Using Theater Techniques in Teaching English to Iranian EFL Educable Retarded Students

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Abstract: Teaching children with mental disability is a challenging task for instructors and parents as well, as the children demonstrate marked deficits in language and social speaking. This study aimed at finding out how utilizing theater techniques including role play, mime, simulation, and readers theater ameliorate English learning of Iranian EFL female educable mentally retarded learners in a classroom setting. This was a quasi-experimental study and the data collection was based on pretest and posttest to conduct the research. The sampling model was convenient sampling. The data were analyzed using a paired sample t test. The results revealed that theater techniques significantly affected the English learning of educable retarded students and there was a positive relationship between using theater techniques and English learning of these students. This study could benefit educable mental retarded students as well as experts and teachers who were in charge of teaching to these students.

Keywords: EFL educable retarded students, mental retardation, mime, readers’ theater, role play, simulation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today’s world, which is gradually become a global village, it is necessary to learn at least one foreign language. Therefore, it is important to prepare course schedules which allow students to participate and to be active. Also it is generally agreed in every society that all children have a right to equal educational opportunity. However, there are incredible changes in the scope of teaching children with intellectual disability, there are still unkind comments such as: Why would you want to teach children who cannot learn? (Heward, 2003). Whereas there is evidence that, learners with mild retardation have ability to develop foreign language competence (Krapez, 2010), but many of people do not pay enough attention to these children.
Intellectual disability, in other word mental retardation (MR), is a generalized neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by significantly impaired intellectual and adaptive functioning. According to exceptionality standards, those mentally retarded children diagnosed as educable mentally retarded, have noticeable delays, and when they were tested, they revealed an IQ, which falls in an approximate range of 50 to 75. An IQ score of 75 or below is considered a low score. Because on most standardized tests of intelligence, the average score is set at 100 and about 68 percent of all scores fall within plus or minus 15 points of the mean, in other words, between 85 and 115.

Theater is not a new subject and is a British approach to education based on using theater techniques. As a new learning method, it relies on theatrical techniques and is especially employed in foreign language instruction. With the emergence of associations such as Language on Stage, this method is becoming commonplace in more and more primary and secondary schools across the world.

Furthermore, Theatre in Language Learning (TiLL) model has many linguistically advantages as they do artistic advantages. First, this method allows students to learn while having fun and to downplay language learning, making it less formal. In school, this is much more entertaining than listening to the teacher who is repeating the same thing 100 times. In addition, students are able to develop their self-confidence because many believe that, the worst enemy of language learning is shyness. Thus, students need to break out of their shell and begin speaking in order to master another language. The last but not least advantage is learning a language through communicative approach, in other words, students learn by action. Theater includes several skills such as role play, mime, simulation, and readers theater (RT) which are explained in following.

This study focused on mentally retarded students’ English language learning, and tried to prove that whether theater techniques including role play, mime, simulation, and readers theater could improve learning English of Iranian EFL educable mentally retarded learners as a language other than their mother tongue. It also tried to reveal whether using theater techniques had positive relationship with language learning of those students.

Children and adults with mental retardation had the same needs as those without such disabilities but in addition might have additional needs. Furthermore marked differences, particularly in the Level of language development, gave rise to considerable variations in the way in which individuals with mental retardation were able to describe their thoughts and feelings and therefore the way in which emotional distress and major psychiatric illness presented (Holland, 2001).

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, this study addressed the following research questions:

a. Is there any significant difference between teaching English using theater techniques and traditional teaching classrooms among Iranian EFL educable mentally retarded students in classroom settings?

b. In the case that answer to Question 1 is positive, is there a positive relationship between teaching English using theater techniques and learning of Iranian EFL educable retarded students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the fact that bilinguals can perform better in their activities and have more ready minds, it can be assumed that teaching another language can be helpful for the ones who have difficulty understanding new lessons and have learning disabilities. In general, good language skills enable a child to learn and have a feeling of belonging to a group or community.

As a consequence, it took attentions into some studies about intellectual disability people who involved in learning a foreign language through different techniques. Furthermore, mastering speaking abilities is the ultimate goal of acquiring a foreign or second language and the other skills are overshadowed by its significance (Nunan, 2001).

Spoken language is different from written language in many ways. It possesses features which make it more difficult and demanding compared with written language. Ur (1996) pointed out that among the four language skills, speaking seemed intuitively the most important, people who knew a language were referred to as ‘speakers’ of that language, as if speaking included all required knowledge for a language.
2.1. Studies Conducted on Mentally Retarded Students

According to Heward, (2006) Mental retardation meant substantial limitations in age-appropriate intellectual and adaptive behavior. Being poor in memory skills, mentally retarded children had attracted widespread researched and practical interests. Accordingly, during the past 15 years, attention has been directed toward investigating why the memory skills of mentally retarded persons appeared to be inefficient and how the deficits might be remediated through training. Students with mental retardation often had difficulty to focus on learning tasks (Zeaman & House, 1963).

Considering the characteristics of mentally retarded students, some facts about them could be noticed, like the poor working memory and lack of attention in learning tasks for which bilingualism could bring help as mentioned earlier, so if this group of learners were taught another language, they could perform better in the other aspects of life. Because learning another language improved mind, they would become stronger in their memory and do better in life. The diagnostic standard for mental healthcare professionals in the United States, classified four different degrees of mental retardation: mild, moderate, severe and profound. These categories were based on the functioning level of the individual.

Mild Mental Retardation referred to approximately 85% of the mentally retarded population whose IQ scores ranged from 55 to approximately 75, and they could often acquire academic skills with so much delay. Moderate Mental Retardation referred to about 10% of the mentally retarded population, moderately retarded individuals had scores ranging from 35-55. They could carry out work and self-care tasks with moderate supervision. Severe Mental Retardation referred to had IQ scores of 20 to 40. They might master very basic self-care skills and some communication skills. Profound Mental Retardation referred to only 1-2% of the mentally retarded population who had IQ scores under 20-25. They might be able to develop basic self-care and communication skills with appropriate support and training.

2.2. Studies Conducted on Using Theater in Teaching Foreign Language

According to Savignon et al. (1998), the most effective language learning was gained under the condition which all the learners had influential involvements linking to people, thing and event; things that Theater arts apparently did. She suggested theater approach to shape communicative language curriculum and provide an opportunity for real language use which helped learners to explore situations that would otherwise never come up in the classroom setting and be involved in the created imaginary world. Smith (1984), a professionally trained actor and a teacher of English as a second language, expressed a parallel idea between the theater arts and the language learning. He recommended that actors and learners shared a common aim of communicating with others, thus they faced with similar obstacles of dealing with new roles and language. In order to overcome the difficulties and achieve the aims, both could use the same strategies which benefited them linguistically or socio-linguistically from the techniques applied in the theater arts.

Theater in foreign language teaching context did not mean using a classical play or performing a theatre performance. Theater demonstrated an active involvement of learners. Thus, the learners, who experienced it in the classroom, had the similar feeling of the real-life experience (Schejbal, 2006).

In a role-play, students could ‘learn by doing’. Role play as one of the theater techniques was selected to be practiced and examined in this study. The reasons to adopt role-play here were three fold. First, it was challenging, in role plays learners displayed instantaneously socio pragmatic and pragma linguistic knowledge in interaction (Tatayama, 1998). Second, as advocated by Harmer (1989), role-play was fun and motivating. It provided the chance for quieter students to express themselves in a more forthright way and the world of the classroom was broadened to include the outside world, thus it offered a much wider range of language opportunities. Finally, it was a piece of activity which the researchers have practiced in conversation classes for years. The present study was, thus, intended to examine its effects on learners’ oral abilities.

Mime which was one of the theater techniques, is the language of the body, a symbolic system that encodes information in the bodily-kinesthetic activities. Regarding the historical perspective of simulation and its success in English Language Teaching (ELT), it was originally used as a learning technique in military training and business. Simulation could be defined as the reality of function in a
simulated environment (Jones, 1986). In other words, simulation was a structured set of circumstances which mirror real life situations.

In addition, Marcus (2002) stated that reading aloud to the students was a key to help them obtain information. Young and Vardeli (1993) found that the student audiences, indeed, benefited from RT. Because students concentrated on the performers’ oral reading their listening proficiency were enhanced. Generally speaking, RT provided enjoyment, interaction, cooperation, and purpose in language learning. More importantly, RT also provided emotional support for students.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the present work was to investigate if there was any significant difference between performance of Iranian EFL educable retarded learners in traditional classes and classes which used theater techniques for teaching English language. Accordingly, the present study attempted to find out how theater techniques usage can be beneficial in learning a foreign language for Iranian educable retarded EFL learners in classroom setting.

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a secondary school which was specialized for educable retarded students and located in the western zone of Isfahan, Iran. Students who were studying in this secondary school were all the goal of this research study. The total sessions of treatment were twelve and each session was about 90 minutes. The whole study lasted for almost three months.

3.2. Subjects

Subjects of this study were 40 educable retarded students with ages ranged from 13 to 15 years old. They were all female and their IQ ranged from 50 to approximately 70 -75. They were distributed into two group of Experimental and control. They native language was Persian and they learned English as a foreign language. The teacher taught the vocabularies and dialogues through theater techniques in the experimental group. Also the teacher kept the same style of teaching both groups. The control group which the teacher taught were through textbooks in a traditional way.

Table 1. Demographic Background of the Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of the Participants</th>
<th>40</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>13 to 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Proficiency</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Language</td>
<td>Persian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Language</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3. Materials and Instruments

Taking into account the goal of the study and research questions, materials including three textbooks being taught as educational books in secondary school for educable mentally retarded students.

Also, considering the aim of the study and research questions, the proper instruments for this study were selected. IQ tests, pretest, and posttest are among instruments of this study.

One of the IQ tests was Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). Another test was called Good-enough, which was a psychological projective personality or cognitive test used to evaluate children and adolescents for a variety of purposes. This test was also known as Draw-a-Person test because the children were asked to draw a human. The final one was Leiter International Performance Scale which was a nonverbal measure of intelligence and cognitive abilities for all ages.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Pretest was taken orally by the teacher. The teacher asked students some dialogue sentences or questions and tried to communicate with them in English. The teacher expected students to have proper response for questions. Body gestures and facial expressions were utilized in communication as well.
To avoid subjective data collection, the expert in language teaching with familiarity to characteristics of educable retarded students took the tests, too.

In order for reliability of the pretest, inter-rater reliably used in this study. Based on Kappa tests’ result, it was revealed that there were strong agreements between the raters for both pretest and posttest. As well as Pre-test, Posttest was taken orally. The teacher tried to communicate with students in English after 12 sessions of treatment. Besides the teacher, there was the expert who was qualified in working with educable retarded students and also knew English language teaching rules.

The experimental group got treatment for 12 sessions in this school. Moreover, the control group had the traditional style of teaching. A collection of dialogues which included all the vocabularies and dialogues of the students’ textbooks considered as a theater's reader. After that, the teacher practiced the theater’s reader using four theater techniques (role play, mime. simulation, and reader's theater) with students in the experimental group.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Analyzing the data sets of this study as a quantitative research, included information which was gathered through pretest and posttest by comparing performance of students in traditional way in classroom and performing via theater techniques. After collecting the data, they were statistically analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science), Paired sample t-test as well as mean scores and standard deviation used in this study.

4. RESEARCH RESULT

As collecting and analyzing the data cannot be considered enough in a scientific study, reporting the results statistically becomes important.

4.1. Results of the Reliability of Tests

Kappa reliability test was run to evaluate the inter-rater reliability of the two examiners. According to Table 2, the inter-rater reliability for the pretest was found to be Kappa = 0.296 (p = 0.001) and the inter-rater reliability for the posttest was Kappa = 0.363 (p < 0.001). Based on these Kappa results, it was revealed that there were strong agreements between the raters for both pretest and posttest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of Agreement</th>
<th>Kappa for Pretest</th>
<th>Asymp. Std. Error</th>
<th>Approx. T</th>
<th>Approx. Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure of Agreement</td>
<td>Kappa for Posttest</td>
<td>.363</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>7.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Addressing Research Questions

These research questions were asked to assess if there is any significance difference between teaching English using theater techniques and traditional teaching classrooms among Iranian educable mentally retarded students in classroom settings and a positive relationship between teaching English using theater techniques and learning of Iranian EFL educable retarded students. To answer these research questions, the scores of the participants in both groups on the posttest were compared with each other.
Table 3. Descriptive Results of the Pretest and Posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD (N)</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>10.975 (20)</td>
<td>3.1182</td>
<td>.6972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>16.775 (20)</td>
<td>2.5468</td>
<td>.5695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>11.050 (20)</td>
<td>3.1619</td>
<td>.7070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>12.675 (20)</td>
<td>2.3411</td>
<td>.5235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates the mean score and standard deviation of the experimental group on the pretest (M = 10.98, SD = 3.12) and on the posttest (M = 16.78, SD = 2.55) along with the mean score and standard deviation of the control group on the pretest (M = 11.05, SD = 3.16) and on the posttest (M = 12.68, SD = 2.34). It is obvious that both groups outperformed on the posttest. To make sure these differences were statistically significant, paired-samples t-tests were conducted.

According to the results of the paired-samples t-tests, participants in the experimental group (t(19) = -9.40, p < .001) and the control group (t(19) = -3.43, p = .003) significantly performed better on the posttest. Independent-samples t-test was run to compare the groups with each other.

Table 4. Results of the Paired-Samples t-Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Pretest - Posttest</td>
<td>-5.8000</td>
<td>2.7739</td>
<td>.6203</td>
<td>-7.0982 - 4.5018</td>
<td>-9.351</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Pretest - Posttest</td>
<td>-1.6250</td>
<td>2.1205</td>
<td>.4742</td>
<td>-2.6174 - .6326</td>
<td>-3.427</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the results of the independent-samples t-test, the difference between the groups was statistically significant (t(38) = 5.30, p < .001). Therefore, participants in the experimental group significantly outperformed on the posttest. Hence, using theater techniques had a significant effect on Iranian educable mentally retarded students in classroom settings and there is a positive relationship between teaching English using theater techniques and learning of Iranian EFL educable retarded students. The results are shown in the following figure.

![Figure 4.1. Mean scores of the groups on the posttest](image)

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study (see Table 3) showed that mean score of posttest in experimental group (M = 16.775, SD = 2.5468) was higher than mean score of posttest of the subjects in control group (M = 12.675, SD = 2.3411). Thus, the difference between mean scores of subjects in experimental group and in control group was significant. This result demonstrated that the subjects who
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took part in classes with theater techniques showed a significant improvement in communication and took a better result in their scores. Therefore, theater techniques could help students who had problem in communication in target language as it provided a convenient situation with so much fun and emotion for educable mentally retarded students.

Moreover, according to findings in Table 3, it showed that theater techniques affect subjects’ English learning positively. Although both group had the higher mean scores in posttest, compared to mean scores in pretest, but the difference between mean scores of subjects in experimental group demonstrated significant effect on Iranian educable mentally retarded students in classroom setting and there is a positive relationship between teaching English using theater techniques and learning of Iranian EFL educable retarded students. Moreover, the results was shown in figure 1.

One of the implication of this study is for those educable retarded students who have enough competence but utilizing inappropriate teaching method prevents them from communication in FL. Also, supportive parents who pay a lot of attention to their educable retarded children are of implication of this study, as this study enables them to practice English with their children in an interactive way. Also, it may be of benefit to researchers who are willing to conduct a similar study in the future and to instructional planners of intellectual disabled students to gain insight into how they can use theater techniques such as role play, mime, simulation, and reader’s theater to facilitate teaching and learning English language to educable retarded students.

Application of theater techniques in educational environments which specialized for educable retarded students seems to provide a fresh learning style in compared to using the traditional techniques in classroom. Because students are more willing to take part in theater techniques, a case in that is role play. Both teachers and learners cab benefit to follow the theater techniques.

Based on the limitations of this study, it is worthwhile to announce some suggestions for any related research in the future. First, it is suggested to conduct a research with a bigger sample size selected from different retarded schools in order to find the probable impacts. Moreover, the effect of gender can be investigated in this regard through comparing performance of male and female educable retarded students in learning English through distinct theater techniques. Additionally, as the current study was done on a group of secondary students between the ages 13 to 15 years old, further studies are needed in different age groups of EFL educable retarded students to find out the effects of theater techniques on learning of other ages as well.

6. CONCLUSION

Considering the aim of the present study which was determining the effect of theater techniques on English learning of Iranian female educable retarded EFL students, and also finding the effective technique among all theater techniques, which made distinction in comprehending different varieties of dialogues in addition to communication assessment, first a great amount of relevant literature was reviewed to clarify the background of the study and provide an essential theoretical basis.

Regarding the nature of the study, the proper sample was selected and subjects of this study took a pretest as well as a posttest to make the researcher able to compare two sets of scores and find the effect of different theater techniques on educable retarded students.

In order to compare two sets of scores, as the way of determining the effect of four theater techniques on learners, and based on the nature of the sample, matched t-test was selected as the best statistical method to analyze the data and report the results statistically.

Nowadays, remarkable expansion of English language as the language of communication around the world makes the necessity of learning it undeniable. Moreover, many language learners identify communication ability as one of the primary goals for studying a particular language and educable retarded students are not an exception. The only difference is that they must learn a foreign language considering special teaching approach.

Theater techniques are powerful methods for second language teaching and learning specially for educable retarded students who suffer from lack of attention and confidence for communication with others. It offers many L2 learning benefits, solving the problem of target language practice, especially oral skills and it can be replaced with some routine way of teaching and learning generally and presenting in EFL educable retarded courses particularly.
As the result, the present study was conducted to shed light on EFL educable retarded setting capabilities in this field and tried to make them clear. As the most important outcome of the study, it can be mentioned that nothing can work better than involving educable retarded students in actions during English learning to make Iranian EFL educable retarded learners more successful communicators

7. REFERENCES