Exploring the Role of Drama in Developing Communication Skills Among Students

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Abstract : Competent communication skills constitute a major learning objective in higher education, yet many students have low levels of confidence and skills in speaking and listening. Drama instruction, which makes use of role play, improvisation and acting, has been suggested as a method of building such skills. The current quasi-experiment sought to assess the effect of an eight-week program of drama instruction on the communication skills of first year undergraduate students. Sixty students in a drama group and sixty students in a control group were assessed before and after the intervention by a communication competence test (rubric-based; 0–100) and the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). The average competence score of the drama group increased from 52.4 to 68.9, while it rose from 51.8 to 56.2 in the control group. The difference in increase was statistically significant ($t(118) = 9.45$, $p < 0.001$; Cohen's $d = 1.73$). Increases were observed in all the four subscales: speaking, listening, non-verbal communication and confidence. Communication apprehension decreased by 13.7 points in the drama group and by 3.5 points in the control group. Most drama group students reported that the sessions helped them become more confident. The results indicated that drama is a highly effective and acceptable method of developing communication skills and should be incorporated in the curricula of colleges.

Keywords: drama education; communication skills; role play; communication apprehension; speaking; higher education

Introduction

Communicative skills are amongst the abilities, which are most frequently mentioned as necessary for graduates. These are speaking, active listening, making use of body language and voice, and feeling confident enough to put forward one's point of view. However, in many classes students get little opportunity to develop these skills. Education consists mostly of lectures and written tests, and students afraid of speaking in front of others are allowed to keep silent.

Drama is an entirely different type of learning. In drama-based activities students take roles, improvise, rehearse dialogues, react as characters and then reflect upon the activity. Students are supposed to speak and listen in meaningful contexts and receive feedbacks from other people immediately. As the activity is performed in a fictional context, it helps to reduce the fear of failure that inhibits speaking in real-life

classroom settings. Thus, drama proves to be a very useful method for teaching communicative skills.

There is some empirical evidence in favor of this assumption, according to which drama instruction is linked to increases in verbal and social skills. Most of this evidence is based on observations of school children and conducted in the West. Little is known about its impact on college students in the Indian environment, where there are big classes, pressures of examinations and traditional ways of teaching that limit oral practice. This study aims to find out if a structured drama program helps improve the communication skills

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and decrease communication apprehension of first year undergraduates.

The study pursues three objectives: to compare the changes in overall communication competence in students taking part in the drama program and a control group; to examine changes in the four dimensions of speaking, listening, non-verbal communication and confidence; and to evaluate changes in communication apprehension and views of the students on the program.

Literature review

The theoretical background of drama as a teaching technique includes the principles of social constructivism. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that learning happens in social interaction and that play and imagination create a zone of development in which learners can perform better than they usually do. Drama creates a situation in which students perform in role and receive assistance from peers and the facilitator. Bandura (1997) introduced the concept of self-efficacy, which means people's belief in their ability to accomplish a task and showed that it develops as a result of mastery and social assistance. Thus, successful performing in a secure drama context may enhance a student's confidence in speaking.

Educational drama has been considered by practitioners and theorists as a unique approach to learning. Bolton (1984) stated that drama is to occupy an important place in the curriculum since it helps develop an understanding through experiencing imaginary situations, and Neelands and Goode (2000) identified a number of conventions of drama activity in the classroom. Wagner (1998) reviewed the research on educational drama and language arts and came to the conclusion that drama activities are associated with increases in oral language, reading and writing. Winston (2012) describes the use of drama in the second language teaching and its power to involve learners in speaking.

Empirical synthesis supports the claim. Podlozny (2000) has conducted a meta-analysis of the studies on classroom drama and verbal skills and established the existence of a positive relation between drama activity and a wide range of verbal outcomes, with the strongest relation to oral language. Lee et al. (2015) have reviewed the controlled studies of drama-based pedagogy in pre-school to university settings in the period from 1985 to 2012 and have found positive effects on achievement, attitude and social skills, yet they admitted that the quality of studies differed. Dawson and Lee (2018) have created a framework for drama-based pedagogy that correlates the activities with learning outcomes.

Communication apprehension is an important outcome on its own. McCroskey (1982) defined it as a fear or anxiety related to real or expected communication with others and developed the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension that has been used extensively in the studies of speech anxiety. High level of apprehension is connected with avoiding situations of speaking and lower academic and social involvement. Supervised practice with feedback is amongst the methods that help reduce it.

The literature leaves two gaps. There are fewer studies on drama in higher education than on drama in schools, and the controlled studies from the Indian college environment are scarce. Moreover, many studies present a single outcome and do not divide it into different dimensions. The current study covers both gaps, using a control group in an Indian college and reporting four different dimensions along with apprehension.

Research methodology

Design and participants

The pretest-posttest non-equivalent control group design was used. The participants were 120 first year undergraduate students from an arts and science college who were allocated into a drama group (n=60) or a control group (n=60) depending on the sections. Sections were distributed according to the college timetable, so that the random allocation of the groups was impossible. The equivalence of the groups was tested on the pretest. The average age was 18.6 years and females comprised 58% of the sample. The informed consent was obtained and the college authorities approved the study.

Intervention

Students of the drama group took part in an eight-week program of two 60-minute sessions a week, i.e. 16 sessions in total. Sessions were performed according to the common structure of warming-up games, voice and body exercises, role play and improvisation, scripted scenes, group performance and reflection. The typical activities included mock interviews, problem-solving scenes, debates in role, storytelling and short plays on campus themes. Peers gave feedback to the performances of each participant under the guidance of

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the facilitator. The control group attended their regular English and communication lessons of the same total time which consisted of lectures, reading and writing.

Instruments

The communication competence was measured by a rubric-based test of 100 marks, consisting of four subscales of 25 marks each: speaking (fluency, clarity and organization), listening (comprehension and response), non-verbal communication (voice, posture, eye contact and gesture) and confidence (composure and readiness to speak). Students completed a speaking task, a listening-and-response task and a role play, and were rated by two trained raters who did not know the group to which the student belonged. The intraclass correlation coefficient was 0.88. The communication apprehension was measured with the 24-item Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982) in which scores vary from 24 to 120, and the higher scores mean the greater level of apprehension. At the end of the program students of the drama group filled in a feedback questionnaire.

Statistical analysis

Group means are presented with the standard deviations. Pretest equivalence and the differences in gain scores were tested with independent-samples t tests, and changes within the groups were tested with paired t tests. The correlation between the pretest and posttest scores was close to 0.62, and this value was used to calculate the standard deviation of the gain. The effect size was calculated as Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988). The significance level was 0.05.

Results

Equivalence of the groups

There were no differences in competence between the groups on the pretest (52.4 ± 8.1 in the drama group; 51.8 ± 8.4 in the control group; t(118) = 0.40, p = 0.691), and their apprehension scores were similar (78.2 and 77.6).

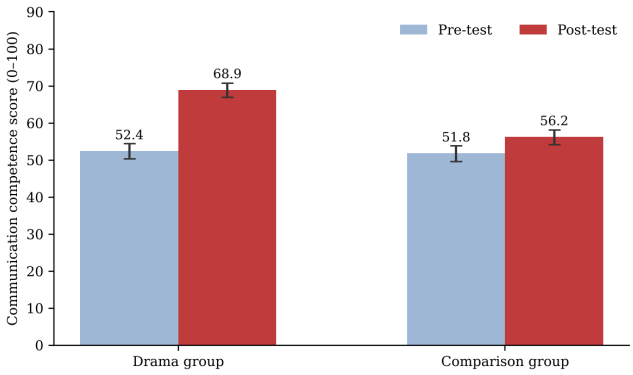
Overall communication competence

The drama group gained 16.5 points (paired t(59) = 18.6, p <0.001), while the control group gained 4.4 points (t(59) = 4.8, p <0.001). The difference in the gain between the groups was 12.1 points (95% CI 9.6 to 14.6; t(118) = 9.45, p <0.001) with a large effect (d = 1.73). At the posttest the drama group scored higher than the control group (t(118) = 8.92, p <0.001). The results are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. Scores in communication competence test (0-100), mean ± SD, n = 60 per group

Group	Pre-test	Post-test	Gain	Paired t
Drama group	52.4 ± 8.1	68.9 ± 7.6	16.5	18.6
Comparison group	51.8 ± 8.4	56.2 ± 8.0	4.4	4.8
Between-group gain test			12.1	t = 9.45

Figure 1. Changes in communication competence before and after the program (mean with 95% confidence intervals).



Dimensions of communication

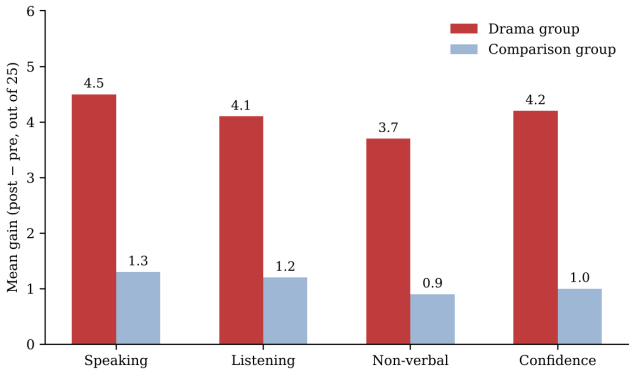
Increases in the drama group exceeded those in the control group in all the four subscales (Table 2, Figure 2). The largest difference was in speaking (gain 4.5 vs 1.3; p <0.001), followed by confidence (4.2 vs 1.0; p <0.001), listening (4.1 vs 1.2; p <0.001) and non-verbal communication (3.7 vs 0.9; p <0.001).

Table 2. Average gain on communication subscales (out of 25)

Subscale	Drama group	Comparison group	t	p	d
Speaking	4.5	1.3	5.39	<0.001	0.98
Listening	4.1	1.2	4.89	<0.001	0.89
Non-verbal	3.7	0.9	4.72	<0.001	0.86
Confidence	4.2	1.0	5.39	<0.001	0.98

Figure 2. Increase in each communication subscale by group.

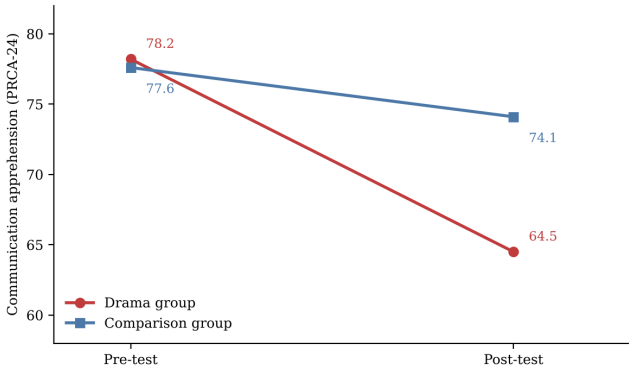
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Communication apprehension

The communication apprehension reduced by 13.7 points in the drama group (from 78.2 to 64.5) and by 3.5 points in the control group (from 77.6 to 74.1). The difference in changes between the groups was statistically significant ($t(118) = 6.17$, $p < 0.001$; $d = 1.13$) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Changes in communication apprehension (PRCA-24) before and after the program.



Feedback of the students

The majority of students in the drama group responded to the program positively (Table 3). Almost all of them (93%) stated that they enjoyed the sessions, and a great majority of students said that they felt more confident speaking in class and that the peer feedback was helpful.

Table 3. Feedback of drama group students (n = 60)

Statement	Agreed, n	Agreed, %
Enjoyed the drama sessions	56	93.3
Felt more confident speaking in class	53	88.3
Peer feedback helped improve speaking	51	85.0
Felt less anxious when presenting	49	81.7
Would like drama activities in other courses	54	90.0

Discussion

It was found that an eight-week drama program resulted in a statistically significant greater improvement of the communication skills in comparison with regular classes with a large effect. The drama group gained 16.5 points, while the control group gained 4.4 points. The result corroborates the meta-analytic evidence of positive effects of drama on verbal outcomes (Podlozny, 2000) and on achievement and social skills (Lee et al., 2015) and extends the evidence to an Indian undergraduate environment.

The pattern of gains on the subscales is interesting. The greatest gain was in speaking, which is the skill that role play and improvisation train directly. The gain in confidence was almost as large, which supports the idea that drama increases self-efficacy through repeated successful performance in a supportive context (Bandura, 1997). The gains in listening and non-verbal communication were smaller, yet still statistically significant, which corresponds to the nature of drama, in which students have to pay attention to a partner's words and body language to respond in role.

The reduction in communication apprehension is important in practice because apprehension prevents many students from participating in discussions and presentations. The result is consistent with the assumption that practicing speaking in a fictional context with the help of peers reduces fear of real-life speaking situations (McCroskey, 1982). The positive feedback of the students shows that the method is acceptable, which is important because a method the students like is more likely to persist.

The results can be explained with the help of the social constructivist theory. The program provided the students with a social context in which they could speak, listen and respond with the help of the facilitator and peers, which is the type of context discussed by Vygotsky (1978). The drama-based pedagogy proposed by Dawson and Lee (2018) allows designing such

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activities. In the case of colleges, the implication is that the drama activities can be incorporated in communication and language courses with a modest cost, since the sessions require little equipment, but trained facilitators.

Limitations

The groups were not randomly allocated, so differences in unknown characteristics could have affected the results, even though the groups were similar on the pretest. The study included one college and one program lasting eight weeks, without testing the sustainability of the gains in a follow-up session. The raters could not be completely blind to the nature of the activities performed by the students. Some gain in the control group might result from practice with the test. The feedback questionnaire was filled by the drama group students alone and might show biased results.

Conclusion

An eight-week program of drama activities helped increase the communication competence of the first year undergraduates considerably more than regular classes, with gains in speaking, listening, non-verbal communication and confidence, and with a bigger decrease in communication apprehension. The students responded to the method positively. The colleges should consider including drama activities in communication and language courses and train teachers to facilitate them. Future research should use randomized designs, observe students for a longer period and examine the transfer of gains to academic presentations and employment.

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