

PLOT COMPREHENSION AND LITERARY APPRECIATION THROUGH DRAMATIZATION

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Abstract: *Learning literature is often regarded as dry and tedious. Due to factors like language barriers, low self-motivation, and poor reading habit, many learners especially those who are learning English as a second or foreign language often face difficulties in comprehending and appreciating literary texts that are assigned to them. This action research investigated challenges faced by ESL learners when dealing with a plot of a literary text. It also disclosed ESL learners' views about the influence of dramatization on their plot comprehension and literary appreciation. Dramatization was used as an intervention and data was collected through a self-reflection session, a naturalistic observation, and an interview protocol. The findings revealed that the respondents had some problems with the elements and development of a plot in a literary text. It was also discovered that dramatization had positively assisted the respondents' comprehension of the elements and development of a plot in a literary text. It was also found that dramatization had increased the respondents' literary appreciation.*

Keywords: *Action Research, Dramatization, ESL Learners, Plot Comprehension, Literary Appreciation*

Introduction

Drama is the act of using a person's imagination to become someone or something. It can take one to any place and to any period of time. It is only limited by the imagination, the participants' fear of risking, or the leader or teacher's set limitations. Courtney (1980) defines drama as, "the human process whereby imaginative thought becomes action, drama is based on internal empathy and identification, and leads to external impersonation".

Drama incorporates elements of communicative and active approach to learning where individuals are given freedom to explore, engage and understand their respective roles beyond the cultural and language boundaries. Drama is a good platform for cultural and language enrichment because it provides invaluable insights about a target culture and it encourages

language use in a realistic social and physical context. Through drama, learners are given opportunities to express themselves through multiple voices of characters (Vygotsky, 1987; Bakhtin, 1986) in which learners are encouraged to be fully engaged in the learning process.

Drama not only provides a context for listening and meaningful language production, it also forces students to use their language resources that would enhance their linguistic abilities. Drama also grants situations for reading and writing. It is very useful in teaching literary texts as it abets in plot, character and style analysis. Drama also permits students to be more positively and actively involved with the text.

“Drama in education uses the same tools employed by actors in the theatre. But while in the theatre everything is contrived for the benefit of the audience, in classroom drama, everything is contrived for the benefit of the learners” (Wessels, 1987, p.8). Drama in education intends to advance students’ personal, social and cultural development. Drama in education exposes students to various genres of literary work in which students are given liberty to explore, immerse, experience and value them. By relating learning experience with personal experience, learning process would surely be more meaningful and appealing.

The research scope of this study is limited to a group of ESL learners in an English literature class taught by the researcher. This study only examines the learners’ understanding of the elements and development of a plot and the influence of dramatization on the learners’ plot comprehension and literary appreciation. This research is centred on two objectives namely

1. to discover learners’ difficulties in understanding the elements and development of a plot.
2. to ascertain how dramatization can enhance learners’ understanding of the elements and development of a plot as well as their literary appreciation.

Literature Review

Learning literature especially among ESL/EFL learners is undoubtedly exigent. Aysun (2014) highlights that some learners face difficulties in understanding and interpreting literary texts due to their limited understanding of the relationship between the writer/poet, period of the text, and the theme/s of the literary piece. Keshta (2000) further reiterates that some learners have some hitches understanding the theme, conflict, characters, plot and writing style in literary texts.

One of the main reasons of such problems is due to the different types of thinking readers experience in literary and non-literary readings. These distinct thinking styles could influence the reader’s meaning and his/her approaches towards comprehending a text (Langer, 1989). When reading a non-literary text, a reader usually uses the topic as a guide to understand the content but when reading and understanding a literary text, a reader normally considers elements like human situation, interplays between events, emotions and eventualities (Langer, 1989).

Another downside is the uniqueness of the literary creation. The literary creation commonly involves the author’s creativity, talent, language use, artistic devices and choice of themes, genres and literary conventions (Sadowski, 1992). All these aspects entail a specific type of literary competence in the reader. Lack of understanding in any of these aspects may hinder the reader’s comprehension of the literary text. In addition, it is also vital for the reader to clearly understand the author’s intention, expectations and also pre-suppositions based on the author’s choice of literary conventions (Sadowski, 1992).

Density of words or vocabulary used in literary texts is another factor that may hamper learners' understanding and appreciation of literary texts. Shanahan, Fisher and Frey (2012) elaborate that authors' ideas are presented through words and phrases and failure to know the meanings of these words and phrases may lead to being handicapped in making sense of the text. Mahmoud (2012) states literary texts that mostly contain massive use of symbolism, similes and metaphor are very demanding to many learners. Interpreting figures of speech is another drawback to most learners especially the ESL/EFL learners (Aysun, 2014).

Sentence structure may also influence the process of making sense of the literary texts. Simple sentence structure could ease readers' understanding but complex ones may be troublesome. In literary passages, complex sentence structure is commonly used to convey complicated emotions related to the events and to encourage readers to explore the writers' thoughts and feelings (Shanahan, Fisher & Frey, 2012).

All the discussed problems have initiated this present study and dramatization is used as one of its research tools. Dramatization is practiced since it includes communication that goes beyond language competence since non-verbal aspects like gesture, body posture, intonation and other prosodic features are used significantly. Drama can be defined as an activity that allows people to participate in a social context. Drama is powerful because its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning exciting, challenging relevant to real-life concerns, and enjoyable (Wagner, 1976).

The elements of drama were first defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The first element of drama, according to Aristotle, is thematic idea that drives its structure and delivery. Theme may be revealed through dialogue, through circumstances of the drama, or through the action of the drama. The second element of drama is also called plot. Plot is the action that drives the drama forward to the conflict and, eventually, to the resolution. It is the crisis and conflict and both rising and falling action that the characters face and experience in the drama. The third element of drama is the characters, or people, who experience the plot. Characters represent distinct and identifiable individuals, with personal characteristics, like age and appearance; with social characteristics, like beliefs and socio-economic background; and with national or ethnic characteristics, like culture and language. The fourth element of drama is language which is portrayed in dialogues. Language refers to the words chosen by the playwright as well as the way in which the characters speak them. The dialect chosen helps drive the play and shapes the background of individual characters. The fifth element of drama incorporates music with the Aristotelian idea of "spectacle" of drama. Music refers to any music that drives the drama forward and heightens excitement or suspense throughout. The spectacle element, or the scenery, props, costumes, and special effects should also be considered when studying drama, because these items play a large role in the production of a play.

Barreto (2014) agrees that drama can be used to assist language development. Taskin (2013), on the other hand, professes that drama has some influence on science and scientific process skills. Bertiz (2005) acknowledges that creative drama and narratives can significantly facilitate learners in acquiring abstract concepts. Gomez (2010) admits that teaching English through drama is more effective compared to traditional instructional methods. Role playing and story-telling techniques are found to have some influence on second language vocabulary acquisition (Uddin, 2009). The role play assists fluency of communicative skills and story-telling permits reflection of literary texts. Akoğuz (2002) in his study discovers that creative

drama has positively affected communication skills. When examining the effects of creative drama on emotional intelligence of the third-grade university students at the Department of Classroom Teacher Education Program, Özdemiş (2003) reiterates that creative drama has enhanced students' emotional intelligence scores and in the sub-scores of self-consciousness, empathy and social skills. Similarly, Okvuran (2000) also encounters a positive effect of creative drama on students' emotional intelligence (empathic skill and empathic tendency).

Maley and Duff (2005) have set out a list of benefits of using drama in classrooms: (1). It assimilates language skills in a natural way, careful listening and spontaneous verbal expression. (2). It unites verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication - physical and intellectual aspects of learning (3). It combines both cognitive and affective domains - importance of feeling as well as thinking. (4). It brings the classroom interaction to life through an intensive focus on meaning. (5). It caters learning style diversity. (6). It fosters self-awareness, awareness of others, self-esteem and confidence. (7). It provides motivation through various activities. (8). It promotes student-centered approach. (9). It boosts an open, exploratory style of learning, where creativity and the imagination can freely be developed. (10) It encourages risk-taking that may influence classroom dynamics and atmosphere. (11). It offers an enjoyable and engaging experience. (12). It postulates cheap cost because human beings are its utmost priority.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study is an action research by design. In this study, the research problem is identified through self-reflection and naturalistic observation. Dramatization is used as a medium to address the problem and possible influence of this technique on students' learning experience is thoroughly examined.

Based on Gilmore, Krantz and Ramirez (1986),

"Action research...aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process" (p.161).

Research Instruments

Self-reflection, naturalistic observation and interview session are used in collecting the data. Self-reflection refers to the processes that a student undergoes to look back on his/her past learning experiences and what he/she does to enable learning to occur (self-reflection on *how* learning takes place), and the exploration of connections between the knowledge that is taught and the student's own ideas about them (self-reflection on *what* is learned). It is contended that since processes such as these can lead to informed and thoughtful deliberations on one's behaviours and actions, they are believed to assist students to become better at self-reflection, which leads subsequently to better academic achievement. Naturalistic observation, on the other hand, involves studying the spontaneous behaviour of participants in natural surroundings. It allows an observation of behaviours exactly as they occur in the real world. The naturalistic observation is often used to generate new ideas. Apart from that, an interview

session gauges students' views on dramatization influence on their comprehension of elements and development of a plot as well as on their literary appreciation.

Research Procedure

Twenty students are initially briefed on the concept and objectives of this study and they are told to regard themselves as co-investigators. As co-investigators, the students are given the chances to share and discuss openly the ways in which they hope to benefit from this study.

In the initial class, the students' views about a plot of a literary text are openly gathered in a self-reflection session. The collected data has helped the researcher to identify the level of the students' comprehension on the elements and development of a plot and the extent of the students' literary appreciation. The gathered feedback has evidently shown that the students (1) have limited knowledge about the elements of a plot and (2) face some difficulties in recalling the development of the plot. (3) low literary appreciation.

The PAR (Practical Action Research) Moments is practiced according to phases that are introduced by Kemmis & Taggart (1988). Table 1 describes the activities in each phase/moment.

Table 1: The PAR Moments

| MOMENT | WHAT'S HAPPENING |
|------------------------|---|
| OBSERVATION | During a lecture entitled "Plot development in narrative texts", it is observed that majority of the students have lost their attention in the class. The question-answer session about the elements of a plot is dry. Many students fail to name and to explain the elements of a plot. In addition, a few students have struggled in recalling the development of the plot. Due to such difficulties, majority of the students are not able to fully understand the writer's intention as well as the characters' emotions and actions. |
| DIAGNOSIS | In the next class, the instructor/researcher expresses her previous observations to the class. The class is later asked to do a self-reflection on their knowledge about the elements and development of a plot as well as their sense of appreciation towards a text. Based on the students' feedback, it was concluded that majority of the students have difficulties in comprehending and recalling the elements and development of a plot. The students also professed that their appreciation towards the text is low. |
| ACTION PLANNING | The class is asked to propose relevant solutions and some of the proposed remedies are revising, acting, rereading stories and memorizing the plot elements. |
| ACTION | Based on the students' feedback, the instructor/researcher has resorted to dramatization since it can integrate all the suggested remedies. Besides that, dramatization can also inject the element of fun learning in the class. |
| EVALUATION | To discover the students' views on the influence of dramatization on their understanding of the elements and development of a plot as well as their appreciation towards a literary text, the students are interviewed individually. |
| LEARNING | The increased understanding of the elements and development of a plot and the strong interest towards a literary text clearly indicate that if the students are actively involved, their learning, interest and ongoing learning strategy will tremendously improve. |

Findings And Discussion

Based on the self-reflection session, it was documented that the students faced several problems relating to a plot. Firstly, it was discovered that the learners were struggling in listing and explaining the plot elements. Majority of the learners had very limited knowledge on the plot elements. This was obvious because many of them could not name and explain all the six elements (setting, conflict, rising action, climax, denouement and ending) correctly. A few learners had simply used terms like “the starting,” (to refer to the first stage of the story), “the middle” (to refer to the crisis) and “the ending” (to refer to the last stage of the story) to describe the three components of a plot.

Secondly, majority of the students failed to differentiate the differences between (1) the climax and the conflict; and (2) the rising action and the denouement. Some learners had confessed that it was not a must to know and to fully understand each element of a plot because their main goal was only to identify the story’s main characters.

Thirdly, many students failed to explain some aspects in the plot development. For instance, some students failed to clarify how a writer presented the problem between the protagonist and antagonist in the given story. In addition, several of them failed to explain the use of foreshadowing and suspense in the given story.

Finally, the students admitted that they had some difficulties recalling the development of the plot. Majority of the students claimed that it was too taxing to remember every detail of the plot especially when reading a long literary text. They further clarified that understanding the plot elements was not important as compared to the pleasure of reading the text.

The findings obtained revealed that the elements and development of a plot were problematic to majority of the learners. Lazar (2008) explains that dramatization can be used to enhance students’ understanding of new materials since students can summarize what they have learned by acting it out. A brief dramatization can be useful to evaluate the extent of students’ understanding of what they read. By attending to the students’ actions and words, the instructor can assess the areas of the text that require additional reinforcement. Dramatization is also a way for instructors to assess whether there is a discrepancy between what students comprehend and their ability to express comprehension (McMasters, 2010). Drama activities provide an outlet, both physical and verbal, for students who might otherwise have no way to express their understanding or feelings about what they have read or heard. Through dramatization, learners can show what they mean via their assigned roles (Collie & Slater, 2009).

The study also discovered that dramatization (its pre, during and post stages) had positively enhanced the students’ understanding of the elements and development of a plot. At the pre-dramatization or planning stage, the students asserted that regular reviewing a story had greatly helped them in understanding and recalling the events that occurred in every phase of the plot. The regular reviewing had also assisted these students to recheck the synchronization and the suitability of the plot elements to ensure its smooth development. This aspect was regarded as very crucial since these students were writing their own scripts. Regular reviewing the story had allowed the students to deeply understand each character’s attributes and behaviors. All students agreed that having deep understanding of their assigned roles had successfully helped them to get into the characters which had significantly improved their acting and spurred deep enjoyment towards the literary work. Some students even confessed that their script was the product of “infatuation and fun yet challenging discovery”.

The students reaffirmed that their extensive research about the setting, events in the plot and characters had encouraged them to be more engaged with their script writing and acting. This active engagement had greatly contributed to the ownership of the educational process among the students. Kao et al., (2011) explain that "In drama-oriented English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms, teachers often ask questions to shape the story, unveil the details, sequence the scenes, create a beneficial linguistic environment to elicit student output and promote meaning negotiation in the target language." Apart from that, the extensive reading about the plot was also regarded as significant since it aided the students in relating what they had already known with what they wanted to know. Drama creates a context for reflecting the narratives of ESL students' own lived experiences by compromising fictional and actual experiences, past and present, and the use of in-role and out of role reflection (Ntelioglou, 2006). Students' engagement in dramatization involves verbal and non-verbal communication, collaboration, interpretation of information, imagination and risk-taking (Ntelioglou, 2006).

Peer discussion on the elements and development of a plot had greatly strengthened the students' knowledge about aspects like flashback, foreshadowing, motif and conflict. The extensive research and constructive peer discussion had also deepened the students' understanding of other cultures. These interesting findings clearly justified that "drama also offers ample opportunities to explore nuances of the foreign culture as well as conflict situations and emotions which are seldom encountered in textbook dialogues and materials" (Cunico, 2005). Drama by its very nature involves students in social contexts where they are required to think, talk, manipulate concrete materials, and share viewpoints in order to arrive at decisions. Thus, through drama, learners explore both factual knowledge and content concepts while "trying on" social experiences (Maley, 2011).

Dramatization has indeed inspired these students to read extensively in order to find the "perfect" story to dramatize (Wagner, 2003). Dramatization has also motivated these students to naturally desire to act out the "perfect" plot (Fleming, 2006). These ultimately have led to deep understanding and longer recalling of the elements and development of the plot as well as the characters.

During dramatization or playing stage, students had ample opportunities to personally experience every stage of the plot namely the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. The students reaffirmed that dramatization allowed them to be more creative and imaginative. They also admitted that when they acted out the story, they felt that the words on the pages had meaning, both to them and to the audience. Majority of the students confessed that in order to play their roles competently, they had to fully understand the characters' souls, thoughts and emotions. Thus, without doubts, drama did allow these students to "enter imaginary worlds that they cooperatively construct, experience, furnish, arrange, and change" (Even, 2008).

The students were also ascertained that "learning by doing" had positively affected their understanding and recalling of a plot as well as their literary appreciation. The students also viewed dramatization as the best platform for them to use and express their feelings, thoughts and imaginations. Özdemir and Çakmak (2008) state that "Drama enables students, in all levels of education, develop their intellectual skills such as creativity, problem solving, communication, socialization and empathy and it gives individuals the opportunity for self-actualization, group work and sharing their responsibilities." Dramatization also encourages

students' learning experience that helps to enhance their motivation to be actively involved in the classroom and the drama experience that permit problem-solving skills and various modes of language use may also benefit the students (Barreto, 2014).

The students agreed that successful participation in the dramatization was the results of reading and repeating dialogues. Although this process was regarded as tedious, the students admitted that it was “fun, highly engaging and educational” and re-reading was seen as crucial for deepening meaning. Being highly interested in the dramatic reading tasks leads to long term dramatic inquiry and retention of language and conceptual understandings (Cushman, 2011). Dramatic reading events not only encourage the students to be active, embodied and playful engagements with learning but they also develop long term inter-textuality and higher order thinking skills -the qualities of a semiotic resource (Cushman, 2011).

At the post dramatization or evaluation stage, the students considered the interview session as fruitful. They acknowledged that during this session, they were indirectly encouraged to do some self-reflection on their personal learning experience. The students claimed that they could openly express their personal reactions towards the dramatized literary work. This self-reflective had indeed inspired insight and complex learning since it involved linking a current experience to previous learnings - a process called scaffolding.

Conclusion

The study has evidently justified that dramatization is a powerful tool in connecting students with learning and content. Dramatization could prevent academic content from appearing lifeless, abstract and beyond understanding. Dramatization could also provide students with a means of living through content in a way that could deepen their understanding and appreciation of the dramatized literary work. Drama activities are highly recommended in language classes since they can improve students' personalities, creativity and cultural awareness. As such, proper trainings on how to plan and execute drama activities effectively in language classrooms should be put forward. Drama offers language instructors the chances not only to teach their students but also to cultivate a love for learning. Drama acts as a platform for problem solving, social, and creative skills and it is through drama that students' imagination and emotions are enriched.

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