

# Symbolic Interactionism in Performing Arts Integrated Pedagogy and its Relevance in Future English Language Classrooms

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## Abstract

*How man influences humankind is determined by the experiences that people encounter through interactions. The nuances of meanings that we attach to particular pieces of spoken or written transmission reflects our perspectives. The theory of symbolic interactionism assumes that people respond to elements of their environment according to subjective meanings that they attach to these elements. Meanings are being created and modified through social interaction involving symbolic communication with other people. The performing arts are the creative expressions that use various mediums such as music, dance, theatre, and visual arts to convey messages, and emotions to the audience. Performing arts integrated pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning through constructing meaning by utilising the possibilities of the performing arts. The symbols inherent in theatrical arts transmit specific meanings through interactions that evolve from the cultural and social contexts. This is successfully done by creating auditory, visual and kinesthetic imagery through theatrical techniques in classrooms thus, fulfilling the major objective of interaction.*

**Keywords:** *Symbolic interactionism, performing arts integrated pedagogy, future english language classrooms*

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## INTRODUCTION

Human beings establish their identity by detecting certain strategies to motivate, inform and influence mankind. The way man influences humankind is determined by the experiences that the people encounter through interactions. The thoughts, feelings, beliefs, conventions, etc., of the people are reflected in the interactions. There is a close connection between experiences and interactions. One's experiences determine the efficacy of interactions. Likewise, interactions either illuminate or adumbrate one's experiences. The reciprocity of interaction involving people becomes meaningful only by reaching a consensus between those involved in it. The common ground arrived at by different people caters to the requirements of those who are involved in the synergy. How is it possible to cater to the needs of everyone in an assemblage without hindering each other's modes of thought processes and at the same time by utilising each others' unique strategy employed for effective reciprocity?

This quest directs one to the avenues of interpretations of meanings in interactions. The capacity to interpret meaning arises out of an ability to put oneself in the place of others thus, qualifying an individual to behave by the expectations of others. Whenever communication occurs, these meanings are created and modified regarding the reactions of everyone in

the society. An individual's intentions and his manners of expressing his intentions can be analysed by understanding his life situations and social roles. The meaning of any piece of communication is affected by the cultural and social factors of those who interpret language. It is the reflection of one's perspective that determines the meanings of spoken or written transmissions. Thus, a combination of various factors affects the meaning-making process.

Mastery over a language enables anyone to communicate with accuracy and appropriacy. To make pronouncements translucent and intelligible, one has to acquire the skills essential for an efficacious network of interactivity. A student of English as a foreign language has to apply a convincingly constructive methodology for learning the language since the exposure to the language is usually confined to the classrooms. Bose suggests that learning a second language requires conscious efforts to learn it and the exposure to the second language in most cases is limited (Enes, 2022). Students, especially from government schools, are scared of the language and hence, one of the major tasks before the teacher is to demystify that aura and convey the message that the language is simple and accessible (Farooqui, 2015).

It has to be admitted that despite the facts based on several statistical records that a large percentage of the students would need to cross the border to find living in other

states and countries where the English language would be required to survive and succeed, the English language curriculum committee, the educationalists and the course designers, appointed from time to time by the Ministry of Education of Kerala and the various universities have failed to envisage and foresee the future language needs of the students and to give what exactly they needed for their life (Joseph and Sundarsingh, 2020).

Kerala Education Department was surprised to know that most government school students at the primary level were unable to read their English textbooks correctly. The evaluators from the department had given out cards carrying simple English sentences, which the students found difficult to read and comprehend (Times of India, March 2nd, 2020).

### **BACKGROUND SCENARIO AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The pathetic state of affairs prevalent in the teaching and learning environment of Kerala prompted the researcher to identify possible transformations that could be made in the classroom pedagogical practices. Effective reciprocity demands creating a realistic environment which auspiciously satisfies the needs of those involved in interaction. In a realistic environment, we intend to cherish the priorities of everyone convoluted in the mechanism of interaction by visualising a democratic

and natural learning entourage. Such a habitat will both hearten creativity and imaginative thinking, essential elements for generating a language. A learner enjoys freedom of thought and expression, the essential prerequisite for mastery of a language envisaged in such a setting.

In curriculum and pedagogy in schools, the National Education Policy (NEP-2020) envisages that learning should be holistic, integrated, enjoyable and engaging. It has been declared that as a part of the thrust on experiential learning, art-integrated education will be embedded in classroom transactions not only for creating joyful classrooms but also for imbibing the Indian ethos through integration of Indian art and culture in the teaching and learning process at every level (NEP-2020 p. 11 para 4.7). The teaching of languages will also be based on experiential learning pedagogy (4.21). It is in this context that the present paper formulates the following objectives:

1. To examine if performing arts integrated pedagogy inherits traits of the sociological theory symbolic interactionism.
2. To elucidate the suitability of performing arts integrated pedagogy in future English classrooms.

### **Language as Symbols in Interactions**

Symbol is a sign, shape or object that is used to represent something else (Cambridge Dictionary. n.d.). It

is a thing that represents something else. Ideas can be represented by using symbols thus, making communication effective. Image is representation of the external form of a person or thing in art. An image is a visual representation of something (Merriam - Webster. n.d.). Interaction is communication. During interaction man uses representations. The choice of the most appropriate symbols and images determines the efficacy of representations. The words in a sentence carry symbols having different meanings in different contexts. For example, the word 'green' symbolises rebirth, renewal or immortality. The green colour may represent freshness and hope. In the classroom context, a green flag may refer to student interest. A driver can start a vehicle with a green signal. It is by comprehending the contextual meaning of a symbol that communication becomes fruitful.

The visual representations also carry different waving, saluting or supporting. In group context it enables interaction through images in different contexts. Let's consider an example of a raised hand. Hand raising can be an enforcing order. In a classroom, it represents gaining attention of others or to convey the meaning of silence from others. Hand raising has the possibility of expressing different emotions too. The cognitive theory of visual communication says that people interpret visuals through their own thoughts and emotions. This theory is based on the idea that humans are

constantly processing information and that what we see shapes how we think and feel (UK Blue Sky Graphics, May 16, 2022).

The choice of symbols and images to communicate the intended meaning of an utterance to the listeners and viewers depends on the kind of experiences that a speaker comes across. Experiences take part in a decisive function in not only the selection of symbols but in the analysis and interpretation of meanings transmitted for interactive purposes. Hertzler defines language as a culturally constructed and socially established system of standardised and conventionalised symbols which have a specific and arbitrarily determined meaning and common usage for the purpose of socially meaningful expression and for communication in a given society (Fernback, 2019).

### **Symbolic Interactionism and Performing Arts**

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theory that focuses on meanings attached to human interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, and to symbols (Lumenlearning.com, March, 2016).

It originates from the American philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead. It is a perspective that sees society as the product of shared symbols, like language. The social world is constructed by the meanings that individuals attach to events and social interactions and these

symbols are transmitted across the generations through language. This theory assumes that people respond to elements of their environments according to the subjective meanings they attach to these elements such as, meanings being created and modified through social interaction involving symbolic communication with other people (Nickerson, 2023).

'Interactionist' refers to people's capacity to put themselves in the place of others. This ability to see ourselves as the object of others' attention allows us to direct our actions through self-reflection. 'Symbols' refers to our sharing of symbols (such as language) with others (Counsell, 2013). Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings things have for them. The meaning of such things arises out of social interaction. These meanings are modified through an interpretive process (Blumer, 1969).

The focus on the importance of interaction in building a society led sociologists like Erving Goffman to develop a technique called dramaturgical analysis. Goffman used theatre as an analogy for social interaction and recognised that people's interaction showed patterns of cultural 'scripts' (Crossman, 2020). He defined individual activities which serve to influence an audience as a 'performance'. Dramaturgical analysis is a technique sociologists use in which they view society through the metaphor of theatrical performance, including role improvisation (Crossman, 2020).

The role theory of social psychology, inspired by symbolic interactionism, deals with the process of creating and modifying how one defines oneself and others' roles (Turner, 2001).

Performing arts deal with life and experiences. The social world as revealed through the performing arts, is constructed by the meanings that artists convey in their performances. The societies are created and maintained through the repeated actions of individuals (Carter and Fuller, 2015). Cooley (1902) used the term 'looking glass self' to convey the idea that a person's knowledge of the self concept is largely determined by the reactions of others around them. Other people thus, act as a looking glass (mirror) so that we can judge ourselves by looking 'in' it (Nickerson, 2023).

### **Using Performing Arts Integrated Pedagogy to Enhance Socially Meaningful Expressions in English Language Classrooms**

Performing Arts Integrated Pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning through constructing meaning by utilising the possibilities of performing arts like music, drama and dance. One of the most arduous tasks of an English teacher is to make the students listen to and to help them generate meaningful utterances. By utilising an integrated pedagogy of performing arts, the teacher transforms into a facilitator to ensure that all students get the opportunities to interact. The student gets the

exposure to english by enriching their learning environment (Hinga et al., 2012; Cummins, 2013; Greenfader, Brouillette and Farkas, 2014; Black, 2016; Altweissi and Maaytah, 2021).

Greenfader, et al., (2011, 2012a, 2012b) chose to examine the Teaching Artist Project (TAP), a professional development programme for classroom teachers that focused on fostering rich verbal interactions, pairing speech with movement, gesture and expression. Although such activities certainly fostered english vocabulary development, students also practiced such language skills as narrative discourse, story construction and story recall as they paired language with gesture in their dramatic interpretations, injecting their additions to the narrative. TAP was found to be most effective the students who are oftentimes the most difficult to reach—those students who began the programme with the weakest english language skills.

The purpose of the study of Kariuki, et al., (2016) was to examine the effects of integrating theatre arts strategies and traditional strategies in high school English classrooms. The findings suggest that theatre integrated strategies are beneficial to both males and females, although females tend to excel in theatre integrated classes.

Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS) implemented the Integrated Theatre and Arts Strategies (ITAS) programme to evaluate if there is an improvement in students' literacy skills that can be

associated with teacher training. The findings in this study imply that the infusion of theatre arts strategies had an effect on students' literacy skills in the targeted areas. The increase reported in students demonstrating active listening from the second to fourth survey, as evidenced by teachers' responses, suggests that there was an increase in student engagement in the lessons (Cummins, 2013).

The arts have been shown to be crucial for student development, not only for the joy of self-expression through the arts themselves but also because of the social, emotional and academic connections children can make through them. This qualitative study carried out by Penerosa, et al. (2021), seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of this particular programme in a handful of schools through interviews conducted with arts educators, general-curriculum teachers, students and parents. Results indicate that despite some challenges, participants found this method of art integration to be a highly effective way to teach the core curricula while preserving the aspects of art that students find engaging.

### **How Performing Arts Integration Relates with Symbolic Interactionism**

Several studies have been conducted which prove the association between symbolic interactionism, performing arts and the process of communication.



Couch (1984); Couch et al., (1986) in Carter and Fuller, (2016) following the symbolic interactionist tradition at Iowa, applied a pragmatic approach to the study of social phenomena and used innovative experiments to understand interactions among actors. Couch's brand of interactionism attempted to understand individuals' orientations toward one another across time and space (Herman-Kinney and Vershaeve, 2003 in Carter and Fuller, 2016). According to Stryker (1980: 57) expectations of roles vary across situations and within the context of cultural or social change. Roles as they are attached to positions may be analysed as predictors of future behaviour for individuals in various social categories (in Carter and Fuller 2016).

One of the more famous examples of symbolic interactionist scholarship was provided by Glaser and Strauss (1964) in their examination of awareness contexts that influence social interaction. Becker's (1953) study shows how role behaviours are socialised and acquired through interactions with others. Another seminal study was conducted by Rosengren (1961), who examined the nature of self-meanings in those who are 'emotionally disturbed' (in Carter and Fuller 2016).

Over the past decades many scholars have applied an interactionist framework to understand self and identity processes, specifically in the areas of role theory, affect control

theory and identity theory. Ralph Turner's (Turner, 1956, 1990; Turner and Killian, 1987) role theory emphasised role-making or the process of creating and modifying definitions of oneself and one's roles as the orienting mechanism in interaction (Turner, 1962 in Carter and Fuller, 2016).

From Goffman's (1959) early writing onward, the examination of social life as dramatic and designed to persuade has been critical to interactionism. This approach, generally known as the 'strategic paradigm' (Lofland and Lofland 1984), has focused on how social actors manage their performances in their verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal aspects. Even in Goffman's early writing he emphasises that emotions are strategic and that social actors are socialised in their use. Emotions are linked to identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987; Clark, 1987 in Fine, 1993).

The concept of music scene can provide insight into the historical fact that in spite of technological advancements the live music experience is still at the heart of musical experiences across communities and cultures (Kotarba, J.A. and LaLone, N.J. 2014).

Currie, S. (2014) proposes that the internal structure of local jazz worlds or scenes, arising from distinctive modes of meaning production, gives rise to particular types of generalised other, which in turn structures the development of artists'

professional selves or personae through the dialogic internalisation of durable aesthetic predispositions. Jazz musicians construct and project mutually compatible creative selves, whose onstage encounters with one another suggest dramaturgical processes of meaning production, which endow the interplay of their spontaneous aesthetic gestures with narrative significance.

Van den Scott (2014) provides a case study of Inuit throat singing to demonstrate the effectiveness of this model in trying to explore the relationships among music, culture and society. Perinbanayagam and McCarthy (2012) synthesise and integrate the key aspects of these language theories in an attempt to apply them to everyday conversations. The language features in question are routinely put into play by human agents to convey attitudes, emotions, opinions and information, and to achieve an engagement with the other. The findings suggest that human relations, expansive in their range and intricate in their forms, demand complex instrumentations with which to conduct them. These instrumentations are essential features of the linguistic socialisation of human agents, integral to both memory and habits of speech. Berceanu et al. (2020), suggests that negative emotions toward aggressive behaviour might change to positive emotions due to the repetition in performing violent behaviours as a key for the transition from reactive

aggression to appetitive aggression. The analysis of another study revealed that the dancers' aesthetic experience of a dance performance is similar when they perform choreography and watch it on video (Vukadinovic and Marković 2017).

A close analysis and interpretation of the above evidence and practices affirms the following observations and remarks. There is a close association between symbolic interactionism and performing arts integrated pedagogy. Language as a symbol can be effectively generated through integrating performing arts in English classrooms since symbols allow people to go beyond what is seen. The dynamic and symbolic nature of language correlates with the creative nature of arts.

Our words, looks, gestures, facial expressions, body language and actions involving movements of the body are assorted expressions and articulations of our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, norms, attitudes, conventions and ideas. Human beings establish their identity by detecting certain types of symbols which judiciously befit their contextual evaluation of meaning-making thus, making them accept or reject the symbols in interactive procedure. The choice of symbols that a person recruits for generating meanings require a specific kind of understanding as it is an act which demands the ability to put oneself in someone else's place. The symbols inherent in performing arts transmit specific meanings which



evolve from the cultural and social contexts in which they are used. An individual interprets symbols by engaging in the experience of comprehending and exploring another one's perspective.

Performing Arts Integrated Pedagogy emphasises the importance of symbols in human interactions. It is through the use of symbols that a performer and the audience create and interpret meanings. Music, dance and drama convey and evoke responses. The performing arts integrated pedagogy highlights the role of symbols, images and visual communication in creating meanings. An application of the pedagogical practice is by creating a designed setting in which people have chances of applying symbolic interactionism. Designed physical environments communicate a society's shared symbols and meanings (Lawrence and Low 1990). They are agents to shape thoughts and actions through self-reflection (Smith and Bugni, 2006).

### **Relevance in Future English Language Classrooms**

The concept of a classroom has undergone a drastic change today and we are going to witness even more tremendous innovations in the technologically advanced environment in the education sector. Many pedagogical practices will have to be abandoned and some of them require reconstruction. The scope of blended pedagogy will have to be recognised in the future years.

The student being an agent and a teacher being a co-learner, will have a transforming experience in the future blended English learning environment. Such an environment caters to the needs of each and every child. The students take up the responsibility of acquiring English language by reflecting upon the possibilities of utilising technology and collaborating with the structured activities through innovative pedagogical practices. Such an atmosphere provides opportunities for self-expression to the students and English teachers by actively and creatively engaging in the meaning-making processes.

### **CONCLUSION**

If we need the child to be active in an English classroom, we have to make the child feel the need. Children become aware of the necessity only by realising their immense possibilities and potentials within themselves. A student will have to recognise the need to contribute something which nobody else can. This realisation happens naturally when one makes a suitable choice of representation in a language. The learner's involvement in performing arts helps him to acquire an ability to understand and appreciate the modes of self-expression thus, revealing the innate knowledge of effectively using symbols in English language. The child learns the mechanism of interaction by acquiring symbolic representations of concepts and experiences through Performing Arts Integrated Pedagogy.

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