Drama and Theatre: A Polyvalent Pedagogical Praxis for Foreign Language Teaching

Vinita Tulzapukur

Abstract

This article examines the role of drama and theatre in the foreign language classroom. As audiovisual tools increasingly provide access to contextualised language use, literature is often relegated to a peripheral position. This study questions whether theatre is truly incompatible with contemporary pedagogical practices. Through a systematic pedagogical experimentation in a French language classroom, the action-research highlights—via student feedback and observation—the reciprocity between drama and classroom dynamics, reaffirming its polyvalence in foreign language teaching.

Keywords

Foreign language teaching, transformative pedagogy, theatre and drama, experiential learning, artistic strategies

Introduction

This article explores the scope of drama and theatre in a foreign language classroom by questioning the starting point of foreign language learning. In traditional pedagogical settings, the teacher's speech was often regarded as the principal model for oral production, while literary texts served as normative references for written language. Classroom practices largely relied on reading and translating canonical works, followed by detailed linguistic and syntactic analysis, thereby positioning literature as both a cultural resource and a model of correctness. However, the expansion of audiovisual media has progressively reshaped teaching practices by providing learners with more immediate and contextualised

representations of language in use. Videos and audio resources have thus become mainstream tools for recreating authentic communicative situations, often relegating literature to a supplementary role. This perception, however, may be nuanced for specific genres, and we hypothesised that theatre is particularly adapted to contemporary pedagogical orientations. To validate this hypothesis, drama was examined through the prism of current didactic frameworks in order to probe its potential polyvalence, supported by a research methodology grounded in pedagogical experimentation and the analysis of classroom data.

Current Trends in Foreign Language Teaching

If one traces the evolution of foreign language teaching methodologies, it becomes clear that the communicative approach has remained predominant since the 1990s, before being further developed through the emergence of the action-oriented perspective in the early 2000s. This evolution was consolidated with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by the Council of Europe in 2001, which aimed to respond to the need for harmonisation and standardisation in curriculum design, teaching practices and assessment across Europe. Since then, both the communicative and action-oriented approaches have strongly shaped classroom practices, while gradually adapting to contemporary challenges such as online learning environments and the increasing presence of AI-assisted communication. In this context, the Council of Europe published the CEFR—Companion Volume in 2021, with the objective of updating and reinforcing the action-oriented framework in response to new communication realities and to 'provide a common metalanguage for language education' (p. 29).

At the heart of the action-oriented approach lies the ambition to educate language learners as global citizens, capable of functioning as social actors in the target language (Beacco, 2007; Bérard, 1991; Puren, 2004). The transformation from learner to social actor may be broadly conceptualised through three stages: immersion and exposure, followed by assimilation and acquisition and culminating in social action. Throughout this progression, the learner is supported by pedagogical interventions implemented by the teacher. The pedagogical act entails transforming information into knowledge (Altet, 1994), selecting

and implementing techniques (Galisson & Coste, 1976) and making spontaneous decisions to harness the intricacies of learning situations (Meirieu, 1997). During the initial stage of immersion, learners are exposed to the target language as it is used in authentic communicative situations. In order to bring elements of society into the classroom, teachers must create learning contexts that are analogous to real-life interaction (Cicurel, 2002; Dolz-Mestre & Schneuwly, 2009).

Such exposure serves as the foundation for the subsequent phase of assimilation and acquisition, during which learners gradually internalise linguistic forms and communicative strategies by drawing on contextualised examples. In structuring this phase, the CEFR provides a progression framework organised into six proficiency levels (A1 to C2), accompanied by 'can-do' descriptors that assist teachers in planning and sequencing learning objectives. For instance an A1 learner is described as being able to 'understand and use familiar everyday expressions' and 'interact in a simple way' whereas a C2 learner can 'surmise information from different oral and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation, can express themselves spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations' (CEFR, 2001, p. 24). In the enhanced capacity of a facilitator of learning, the teacher generates experiences for learners and then helps them acquire skills to experiment in those experiences. This may be done by adopting creative techniques (Aden, 2008; Badrinathan, 2018) and improvising in the classroom (Miralet, 1964; Van Lier, 1996).

The final stage of the action-oriented approach is characterised by social action. At this point, the classroom increasingly functions as a simulated mini-society (Kramsch, 1985), within which learners mobilise language as a tool for accomplishing purposeful tasks and achieving concrete social objectives (Klein, 1989). Grounded in socio-constructivist theories (Vygotsky , 1962), this approach positions learners as active participants who construct their knowledge through interaction and co-action with others. Language learning thus becomes an experiential process in which competence is progressively developed through collaborative engagement in meaningful communicative activity.

Theatre and Drama: A Cornerstone of Culture in Tandem with Contemporary Curves

Literature, as a work of art, is rooted in the era of the writing, thus reflecting strongly the society and the vague of the thought (Ricoeur, 1981). It represents the linguistic stronghold of the epoch, defining the language patterns. The CEFR—Companion Volume, 2021 highlights that creative texts, including literature, tend to evoke a reaction and stimulate four classic types of response—'engagement, interpretation, analysis and evaluation' (p. 106).

The specificity of drama and theatre is that it is dynamic in nature. As opposed to novels and poetry, they offer the 'inherently spontaneous quality' (Courtney, 1973) of oral communication, and solicit improvisations (Wilson, 2008) as theatrical representations. We may thus focus on two key characteristics of theatre. Theatrical representations and the study of the text allow for a socio-cultural and linguistic experience. The spectator or critic may analyse, decipher and assimilate the drama and live it through the performance. The other key characteristic is that drama is experimental, as it allows for adaptation and improvisation. The drama in its original form may be perceived differently and adapted to innovative character graphs, perspectives and orientations (Blondeau et al., 2003; Dort, 1985; Hristic, 1972).

However, these two characteristics are not exclusive and fluidly move from one to the other, coursing through interpretation. The experience of the play leads to its cognitive and sentimental breakdown and perception from a different angle - interpretation (Danan, 2010; Shaffer, 1993). This, in turn, leads to an adaptation or experiment. Drama may thus be placed on a transformative continuum spanning from experience to experiment. The experience may go deeper as the level of understanding improves, in turn leading to a wider area of interpretation, ultimately resulting in higher experimental value.

Circling back to the recent trends of teaching, we notice a paradox. While pedagogy is in search of experiential learning, drama and theatre are integrated merely as a tertiary activity. Is it inconceivable to align the transformative continuum of drama with the action-based approach? In what way is theatre consistent with the perspectives of the action-oriented approach? In the next section, we elaborate on the methodology along with the presentation of the setting of this empirical study.

Methodology of Enquiry

The study was conducted with the students of the BA in French Studies at the Department of French, University of Mumbai. The National Education Policy—NEP 2020 compliant curriculum integrates French literature, culture and society and exposes students over three years to a range of literary genres—drama, poetry, novels, and short stories, ranging from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Alongside literary study, the program develops written and oral skills of French as a Foreign Language and aims at a B2 level proficiency, described as 'Operational proficiency' or 'Vantage' point proficiency (CEFR, p. 23). The NEP 2020 underscores 'cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking' (p. 37) and emphasises a 'stimulating and engaging learning experience' (p. 38). We can thus infer that the classes, where drama is taught, are not solely a space for literary appreciation, but also an ally of the undergraduate program in its entirety. While the main purpose remains the discovery, discussion and interpretation of the literary text, it also has its collateral objective, the improvement and enhancement of language competence in general.

The objective of this study was to define and harness the scope of the versatility of theatre and drama in a foreign language classroom, here French language classroom. Our enquiry adopted a three-pronged strategy to achieve this aim. At the outset, we conceptualised a pedagogical experimentation comprising a series of classroom activities that initiated access to theatrical texts and allowed for linguistic exploration as well as literary appreciation of the texts. These activities were implemented in the respective classrooms over a period of six months, that is, one semester. The other two elements of our research enquiry were the student feedback mechanism and observation of student engagement and performance. Further on in the article, we shall discuss the results of student responses to the teaching, along with a scrutiny of our observational notes. The following section will articulate our pedagogical techniques.

Pedagogy of a Foreign Language Classroom: Activities, Strategies and Intervention

This study is based on the teaching of two French plays to the students of the second and third year of the BA in French Studies programme, as prescribed in the syllabus: the play *Le médecin malgré lui* (The Doctor in

Spite of Himself) by Molière (1666) in the second year of the programme and *Andromaque* by Racine (1667) for the third year students. These two plays, though set in the backdrop of the seventeenth century French society, have diversity to offer, in terms of genre, writing style, context and themes. The experimental teaching framework was developed by integrating two complementary pedagogical strands. The conceptual strand established parallels between the stages of the action-oriented approach and the transformative continuum of theatre, while the practical strand translated these links into classroom-based activities.

To elaborate the conceptual strand, it was readily evident that the immersion stage correlates with the theatrical 'experience', insofar as reading or watching a play generates exposure to language in use within a meaningful context. Likewise, social action, understood as the ultimate objective of language learning, resonates with the stage of dramatic adaptation and experimentation, as learners mobilise the target language to co-construct new meanings and reinterpret the dramatic text. The liminal stage of assimilation may be considered analogous to the interpretative spectrum of theatre. In language learning, this phase involves a gradual progression marked by fluctuations between error and acquisition, while dramatic interpretation oscillates between comprehension, the broadening of perspective and the reconsideration of meaning. In order to render this learning experience more structured, we relied on the notion of process drama, defined as 'drama not (only) as the rehearsal and performance of plays but as an interactive, participatory form of pedagogy that engages learners (…)' (Winston, 2012, p. 12). Consequently, three core facets—interaction, rehearsal and performance—were patterned into the pedagogical design (Debyser, 1973).

The three activity types—interaction, rehearsal and performance—enabled us to establish a conceptual link between the theatrical transformative continuum and the action-oriented approach. The conceptual framework informed the practical strand—the design of pedagogical tasks, classified according to the categories of reception, production, interaction and mediation (CEFR, 2001, p. 14). The experimentation was operationalised through these three activity types, each simultaneously aligned with a stage of language learning and a dimension of the theatrical continuum, while mobilising specific competencies (reception, production, interaction and mediation). The

selected plays were taught in full and integrated with these activities at various points throughout the semester. The sequencing was not strictly linear but determined by plot progression, learner engagement and proficiency levels. The activities aimed to support CEFR progression from A2 to B1 for second-year students and from B1 to B2 for third-year students.

The interaction activities aimed to foster immersion in the plays through guided reading and the viewing of theatrical adaptations. These tasks primarily mobilised learners' reception and comprehension competencies, complemented by teacher-led explanations and student-led interpretation, discussion and inference, thereby activating production and interaction. The rehearsal activities focused on assimilation and creative interpretation. The classroom functioned as a space for contextual mediation between the world of the play and that of the learners across temporal, geographic, linguistic, artistic and cultural dimensions. This stage predominantly mobilised interaction and mediation competencies, with French serving as the principal language of negotiation, while learners' other languages (English, Hindi, Marathi) supported meaning-making. Activities included linking the text to contemporary contexts, working with idiomatic expressions and engaging in imaginative tasks such as reinterpreting characters or rewriting plot developments. These interpretative tasks culminated in performance. Due to academic constraints, students staged selected extracts rather than complete plays. The final stage mobilised all four CEFR competencies—reception, production, interaction and mediation—simultaneously. The next section dwells on the results of the implementation of this transformative pedagogy.

Observations and Feedback

The feasibility of this experimentation was examined through a systematic analysis of student performance, learner feedback, and pedagogical observations. Language proficiency and its improvement constituted the primary indicator of student performance. Proficiency was assessed using CEFR descriptors (2001; 2021) through a comparative analysis of learners' written and oral production in French before and after the intervention. At the beginning of the semester, students produced a coherent written analysis of a play studied previously, followed by a five-minute individual oral interview designed to elicit opinions,

justification, and argumentation. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. The same procedure was replicated at the end of the semester with the play studied during the intervention. The resulting corpus comprised twenty-one paired samples of written and oral production (eleven second-year and ten third-year students), collected pre- and post-experimentation .

The written productions were evaluated on the basis of 'overall written production' descriptors (CEFR—Companion Volume, 2021, p. 66) and 'creative writing' descriptors (CEFR—Companion Volume, 2021, p. 67). Accordingly, level A2 students can produce a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like "and", "but" and "because"; can tell a simple story, while level B2 students can produce clear, detailed texts (…) synthesising and evaluating information and arguments; can give a review of a film, book or play. The written productions were evaluated systematically, and 62% of the students performed better post the experimentation. This was illustrated by effective choice and use of diverse tenses, increased integration of complex connectors (*pourtant, cependant, toutefois*—however; *c'est ainsi que*—therefore; *contrairement à cela*—in contrast to this; etc.), improved vocabulary by way of use of synonyms (*se moquer de, faire fi de, ridiculiser* for saying "to mock"; *nous constatons, remarquons, notons, identifions que* for saying "we notice that"). The enhanced complexity of the sentence structures illustrated the advancement of language proficiency from A2 to B1 for seven out of eleven second-year students and from B1 to B2 for six out of ten third-year students.

For oral production, the CEFR—Companion Volume (2021) defines the scaling for a 'sustained monologue' (p. 64) and for 'overall oral interaction' (p. 72): level A2 is able to 'explain what they like or dislike (…), making simple, direct comparisons; can ask and answer questions and exchange ideas and information' while level B2 is able to 'develop a clear argument, expanding and supporting their points of view with subsidiary points and relevant examples; can account for and sustain views clearly by providing relevant explanations and arguments'. On analysing the transcriptions of student productions, we noticed that 70% of the students showed improvement in oral production. They incorporated coherence markers with ease (*il est intéressant de noter que*—it is interesting to note that; *ce qui est pertinent*—what is pertinent is that; *à mon avis*—according to me; *on ne peut pas ignorer le fait que*—we must

not ignore the fact that; etc). The pronunciation of certain phonemes was specifically enhanced (/y/ and /ɛ/), and their discourse scored better on the scale of ease of speech. The scaling from A2 to B1 (eight out of eleven second-year students) and from B1to B2 (seven out of ten third-year students) was tangible.

At the end of the semester, student feedback was collected through a six-question questionnaire designed to evaluate engagement, comprehension, and perceived learning outcomes. The questionnaire included qualitative open-ended questions inviting students to comment on the play (*Why did you appreciate the play? What can you say about the writing style of the dramaturge? According to you, in what way is the literary text relevant to your life?*) and to evaluate the classroom activities (*In what way did the classroom activities help you in better understanding the play? Please describe one activity that you specifically appreciated.*). The final question introduced a quantitative component—on a Likert scale of 5, students rated their overall learning experience (1 being very boring, 5 being amazing).

Responses to the first question indicate that students valued the storyline and plot (86% students), the writing style (67% students) and to a lesser extent, the depth of characters (14% students). The second and third questions highlight stronger engagement when literary elements were contextualised: 'Using modern lingo to describe the characters was fun because we all got to chip in. The play seemed more relatable. Students were able to connect the text to real-life situations while demonstrating interpretative insight into dramaturgical style: 'I liked the fact that every character shared similar character traits but were different and unique at the same time'; 'the writing is poetic and musical'; 'Molière uses satire to criticise the social norms and behaviours of that time'; 'Racine appropriately changes the tone for each character'. The performance component was frequently described as an enjoyable and participatory project and was cited by 81% of students in response to the fourth and fifth questions. Overall satisfaction was high: 60% of students rated the experience as '5', while 40% rated it as '4'.

Quantitative findings from student performance and feedback were corroborated by qualitative pedagogical observations. Attendance data suggest sustained learner motivation: 19% of students maintained attendance above 80%, 67% between 60% and 80%, and only 14% below 60%. This engagement was further reflected in consistent participation

and initiative during classroom activities. Students mobilised higher-order thinking skills during interpretative tasks and performance, as reflected in their informed selection of scenes. Second-year students performed the opening scene, characterised by dense comic elements conveyed through language, gesture, intonation, movement, and props, demonstrating linguistic control and effective embodied expression. Third-year students staged two scenes featuring the four main characters and framed their performance with narrative explanations to ensure audience comprehension. Role allocation involved debate informed by proxemic and kinaesthetic considerations, as well as personal identification with characters. Overall, the performances successfully conveyed the comic register of Molière and the tragic intensity of Racine.

Analysis and Discussion

The results consistently demonstrate that the exploration of the transformative continuum of theatre by way of a diversified pedagogical approach resulted in a conscientious cognitive exercise. Our study suggests that the polyvalent potential of drama in the foreign language classroom derives from its reciprocal relationship with classroom dynamics. Dramatic practice reshapes pedagogical modalities by acting as a catalyst that influences teaching strategies, expands the scope of language use, and reconfigures the learner's role.

Drama pedagogy may mobilise artistic, corporeal, multilingual and intercultural approaches, while engaging cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning styles. Consequently, it supports diverse pedagogical aims—linguistic, communicative and literary—and broadens the status of language, positioning it both as an object and a medium of learning. In line with CEFR objectives (2001), learners appropriate the text linguistically while simultaneously interpreting its sociocultural dimensions (Lazar, 1993). The link between classical texts and contemporary contexts further reinforces their relevance. Consistent with constructivist and communicative frameworks, learners co-construct meaning through available lexical and syntactic resources, gradually expanding their competence and facilitating fluid movement between meaning and form (Rosen, 2009).

Learners engaged in activities by activating multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1996), including interpersonal, bodily-kinaesthetic and linguistic competencies. This variety enabled students to draw on their

individual strengths, thereby balancing heterogeneous proficiency levels. Within this cohesive framework, language competence could foster literary competence and vice versa (Culler, 1975), positioning learners simultaneously as readers, critics, spectators and performers. Drama thus emerged as a polyvalent pedagogical praxis that transforms the classroom into a dynamic space of linguistic and cultural development.

Conclusion

That drama is quintessentially a dynamic literary text is unequivocal. This empirical experiment served to bring out the wide range of the drama spectrum, from experiential to experimental. In a foreign language classroom, the spectrum allows for a transitional pedagogy adapted to the fluid roles of the learner and to the interplay of the learners with the target language. With the integration of drama and theatre, the classroom takes on a broader role in the cognitive and emotional development of learners. We may thus conclude that drama, as a tool and object of study, has a prominent place in the classroom and that it should be perceived as more than a mere extension of the classroom pedagogy.

While we do not advocate a regression to the traditional methodology of translation of literary texts and drama, we do put forth the eminence of a well-adapted pedagogy with a predilection for specific aspects and nature of dramatic texts. In the course of this study, we have illustrated the affinity of pedagogical strategies with the nature of drama and presented concrete examples of tested activities, with the intention of paving the way for further didactic research and experiments. The favourable results of this study also open up the arena for research on drama and its role with respect to student learning, engagement and motivation.

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Vinita Tulzapurkar *is an Assistant Professor, Department of French, University of Mumbai. She holds a PhD in didactics of French as a foreign language, specialising in teaching of oral language skills.*

vinita.tulzapurkar@gmail.com