

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE TEACHING OF DRAMA

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Abstrak

Artikel ini ditulis untuk memperkenalkan perspektif budaya dalam pengajaran drama dan berbagai aktivitas yang dapat dilakukan di dalam kelas untuk mendorong kemandirian peserta didik dalam mempelajari teks drama. Tujuan utama dari kegiatan ini adalah memanfaatkan teks drama sebagai sarana untuk meningkatkan pemahaman peserta didik terhadap budaya lain. Teks drama yang dipilih harus sesuai dengan tujuan yang ingin dicapai. Untuk mendorong diskusi mengenai budaya yang dapat digali dari teks drama tersebut, peserta didik diminta untuk mengungkapkan pendapatnya dengan memanfaatkan teks drama sebagai referensi.

Kata-kata Kunci: *perspektif kebudayaan, drama, teks drama*

Teaching drama needs special approaches because of its unique characteristics. Unlike other

forms of literature, dramatic text is designed to be performed on stage in front of audiences. The text of a play, on which most study is centred, is a scenario that invites presentation through the medium of actors. Since the playtext consists of words which the cast must speak, and since words are selected and arranged with great skill, the playtext itself is often mistakenly thought to be simply another form of literature like the novel or poetry. That is why some students find plays difficult to understand because they have not grasped that the real meaning of a play only emerges in the performance. "What makes drama drama is precisely the element which lies outside and beyond the words and which has to be seen as action — or acted — to give the author's concept its full value" (Esllin, 1976:14). The implication of this is that it is important for the students to recognize the peculiar and special quality of dramatic texts that distinguish them from other form of literature. This, certainly, should be clarified in their first encounter with a play so as to make them prepared to deal with this unique form of literature. It is, therefore, very important for teachers to bring out this particular dramatic quality as much as possible in the classroom. In presenting a play, teachers should make the students aware of the fact that the words spoken by the characters are only one element, and should suggest ways in which students can interpret other indications for performance contained in a playtext. Movement, setting, sound effects, background music, facial expression, gestures, costumes, etc. are all important in the performance of a play. These nonverbal elements of the language of drama are conveyed in the author's stage directions, the italicized parts set off in brackets or parentheses. Students usually neglect these stage directions as they read through the play because they think them unimportant, whereas, actually, these parts may tell the readers something. Furthermore, as students study a play, they must be encouraged to construct an imaginary performance in their mind. Some students may find this difficult because they have no experience of the theatre at all. Therefore, teachers should provide activities to help them overcome this factor. Obviously, students will also need to see the plays they are studying performed on stage, but this may not be easy because the chance to see performed English drama is very rare in our country. To compensate for this,

teachers may provide video cassettes or VCD of the plays being discussed in class, so that the students may have opportunities to visualize the play.

Apparently, cultural factors may become the most difficult obstacle to understand dramatic texts. This is indeed understandable because dramatic texts offer a whole series of features which may be unfamiliar to the readers, especially to the non-native readers. Normally the author and reader share some knowledge which is hinted at in the text but not explained or commented on. The non-native speaker may see it as a difficulty, or, possibly, may fail to notice it altogether. In cases where the playtext is totally integrated with a whole range of features, social (as with the plays of Henrik Ibsen), historical and religious (as in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*), mythical (as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*), the problems are concerned with 'background'. Eventhough it is possible to read these texts without background knowledge, certainly, it would be an incomplete reading. Lack of background knowledge, as often experienced by non-native readers, may become an obstacle to understand the text properly. Furthermore, it may also become a source of frustration for them because they have nowhere to turn for explanation.

Undoubtedly, the role of the teacher is very important here. The teacher is usually expected to know all, which is certainly impossible. As a non-native speaker, the teacher also has the same cultural difficulties as the students. To a certain extent, it is definitely impossible for the non-native reader, 'the outsider', to share fully the range of references of an 'insider'. But, it surely does not mean that nothing can be achieved from a text by an outsider. While problems clearly may arise, the show must go on. Of course, there is no way for the teacher to prepare the learner for all possible cross-cultural implications, although for a particular text some explanation in advance of the reading or teaching would undoubtedly be helpful. One thing that the teacher can do is to present an occasional dramatic text for its cross-cultural implications. The aim of this exercise is to develop cultural awareness, and to increase student preparedness for the kinds of points which may occur in any dramatic text.

This paper is intended to introduce approaches and activities with which the teacher may be unfamiliar, in an attempt to encourage students' independence in studying dramatic texts in particular, and literature in general. This may be achieved, hopefully, by letting the students work on their own or in groups in a student-centered classroom. The primary aim of these approaches and activities is to use dramatic text as a resource for stimulating cultural enrichment and cross-cultural understanding. To stimulate discussions about culture based on the dramatic texts, students are encouraged to say what they think in their own words, and to back up their opinions by direct references to the text.

Conducting Initial Analysis

The fact that literary texts are, by their very essence, open to multiple interpretation means that only rarely will two readers understanding of or reaction to a given text be identical. This ready-made opinion gap between one individual's interpretation and another's can be bridged by genuine interaction. Therefore, teachers should always encourage student to interact with each other, either in a small group or in a class discussion. These activities should offer ample opportunities for the students to contribute and share their own experiences, perceptions, and opinions. In the course of discussion, the students are expected to become active agents not passive recipients. To achieve this, students should be motivated to come to class prepared. Without preparation the students will not be able to participate in the discussion, and, in turn, the activity itself will become boring.

Prior to the discussion, students should individually read the assigned dramatic text at home, at least once. To ensure that the students really read the material, the teacher may ask them to make some notes on a number of important features, such as the action, the protagonist's predicament, tensions and threats, and the 'world' of the play while they are reading the playtext. Without this provided reading guide, their reading will be aimless and perhaps of little value.

Furthermore, these features will help students to make sense of their first contact with the play. At this point, the students may 'neglect' the stage directions, and concentrate simply on the dialogue. However, in some cases, such as in reading *Death of a Salesman* for example, students may get lost, especially by the sections which use a 'flashback' technique, but there is no need to become panicky.

Kenneth Pickering (1988:14), who is equally committed to both the production and teaching of drama, suggests four basic steps to approach dramatic texts, especially the modern ones. They are:

1. Achieve a broad outline of the action.
2. Define the protagonist's predicament.
3. Trace the main tensions and threats in the play.
4. Examine the world of the play and its social order.

These four steps are very important for the students to master the material before they are finally capable to discuss more specific features contained in dramatic texts. To enhance students' basic understanding of the play, the teacher may ask them to discuss their prepared notes with their friends, either in pairs, or in groups. The teacher may also assign different task for each group, for example, the first group should discuss about the outline of the action, the second about the protagonist's predicament, etc. The discussion should be timed, and at the end of the discussion each group should present the outcome of the group discussion in front of the class and be prepared to answer questions from other groups. While students are discussing their assigned topic, the teacher should monitor these group discussions by occasionally participating and directing the discussion. By the end of the session, hopefully, the students will be able to master the basic material well and be prepared for further discussion, especially about culture.

Cross-Cultural Understanding

It cannot be denied that the ideal way to deepen one's understanding of life in a foreign country is by visiting and staying for some time in that country. If that is not possible, more indirect routes to this form of understanding must be adopted, one of which is through literary works, in this case is drama. It is true, however, that the 'world' of a play is a created one, yet it offers a full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted. A reader can discover their thought, feelings, customs, possessions; what they buy, believe in, fear, enjoy; how they speak and behave, etc. This vivid imagined world can quickly give the non-native reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society (Collie & Slater, 1987:4).

Once the students have mastered the basic features of a play, discussion may be developed to more specific elements of the drama. However, it should be remembered that the aim of the discussion is to develop students' cultural awareness. Culture means shared background (e.g., national, ethnic, religious) reflecting a common language and communication style, and shared customs, beliefs, attitudes, and values. Therefore, to achieve this the teacher should make use of dramatic elements—setting, character, plot, language, point of view, tone, etc.—to discuss about culture and to stimulate cross-cultural understanding. To illustrate this approach, the following is an example of dealing with some elements of drama.

Setting

Setting in drama serves to place the action in a specific time and place and to help create the appropriate mood. In the playtext, the setting is described in words, usually in the opening stage direction. In a performance, however, the setting is brought to life through lighting, props, and scenery. Setting may be realistic or nonrealistic. Realistic settings require extensive scenery and stage property; the idea is to create as real an environment as possible. Nonrealistic settings are

symbolic or representational; they are often produced by unit sets—a single series of platforms, stairs, and playing areas that serve for all the scenery and the settings of the play.

In modern drama stage setting and instructions to the performers seem to become more and more important features of a play that can not be ignored. It is vital to read these stage directions, otherwise learners will fail to grasp much of the particular force of the play. Stage directions in modern plays script a variety of things, for example, there are instructions regarding facial expression, vocal delivery, gesture and basic actions, costume, 'kinesics' (moving about the stage), 'proxemics' (blocking), space and props (Wallis & Shepard, 1998:8). To illustrate the importance of stage directions in a play, teachers may ask the students to pay close attention to the description given by the playwright at the beginning of the playtext, and to try to dig out as much information as possible out of that. Students should discuss this in their group and report the result to the class. This exercise may help students to reconstruct the performance imaginatively in their mind. The following is a detailed description of the setting of Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*:

A room furnished comfortably and tastefully but not extravagantly. At the back a door to the right leads to the entrance hall; another to the left leads to HELMER's study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door and beyond a window. Near the window are a round table, armchairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door: and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking chair; between the stove and the door a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small bookcase with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter (Ibsen, 1959:14).

Ibsen uses this setting to convey information about the characters and the world of the play. This setting also helps to establish a specific time and place and conditions readers' expectations. This comfortable and tastefully decorated living room implies conditions and values quite different from those suggested by the weathered grey houses with rickety outside stairs in New Orleans in Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The room he describes in detail here is similar to those lived in by many people in Ibsen's audience. The world of the stage directly mirrors the world of the audience. More precisely we can say that as soon as the curtain goes up, audience can tell what sort of middle-class people they are about to meet with on stage. These people are not rich, but they are somewhat comfortable and aim to rise. Native readers have no difficulty in understanding the world of the play because they share the same culture with the characters on stage. For some non-native readers, there might be problems with this detailed stage direction. One problem is related to the social status of the Helmers. Indonesian readers might get confused about that. Some students guessed that the Helmers belong to the upper-class society because they can afford a piano which is very expensive for most Indonesians. Moreover, the furnished living room is also considered luxurious for Indonesian standard. Therefore, it is quite normal that some Indonesian students misjudge the social status of the Helmers. It should be mentioned, however, that it is in the nature of literary text to provide this sort of detail little by little, and it is thus possible for the students to read the whole dramatic text carefully and try to get as much information as they need to understand it, by piecing together bits of information from different part of the text. Even so, some students may not be able to grasp the points by themselves, they need to be directed.

To direct students' discussion, the teacher may reveal the particular points the playwright is making by asking several 'open' questions as guidelines. For examples: What do you learn about the Helmers? Can you judge their social class, attitudes and tastes? How do you know that? What do you know about 'winter'? Do you have any experience connected with winter? Why does the playwright set the play in winter? In real life, people's social class, attitudes and tastes may be judged rapidly simply from the appearance of their homes, and in a play readers may also form a temporary opinion about the characters before they meet them. Furthermore, the stage property

above carries cultural associations with which readers or audiences may learn some aspects of culture, e.g., a stove in a livingroom. Indonesian readers may find it strange to imagine a stove is placed in a livingroom because it is commonly placed in a kitchen. They may not know that the stove here is used to heat the room. For native readers none of this present a problem.

After the opening paragraph of stage setting a shorter paragraph initiates the physical action of *A Doll's House* and gives detailed instructions to the actors and actresses:

A bell rings in the hall; shortly afterwards the door is heard to open.

Enter

NORA, humming a tune and in high spirits. She is in outdoor dress and carries a number of parcels; these she lays on the table to the right. She leaves the outer door open after her, and through it is seen a PORTER who is carrying a Christmas tree and a basket, which he gives to the MAID who has opened the door (Ibsen: 1959:115).

From the above stage direction the teacher may ask many questions to stimulate cross cultural understanding, e.g. Why does Nora seem to be cheerful? Why does she buy a lot of parcels? What kind of outdoor dress do you think she may wear? Why does she buy a Christmas tree? What does Christmas mean for most Indonesians? Were you Nora, would you buy those parcels as well? What kind of parcels would you buy for Christmas? Teachers may ask the students to answer these questions individually before asking them to discuss in groups. After the students have had the chance to discuss their answers in their groups, teacher should conduct a whole-class discussion in order to broaden the students' horizon of some aspects of the non-native culture.

Characters

A character in a play is a person created by a playwright to carry the action, language, ideas, and emotions of the play. We learn a lot about the characters in a play by closely observing their actions. How do they behave in different situations? How do they differ from one another in their behaviour when sharing the same situation? There are countless questions that can be asked about the characters in action. From dialogues between characters, teacher may arouse students' curiosity of some aspects of culture implied in the dialogues by asking questions.

NORA. Hide the Christmas tree carefully, Helen. Be sure the children do not see it till this evening, when it is dressed. [*To the PORTER, taking out her purse.*] How much?

PORTER. Sixpense.

NORA. There is a shilling. No, keep the change...

HELMER. [*calls out from his room*]. Is that my little lark twittering out there?

NORA. [*busy opening some of the parcels*]. Yes, it is!

HELMER. Is it my little squirrel bustling about?

From the above dialogues, teacher may ask questions to stimulate cross-cultural understanding, e.g. Why does Nora ask Helen to hide the Christmas tree? Why does she want to keep it a secret? Have you ever seen a Christmas tree? Have you ever decorated a Christmas tree? How do people celebrate Christmas? Why does Nora ask the porter to keep the change? Is giving a tip common in our society? When do you usually give a tip? Helmer addresses his wife as 'my little lark' and 'my little squirrel'. Is it common for a husband to call his wife that way? How does your father call your mother? By discussing these kinds of questions, students will learn a lot about others' culture.

From the short quotation above, we can learn that characters communicate towards each other either verbally or nonverbally. When they communicate verbally, audience will understand promptly about those characters, such as their expectation, thought, feeling, motivation and their social status. Whereas, when characters communicate nonverbally, non-native audience may get lost because they do not understand the body movement, the nonverbal communication. This

includes tone of voice, facial expression, eye contact, body posture, gesture, body movement, physical appearance including dress, and use of space. When Nora answers her husband's remark, she keeps herself busy opening the parcels. These bodily movements provide clues to attitudes and feelings that are normally concealed. For a non-native audience, this nonverbal communication may not mean anything, but for a native audience it must be the opposite. To be a more alert audience, students must see the message as well as hear it. Seeing nonverbal messages is one thing, interpreting them is quite another and requires some knowledge of generally accepted nonverbal principles. The problem is, nonverbal signs may be ambiguous, they may be interpreted in more than one way, that is why it is difficult to understand them.

To enhance students' understanding of some aspects of the non-native culture, a teacher may ask them to role play the dialogues, play read parts of a play, or act out a whole play. Besides, a teacher may also ask the students to watch a film about the play being discussed in class. In this way, students may learn more about culture through the language used by the characters, the setting, and plot, action and activity.

Role Play

The idea of role play, in its simple form, is that of asking someone to imagine that they are either themselves or another person in a particular situation. They are then asked to behave exactly as they feel that person would. As a result of doing this they, or the rest of the class, or both, will learn something about the person and/or about the situation. In essence, each player acts as part of the social environment of the others and provides a framework in which they can test out their repertoire of behaviours or study the interacting behaviour of the group (Ments, 1994:16). As a technique, role-play has proved to be very powerful. It is highly motivating and enables students to put themselves in situations they have never experienced before. Teachers can make use of this activity to give them practice in various types of behaviour. Hopefully, by role-playing certain characters students can learn to empathize with others and to understand their motivations. Furthermore, non-native students are also expected to learn more about others' culture by putting themselves in others' shoes.

Playreading

In an attempt to come nearer to the idea of performance, teachers may ask the students to proceed to playreading with the aim of injecting life and meaning into the printed text. The idea of playreading is not merely asking the students to read the playtext in front of the class but, much more than that, it is a carefully devised and rehearsed mode of presentation in which the words are read by a group of performers with close attention to characterisation, qualities of speech and oral interpretation (Pikerring, 1988:110).

To practise this activity teachers may divide the class into groups large enough to cover all the cast requirements. Groups could take an act each and present the play in several parts. In situations where there are a large number of characters it is a good idea to start off with more extrovert students in the main roles and to use their interpretations for comments and subsequent discussion by the group as a whole. Subsequently the roles can be changed around and later readers will have guidelines to follow.

This activity can be fun for the students because it does not demand great acting skills and capability to memorize dialogue. Even so, the roles should be seriously prepared by paying attention to the text as a whole in order to 'get in role' —to imagine yourself looking, thinking and sounding like the character you have chosen. To be able to do so students should try to take on the character's past life in their imagination and think of his or her behaviour characteristics. This activity really gives students opportunity to get involved directly in the performance of a play. To enliven the presentation students may wish to use minimal stage property, to dress in simple

costume, and to play musical instrument as background. The result of all this efforts can be remarkably stimulating for the non-native students to enrich their understanding of others' culture because they have learned by doing. Hopefully, this short paper will provide ideas and procedures that will enable and encourage teachers to generate their own materials. I am sure that most of this is not completely new for teachers who have involved in the teaching of drama for many years, except for the emphasis on the cultural enrichment and cultural understanding throughout most of the teaching procedures. Therefore, I would welcome comments on the ideas presented here, and information from any teachers who have developed further ideas and techniques.

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