

The Impact of Live Dramatic Performance on English Literature Students' Interpretation and Analysis of Dramatic Texts

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Abstract

Drama is a composite art, a mixture of literature and many other arts, originally written to be performed, since its proper appreciation depends on its being observed, not just read. A play is not fully a work of dramatic art until the text is transformed to action and sound (Rezai, 1992). The performance of the text will reveal many indicative clues to the discovery of the theme, characterization and symbolism of the play. In our academic environments, however, all courses designed to teach drama focus on the written text, and almost no effort is made to incorporate the theoretical analysis of the text with the unparalleled experience of watching the live dramatic performance of plays. The present study undertakes to examine how effective this experience can be on the students' understanding and evaluation of drama. For this purpose, an intact group of the students of English literature in Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, all at the same level of academic education, were chosen and randomly divided into two groups. A pretest determined their similar level of language proficiency before hand. The treatment, i.e. theoretical discussion and critical evaluation of a play, Sophocles' *Antigone*, plus watching its live performance, was implemented in the experimental

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group for at least 10 sessions. The final step was the administration of a posttest for both groups to estimate to what extent they acquired the ability to the successful analysis of the dramatic work presented to them. The statistical analysis revealed that the experimental group which was offered the chance of theoretical discussion of the text and watching the play yielded more satisfactory results.

Key Words: Drama; Live Dramatic Performance, Literature Students

1. Introduction and Review of Literature

In all discussions of drama, it is emphasized that drama is not merely the written text; it is a mixture of the written text and all other elements which are required for its performance on the stage. In fact, drama starts on paper but does not end there since drama "is written primarily to be performed, not read. It normally presents its action a) through actors, b) on a stage, and c) before an audience. Drama's enormous source of power derives from this characteristic." (Arp & Johnson, 2006, p. 1027) An identical definition is presented by Abrams: "Drama is the form of composition designed for performance in the theater, in which actors take the role of the characters, perform the indicated actions, and utter the written dialogue." (2005, p. 69)

Therefore, since "production brings words to flesh" (Tabone & Albrecht, 2003, Reflections section, para. 5), a thorough and perfect understanding of drama would be rather impossible without watching it on the stage. Clarke believes:

"The word 'drama' refers to a group of people performing in front of spectators. It consists of at least two persons speaking and performing actions representing other people. It is something which can be seen and heard. Drama is not simply literature; it is a composite art form, a mixture of literature and visual arts,

speech and movement, story and spectacle. Plays are not written to be read but to be watched.” (1965, p. 9)

This feature offers drama a unique quality which becomes its major distinction with other literary genres as well: “the playwrights create plays fully conscious of the possibilities that go beyond words and texts and extend to physical actions, stage devices, effects and modify responses. We must take every opportunity to see a play performed to enrich our own reading of it.” (Beaty, Booth, Hunter, & Mays, 2002, p. 1332) The performance of drama through actors makes its impact “direct” and “immediate”, so “the experience of the play is registered directly upon [the spectators’] senses.” (Johnson & Arp, 2006, p. 1027) Where the fiction writer needs several paragraphs to describe a character to the readers, the acted play does this all at once and much more effectively through an actor. In addition to the tremendous source of power provided to drama due to its performance by actors, presenting a play on a stage greatly facilitates focusing the audience’s attention and since the action is performed before an audience, the communal experience it creates becomes even more intensified and impressive (Johnson & Arp, 2006). Probably that’s why drama is at times used as an educational aid, particularly in language teaching (Petty, 2004; Tabone & Albrecht, 2003).

Many teachers have reflected on their successful experiences of employing dramatic performance and role play in language classrooms as a versatile device which serves several purposes. First of all, it can improve language skills, specifically conversation and communication. Sometimes the students’ reluctance to participate in classroom activities may be due to the lack of meaningful opportunities “to use the target language in authentic situations.” (Athimoolam, 2006, p. 3) Performing drama in the class provides such an authentic context in which language can be used realistically and creatively. As Gassparro and Falletta (1994) assert, second language learners, while located in a seemingly real situation, internalize the acquisition. Their involvement in this invaluable experiment brings home to them the non-verbal and verbal aspects of

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language simultaneously. On the whole, it is true that drama provides the language learner “cultural and language enrichment by revealing insights into the target culture and presenting language contexts that make items memorable by placing them in a realistic social and physical context.” (Robinson, 2007, ¶ 4) Secondly, employing dramatic performance motivates and stimulates the students and helps them become “active participants rather than passive recipients in the classroom.” (Athimoolam, 2006, p. 2) Taking part in such performances highly motivates the students to participate in classroom activities “at both an intellectual and feeling level” and “become emotionally involved in their work.” (Tabone & Albrecht, 2003, Reflections section, para. 1) As the students get more engaged and also enjoy their class, they normally become “more inclined to participate and more likely to remember.” Thus they learn better (McClimens & Scott, 2006, p. 2). Thirdly, drama “raises self-esteem and self-confidence since it provides an opportunity to the ordinarily unremarkable individuals to show their potential abilities and talents. Through encouraging “empathetic understanding” and allowing the students to identify themselves with the dramatic personages drama proves to be a “very powerful method for affective education.” (Petty, 2004, p. 247) The application of this method can also lead to the discovery of dormant latent flairs of many individuals, which otherwise are ordinarily ignored and passed totally unnoticed. Frost, a teacher in British council, Turkey, reports:

“My experiences with using plays have always been very positive and I would encourage any teacher to try. I was amazed in Italy by the transformation of one particular 12 year-old. He went from being very passive and disinterested in the lessons to relishing being the centre of attention in the lead role. He demonstrated a natural flair for performing and afterwards, he developed a real enthusiasm for learning English. So you never know where it might lead, you may even find a Polish Pacino or

a Turkish De Niro hiding in your class.” (2006, A Few Final Thoughts section, para. 2)

So drama is not merely an educational aid or a learning medium; it “can be empowering and promote personal growth.” (Wasylo & Stickley, 2003, quoted in McClimens & Scott, 2006, p. 6) Finally, practice of drama activates the students’ imagination by drawing the audiences and participants into fictional worlds (O’Neill, 1995, cited in Tabone & Albrecht, 2003). It invigorates their imaginative power by letting them reproduce fictional characters and situations and enables them to “become lost in their imagination and less conscious about speaking in front of others” (Tibone & Albrecht, 2007), thus turning them into “confident expressive speakers.” (Athimoolam, 2006, p. 7) On the other hand, this experience causes the students to be more “critical and imaginative” since exercising dramatic performance entails “originality and creativity.” (p. 20) In short, “Drama and mime can be used to promote creative language practice, reduce affective barriers, motivate the learners, and stimulate their imaginations.” (Whitair, 1998, ¶ 1)

But how often is live dramatic performance employed to teach literature, particularly to teach drama itself in our educational system in Iran? How many of us, teachers of literature, teach the students anything but the literary text in our drama courses? If language can be taught through drama, why not teach drama through drama? These questions somehow provided the incentive to carry out the following experiment. The objective of this project is, therefore, to see how effective watching the live dramatic performance can prove to be on the improvement of students who take a drama course for the first time to gain a basic familiarity with this literary genre. What we mean by improvement is, in fact, how well they learn the materials presented to them during the semester as far as the interpretation and analysis of the play instructed to them is concerned and how well they respond to the questions they are required to answer in the final exam. Consequently, based on this objective, the research question will be:

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1. Is there a relationship between live dramatic performance and the improvement of students of English literature?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The present study comprised all the students in Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, who had taken and passed the prerequisite courses and were eligible to take "Introduction to Literature II", a course through which students are supposed to acquire a basic familiarity with drama, i.e. learn its essential theoretical principles and practice the analysis and interpretation of a dramatic text by reading and discussing at least one play. In other words, all the participants were at identical level of knowledge in terms of literature, especially drama. About 60 students upon their own choice took one of the two sections of the same course, both taught by a single instructor, one of the researchers.

2.2 Instrumentation

The assessment of the two groups was then started by administering a pretest. A proficiency test, TOEFL, 1995 administration, was given to both groups at the beginning of the semester before the instruction began to determine whether all the participants were approximately equal in terms of language proficiency to make sure that the students' performance in the posttest is not affected by their different language proficiency levels. The reliability of the pretest was then estimated to be 0.72, which is quite satisfactory. The instruction followed afterwards for both groups. At the end of the semester, another test, including five open-ended questions based on the dramatic text discussed and analyzed during the period of instruction, was administered. The questions asked in the posttest were essay type comprehensive questions, which demanded the students to present a lengthy and detailed discussion of the points included in the query, e.g. *1. Comment on the types of conflict in this tragedy; or 2. Analyze Antigone's character as a tragic hero and as an ordinary woman.*

2.3 Procedure

One of the two intact groups was randomly assigned as the control group and the other one selected as the experimental group, each composed of 30 students. Following this division, the pretest was given and eventually the process of instruction started. The rationale to give the participants a proficiency test as the pretest was to make sure the two groups were similar in terms of their language proficiency. This assures us that the likely difference at the end of the query is not due to the proficiency difference between the two groups in the beginning of the study but the effect of the treatment. The material presented to both groups in the course of the instruction included the discussion of the essential features of drama as a literary genre, the definition and characteristics of comedy and tragedy as major dramatic forms, and a very brief review of the genesis and development of drama, (from Laurence Perrine's *Literature, Structure, Sound and Sense*; and R.F. Clarke's *The Growth and Nature of Drama*) which took about three 90-minute sessions, as well as practical interpretation and critical evaluation of a famous classical play, Sophocles' *Antigone*, which took almost ten 90-minute sessions. So the two groups were exposed to similar materials through an identical method, excepting that in the experimental group the theoretical instruction was accompanied by the performance of the play. That is, during each session, one or two sections of the play – the play consists of five choral Odes, five major scenes, a prologue and a final scene called exodus – were read, discussed and interpreted through an exchange of question and answer between the instructor and the students. It goes without saying that in the control group more time could be dedicated to detailed and minute interpretation of the text theoretically, whereas the discussion in the experimental group had to be summed up more quickly in order to spare enough time for the performance of the play. The actors, themselves students but not members of either the experimental or the control group, then entered the scene and performed the same section just discussed in the same session. The rehearsals were supervised and directed by two researchers. At the

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end of the semester (15 sessions), the posttest was given. The correction of the papers for both groups was done by two researchers as separate raters, who evaluated and graded the answers independently to ensure the inter-rater reliability of the scores (Bachman, 1995), calculated to be 0.79 which is a sound reliability index (Table 1).

Table 1: Pearson Correlations for inter-rater reliability

		First	Second
First	Pearson Correlation	1	.793(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	60	60
Second	Pearson Correlation	.793(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	60	60

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The mean of the two grades was then considered to be the final score for each student's performance on posttest upon which the data analysis had to be performed. To analyze the data, the SPSS software was used.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Quantitative Phase

What follows is the statistical analysis of the data. Two comparisons should be made in order to display clearly the outcomes of the experiment:

- (1) Experimental group pretest vs. Control group pretest
- (2) Experimental group posttest vs. Control group posttest

The following tables clarify the results of the above mentioned comparisons:

Table 2: Group statistics

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretests 1	30	50.1667	10.66119	1.94646
2	30	47.6000	13.90758	2.53916

Table 3: Independent Samples Test (pretest)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	sig.	T	df	Sig.(2 tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Pre-test	Equal variances Assumed	1.572	.215	.802	58	.426	2.5667	3.19938

According to table 3, which compares the results of the pretest of the two groups, our null hypothesis is verified; that is, we can claim that there was no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group before the experiment was started as far as their language proficiency is concerned.

Now we should see if this similarity persisted at the end of the experiment.

Table 4: Group statistics

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
posttest 1	30	61.5333	18.95932	3.46148
2	30	46.6667	21.10200	3.85268

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Table 5: Independent Samples Test (posttest)

Po st- tes t		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	sig.	T	df	Sig. (2 tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
		Equal variances Assumed	1.994	.163	2.870	58	.006	14.86 67

Comparison of the posttest scores of the two groups, however, leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis since here:

$$t_{obs} > \text{Critical } t$$

This means that there is a significant difference between our groups after the treatment is implemented; thus we can claim that our treatment has had a significant effect on the students who received it.

3.2 The Qualitative Phase

The quantitative analysis of the data to some extent revealed the difference between the experimental group and the control group. Yet a glance at how the participants answered the questions can illustrate the case more clearly. In general, the answers provided by the participants in the experimental group tended to be more profound and analytical, whereas those given by the students in control group were rather superficial or based on memorization. First and foremost, the participants in the control group in answering the questions mainly focused on giving a synopsis of the plot, while their counterparts in the experimental group tried to comment on the external and internal conflicts, mental and emotional tensions and motives involved in the confrontations between the characters. For instance, observe how two students respectively from the control group and the experimental group have answered the following question: *Comment on the confrontation between Creon and his son*

Haimon. (The answers quoted here are rephrased and grammatically corrected.)

1. “Creon and Haimon hold opposite views regarding Antigone. When Haimon tells his father that he should listen to other people’s views, Creon says that the state is the King. Haimon tells him that people consider Antigone to be innocent, yet Creon answers that people cannot teach him how to rule. Finally, Creon gets angry and insults Him. Haimon, hurt by his fathers perverseness, leaves the palace and threatens that Antigone’s death will lead to his death as well.”

2. “The confrontation between Creon and Haimon starts with a display of strong father-son emotions. Haimon seems to be a respectful and obedient son; Creon a responsible, wise father, who tries to direct his son act wisely regarding the current issue. His reasons in supporting his own decision are not only personal, but according to his position and duties as a king. On the other hand, Haimon reveals his disagreement first indirectly in order not to annoy his father. His justifications are not personal either and thus not related to his love for Antigone, but to show how he believes a just monarch must rule. Nevertheless, the tension between father and son heightens because of their entirely opposite views about the role of the monarch and power of the state and as a result of Creon’s stubbornness, and the scene which started in mutual kindness and understanding ends in struggle and anger.....”

Secondly, when asked to compare and contrast Antigone and Ismene’s characters, the members of the experimental group appeared more precise in their description and analysis of dramatic personages. Most students in the control group merely pointed out Antigone’s heroism and intrepidity in contrast to Ismene’s timidity, caution and obedience. Typically this is how they have compared and contrasted the two sisters:

“Antigone is brave, heroic, unafraid even of death, while Ismene is timid and cautious and does not dare to disobey the King’s order. In the play, she shows signs of courage only once: when Creon

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accuses her of helping Antigone, and she states that she has helped her sister bury their brother.”

A few students in the experimental group, however, have pointed out that Ismene is not devoid of heroism, yet her attempt to share Antigone's retribution is just a desperate futile effort which leads to nowhere. Meanwhile, some of them have also emphasized that Antigone's heroism is not godlike and superhuman since she behaves as every ordinary man or woman would do facing death.

And finally, the experimental group students grasped the correspondence between the choral odes and the pertaining scenes more accurately and could comment on their function more satisfactorily, whereas the members of the control group seemed to be more concerned with paraphrasing the content of the odes. One student of the former group, for example, writes:

“The choral ode which follows the scene containing Creon and Haimon's clash simplifies their opposition since they attribute the conflict to the power of Love, whereas their disagreement lies in more serious and important ideas, which in many societies still persist and are matters of controversy. The chorus, however, ignores this fact by respecting strong and merciless Aphrodite, who in their view has caused the conflict between father and son.”

4. Conclusion

The final analysis of the data and analyzing the content of the posttest support the idea that watching the live dramatic performance has had a significant effect on the improvement of the students who received the treatment. Since the experimental and the control group which were of equal levels of proficiency and performed similarly in the pretest, and were supposedly of identical academic literary background, produced different results in the posttest after the implementation of the treatment; that is, the students who had watched the live performance of the play in addition to theoretical class discussions obtained much better results in the posttest.

5. The Last Word

What was presented above is a rather minute account of a scientifically conducted experiment, mostly in terms of quantitative tools; that is, numerical values, statistical procedures, tables and graphs, which by themselves are valid and acceptable in revealing a specific dimension of this experience; namely, how watching live dramatic performance may help the students learn the material presented in a drama course better and thus to perform more satisfactorily in the exam. Yet we all know that *there is much more to be considered and discussed as far as the total effects of this experience are concerned*. What about the mental and emotional and aesthetic impacts of watching the drama on the spectators, here the students? What instrument can measure the feelings – ranging from curiosity and trepidation to anger, sorrow and vengeance – aroused in their hearts and souls as they watched the play and perhaps identified themselves sometimes with the characters involved in its intense conflict? What legitimate devices are there to record and report how long these effects may last or how long will the spectators hold this memory in their hearts and minds? Some aspects and dimensions of this aesthetic and emotional experience, so it seems, cannot be measured as easily as its educational effect through facts and figures and formula; those very aspects and dimensions can by no means be denied or undermined either.

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