

Teaching English Through *bharatanatyam*

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Abstract: *In accordance with the changing views on the value of English language, ELT has changed a lot in the recent years. Language, being a social product, is used to reflect all aspects of society and its culture. Educationists emphasise the moral value and social identities associated with language use in the society. This paper stresses the importance of learning a second language like English within one's own social and cultural bounds. Many scholars have also proposed the need to promote student's creative thinking, critical thinking and analytical thinking in ELT programs. This paper also attempts to make clear that when a dance form like Bharatanatyam (a representation of Indian culture and heritage) is collaborated with ELT, not only make the learners creative but also critical and analytical thinkers.*

Key words: Bharatanatyam, ELT, ELL, Kinaesthetic, Mudras, Natarajar pose, concentration, aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION:

Theories can be learnt in a scientific manner while skills can be acquired only in an artistic way. Learning a language is more a skill than a science because only by practice can it be perfected and no theories or grammar can help you acquire the language. The tradition of teaching a language, especially the English language has undergone tremendous changes throughout the twentieth century and the twenty first century is seeing modern technology play a vital role in ELT. It is a well-known fact that machines can never replace a human being. Though computers and multimedia facilitate the process of learning English to a greater extent, they can never substitute a real human teacher. Mathematics or Physics can be effectively taught using technology, but the language acquisition of a learner is highly proportional to the performance of a teacher.

A teacher's performance, that is, the vital abilities of a teacher in imparting knowledge to the learners is very important in education. But think of a teacher teaching with a performance art as a tool! Having a performance art as a teaching tool in language learning makes teaching and learning a very interesting and exciting experience. Teaching of a language is itself a skill

and an art, and when it is done in an artistic way accelerates the process of learning. There is absolute involvement of both the teacher and the taught.

This paper brings out a proposition that English language can be taught using a performing art like Bharatanatyam which is a symbol of Indian tradition and culture. Any dynamic art changes and develops on new lines with the passage of time. English and Bharatanatyam are two such art forms that can contribute mutually to each other. The researcher being a classical Bharatanatyam dancer and an English teacher experimented on using Bharatanatyam to teach English and found positive results that are found in this paper.

BHARATANATYAM:

Bharatanatyam is a dance form of Tamilnadu, the southern part of India. It was not created for mere pleasure, but to “embody the cosmic relationships and expressions (bhava) for all the worlds”(Balasaraswathi, Web). Bharatanatyam is, according to Balasaraswathi, one of the exponents of this dance form, “a variety of Natya Yoga that reveals the spiritual through the physical and emotional body”. There are three elements in Bharatanatyam --- Nrittha, Nritya, and Natya. Nrittha is the rhythmic element that interprets the language of rhythm with the help of body movements; Nritya is a combination of rhythm with expression, it conveys the poetic meanings with body and facial expressions; and Natya is the combination of Nrittha and Nritya and the dramatisation of a theme. All the movements, states and activities can be expressed by Bharatanatyam. All the moods, emotions and passions of the soul can also be made explicit by Bharatanatyam.

Mythology says that Brahma created the Fifth Veda or the Panchama Veda which is the Natya Veda (Bharatanatyam), a quintessence of all the four Vedas. The Natya Veda combines Pathya (words) of the Rig Veda; Abhinaya (body language) of Yajur Veda; Geetham (music and chant) of Sama Veda; and rasam (emotions and sentiments) of Atharva Veda. Perhaps the Natya Veda is on our modern day Communicative Skills.

Lord Nataraja of Chidambaram is considered as the Lord of Dance. ‘Nata’ means ‘dance’ and ‘raja’ means ‘king’. The pose of Nataraja reveals a lot. It is maths, physics and philosophy. It can also mean a lot in the process of language learning. The upper right hand of the Lord holds the drum of Creation and a symbol of primeval sound. To an English language learner, it is the production of sounds that is the speaking skills. The upper left hand of the Lord holds the Fire destroying the old universe and giving space for new ideologies to grow. Perhaps it symbolises the state of refreshing our ideas and notions on the English language and accepting new knowledge and practices. The English language takes in and gives out a lot. It is capable of giving terms to newer concepts of life and science. It is an ever growing language. The lower

right hand is in Abhayahasta or is Blessing. We may interpret that the English language is also a blessing and a tool to communicate worldwide. The lower left hand points towards the raised foot which signifies uplift and liberation. Lord Nataraja is seen to be dancing on a demon that is known as Muyalaka who is a symbol of ignorance and epilepsy. The Lord is crushing the demon under His feet signifying enlightenment.

Bharatanatyam is the expression of the heart and the soul. It is an extremely traditional art form known for its grace, purity and tenderness. It uplifts the dancer and the audience to a higher level of spiritual consciousness. The greatest blessing of Bharatanatyam is its ability to control the mind. In Bharatanatyam, actions are not avoided. There is much to do but it is the harmony of these various actions that leads to the concentration we seek in learning. The heaviness of the action is forgotten in the charm and grace of Bharatanatyam.

Yatho hasthas thatho drishti

Yatho drishtis thatho manaha

Yatho manas thatho bhavaha

Yatho bhavas thatho rasaha

Meaning,

Where the hand goes there goes the eyes

Where the eyes go there goes the mind

Where the mind goes there is the expression

When there is expression there is enjoyment.

The feet dances in tune to the rhythm of the music, the body gestures express the meaning of the message and the facial expressions convey the emotions and the feelings underlying the message. The face, the limbs and the feet together work in harmony during a dance performance and result in achieving concentration and effective learning. Any verbal message can be communicated non-verbally using a Bharatanatyam technique called Abhinaya. Abhinaya is facial expressions and body gestures.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING:

The communicative values and the academic or professional values of the English language make it a very important language that ought to be learnt if one has to be successful in today's global business. Though there are many English medium schools and higher institutions, the learners fail to master the language because of various reasons.

So long, English teachers have been teaching 'about' the English language rather than the actual use of it. Grammar lessons and the literature of England were validated enough to acquire the language. The learners were also trained mainly with the aim of clearing the exams

and not for its communicative purpose. Today many educational researchers and teachers find that it is only the communicative value of the English language that is needed for today's youth to make him employable in the global job market. So, many innovative methods were formulated making the best use of technology to enhance the communicative skills of the learners in English.

Another reason for the failure of learning the English language is that it is being taught from the wrong end. We all know that the four language skills are very important in the learning of a language. They are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). Listening, though it may sound easy, is one of the toughest skills that can be acquired and the first skill that a language learner ought to learn. It serves as a strong foundation for the whole process of learning. But in India and perhaps also in other countries where English is being taught as a second or foreign language, the learners are introduced to the language from the wrong end, Writing. At the primary level, the students are taught to write the alphabets even before they even know that it is English! At the secondary and tertiary levels, the students are threatened with grammar rules that breed fear and aversion towards the language. Though computers and multimedia (inanimate tools) play a vital role in facilitating the communicative skills of the English language learners, a performing art can add colour and life to the process of language learning.

AN IDEAL NEW PAIR:

When a performing art like Bharatanatyam is used as a tool in ELT, it first gives a context for listening and is a visual representation of messages. It also gives a lot of scope to the learners to produce meaningful sentences in the target language forcing the learners to use their language resources and thus enhancing their linguistic abilities. It also provides a lot of situations that can be used to develop the reading and writing skills. In Bharatanatyam, the *mudras* or the hand gestures are expressions of various actions. Effective communication is when information is passed from a sender to a recipient using a medium. There are different media that are used to transmit a message such as visual, sound, and kinaesthetic. Bharatanatyam makes use of all the three media thus captivating the learners' attention. The English Language Learners (ELL) now is able to easily recognise essential information and its relationship to supporting ideas. Both privately observable processes such as feelings and thinking and publicly observable processes such as actions are made explicit by a *Bharatanatyam* performance. Such explicit expressions make both the language and content more accessible to the learners.

Experiments were done in an Indian classroom by the researcher to prove that Bharatanatyam can be used as an effective tool in English language teaching. First, a Bharatanatyam piece was performed in the class and the students were asked to write the message conveyed in English. The lyrics were in Tamil, the mother tongue of most of the students, and hence they were able to perceive what was conveyed. But the problem was to put them in words. Good translators were able to do well though. By this translation exercise, learners were able to make the best use of their linguistic abilities. Then, the students were given the same performance without the lyrics and asked to interpret their own meaning. They need to give a different meaning. Here the creative capabilities of the students played a significant role in the learning process. The mudras used here are *Katakamukha*, *Alapadma*, *Chatura*, *Hamsasya*, *Soochi*, *Pataka*, *Sikhara*, and *Keelaka*. The *Katakamukha* mudra is used to refer to a bird and when it is changed to *Alapadma* it means 'to say'; the *Chatura* mudra is used here to show 'come near me'; *Hamsasya* is used here to denote the self and her secret; *Soochi*, used here to mean 'one' is also used to mean 'enchantment' by rotating the *Sooji mudra* finger; *Sikhara* is used to mean *Lord Muruga* with his weapon, the *Velayutham*. The double hand gesture *Keelaka* is used to denote the Love between the Lovers.

Even a classic English literary piece can be depicted using Bharatanatyam mudras (gestures) and bhavams (expressions). (CLIPPING). This is a Bharatanatyam rendering of the first four lines of the English poem, Andrea Del Sarto. Almost the mudras used in the previous clippings are also used here and give a different meaning. As opposed to *Keelaka*, the double hand mudra *Paasam* is used. Here the learners associate the words and the message of the literary piece with the mudras and bhavams of the Bharatanatyam performance. The sounds of the language are visually represented in Bharatanatyam and the learner associates the sounds with the Visual representations and vice versa.

Concentration, discipline and hard work are essential for the performance of Bharatanatyam. In fact, through Bharatanatyam, a known and familiar art form to the learners in India, they are motivated to imbibe all these qualities in learning English. They have concentration from which they come to know that the beauty of the performance is only due to the disciplined synchronisation of the rhythm, music and expression along with the involvement of the learner.

According to Boulton (1968), "there is an enormous difference between a play and any other form of literature. A play is not really a piece of literature for reading. It is the literature that walks and talks before our eyes" (3). More than a play, a Bharatanatyam performance adds music, charm and grace to the meaning, thus, enchanting the learners and their attention. As in a play, the text is translated into sights, sounds and actions that register into

the mind of the learners easily. Bharatanatyam not only facilitates the language learning process, but it also makes the learners discover the richness of their tradition and culture and would have learnt to make use of their linguistic capabilities in their own cultural and social contexts.

Robbins rightly stated referring to drama which can be applied to Bharatanatyam as well: “Dramatic activities help students investigate a subject while finding its relationship to themselves and society, moreover, they make students counter with performance of social roles they have never experienced before, with the corresponding language and communicative styles” (1-2).

According to Celce Murcia (2001), it is easier for learners to be engaged in a lesson through a performance than through instructions or explanations. There is more involvement in the learning process. A Bharatanatyam performance breaks the monotony of a traditional classroom and there is a lot of involvement and meaningful interaction. The classroom is no longer a dull and boring place. It is full of actions that open up doors to creativity, criticism and analysis. The learners think on new lines, try to give new meanings and are good critics.

Berlinger (2000) notifies the effect of dramatic performances on teaching culture by considering story making, rehearsal and performance as inducements to make students think consecutively to show inner life of characters, to compare and contrast aspects of their own culture with those of the second one, and to interact with classmates, and through all these they use their second language. When a Bharatanatyam piece is performed in the class, the learners are able to easily translate the message conveyed as they are already familiar to the culture that is embodied in it. Similarly when an English message is conveyed, the learners are able to easily grasp the content and the language because they are visually expressed using a familiar art. Here, a new art, that is, the English language is learnt using an already familiar art, Bharatanatyam. So now, new scopes are provided to the learners to compare and analyse their own culture and language with that of a new culture and language and get a better understanding of it.

Generally, second language learning causes anxiety (Krashen, 1981). Bharatanatyam focuses on meaning through actions rather than on meaning through instructions; and Bharatanatyam is a very charming art that satisfies one’s aesthetic sense thus liberating the learner from stressful condition and thus fully engaged in learning.

In a classroom where language is taught through performing art, the teacher is not the centre and the students are also equally involved. Hence the learners would take an egalitarian attitude towards the teacher and the classroom would become a friendly atmosphere where optimal learning occurs.

Great researchers like Steinberg (1986), Vygotsky (1986) and Baxter (1999) believed that learners are motivated to communicate and learn better through games, activities and performances. They become fully and personally engaged in the learning process. And Bharatanatyam is one such art that can set the learners to think creatively and critically.

Matsuzaki Carreira (2005) approves that the learners are helped by a performance to experience a deeper sense of sympathy which rarely takes place by mere passive viewing. In a Bharatanatyam performance, a message is conveyed in all its dimensions. So a learner is able to fully understand and sympathise with what is being communicated. Bharatanatyam is valuable for its own sake and for what it can add to a lesson. Teaching a lesson in this fashion engages the emotions of the learners in the learning process.

In an English class where Bharatanatyam is performed, a lot of learning takes place, but the burden that the learners feel in a conventional English classroom is nullified by the charisma of the Bharatanatyam performance. The learners gain a lot of confidence by their participation and engrossment in the arts.

LIMITATIONS:

No doubt, Bharatanatyam is a wonderful tool in the hands of an English teacher. But this tool, perhaps, cannot be used in all English classes. The learning of native sounds (phonetics) cannot be taught by Bharatanatyam performance since it has strong roots in the English culture; grammar and certain prose pieces in literature have not been attempted to be taught using Bharatanatyam.

CONCLUSION:

English language learning doesn't stop in the mastery of reading, comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, communication skills or soft skills. A perfect learner learns how to learn, think, analyse and create. Learning should be filled with interest and involvement and should be collaborated as often as possible to make learning better and multi-faceted.

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