimental researches conducted about theatre application on first language and foreign-language acquisition and learning, positive results have been obtained. An instance of these experiments is the one conducted by (Frelon, 2016/2017). The author confirmed that his learners were highly motivated and that he succeeded to collect positive feedback from them. The researcher explained also how he discovered capacities that he was not able to detect using classical teaching methods. A positive evolution of the learners' linguistic skills has also been noticed.

In conclusion, one can assume that the application of theatre in schools notably in enhancing and developing language abilities is recommended to every teacher who seeks to succeed in giving learners the will to study and to fully develop.

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