

Using Theatrical Skills to Enhance Language Fluency and Situational Learning of Pre-Service Teachers: An Experimental Study

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Abstract



Teachers need effective communication to convey their message. Several studies in Pakistan have highlighted the need for better communication skills in pre-service teachers to positively influence their students' language learning. Theatrical skills are not only considered an interesting tool for teaching language in the classroom but also help pre-service teachers become more immersed, active, and effective when delivering their message. A quasi-experimental research design with a pretest-post test control group was chosen to determine the effect of using theatrical skills to enhance pre-service teachers' language fluency and situational learning. A study group of 30 female prospective teachers enrolled in the B.Ed. program at a women's university were introduced to theatrical skills for an entire semester as part of their "English Communication Skills" course. A parallel section of 30 students was kept as the control group, with all other conditions remaining the same. The data collected using two researcher-made rubrics, the "Verbal Communication Inventory" and the "Situational Learning Checklist," revealed a significant difference in the pre- and post-performance of teachers on both instruments. The study suggests that theatrical skills should be incorporated and integrated into teachers' training programs and their professional development activities to enhance their confidence in using language for teaching purposes.

Keywords: Theatrical Skills, Language Fluency, Situational Learning, Pre-service Teachers

Introduction

Teachers face daily challenges in responding to the diverse needs and demands that arise in various teaching situations. Effective communication skills enable teachers to deliver their lessons effectively, engage with students, maintain classroom discipline, and confidently manage classroom activities. The more fluent they are in communication, the more effectively they can engage their students. It is widely acknowledged that to be a competent and adaptable professional, a teacher must possess both a conscious understanding of the curriculum and the ability to think and deliver strategically when implementing their lessons. Moreover, the ability to improvise in education relies on the development of learnable repertoires, which are shaped by the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter and their understanding of effective teaching strategies (Holdhus et al., 2016).

As teaching is an art and a science at the same time, intelligently and tactfully handling situations is an essential skill for teachers to learn. Similarly, situational learning helps teachers to adapt to the diverse and ever-changing class environment. Language teachers are always looking for new ways to improve their teaching and classes (Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023; Nazari & De Costa, 2022). Language is always learned by practice and adapting to different situations. If teachers succeed in making the language learning process interesting and appealing through active participation, students learn easily and effectively. Drama and theatrical activities become strong stimulus to urge the participants to speak and deliver. A thriving environment is always helpful for learning language where everybody is given opportunity to participate and being visible and audible. Theatrical skills related to voice, movement control, character imitation and improvisation have been a tool for

language learning for long. Therefore, language classroom is always noisy and engaged in talks and expressions (Halimovna, Nurilloevna, 2019).

According to Sever (2017) and Briones, Gallego, and Palomera (2022), having acquired theatrical and presentation skills enables a teacher to effectively vocalize various language components, including voice, syllables, words, and clauses, ensuring accurate emphasis on clauses and words. Through their voice, teachers can convey the emotional and thoughtful aspects of the subject, enhancing the understanding of the speech content through strategic emphasis and well-placed pauses. Additionally, teachers can reinforce the meaning of statements by incorporating physical actions, gestures, and facial expressions into their speech, using a trained tone of voice. Developing theatrical skills requires dedicated effort, learning, and education.

The utilization of theatrical skills within the classroom contributes to the development of various abilities: (1) acting proficiency; (2) improvisation skills; (3) natural expression; (4) language refinement; and (5) increased confidence. This approach is not only enjoyable and entertaining but also serves as a motivational factor for learning. It offers diverse opportunities for utilizing language and creates a captivating linguistic experience for participants (Fleming, 2006, p.1). Moreover, theatre presents a wide array of teaching and learning possibilities, making it adaptable to suit the needs of students. Therefore, its significance in the classroom should not be underestimated. In contrast to traditional teacher-centered methods, theatre promotes a learner-centered approach by fostering active cooperation, resulting in a shift of roles and enabling students to develop their skills autonomously and actively. They can engage in "exploring and playing with reality," as theatrical performances evoke emotions, liveliness, and experiential learning. The practice of theatre provides a physical and primarily psychological space for inquiry, exploration, and experimentation with reality (Motos, 2017, p.345).

However, despite its significant potential, there are certain prerequisites that need to be considered before deciding to incorporate theatrical skills into the classroom. Utilizing theatre as an instructional tool entails a series of challenges, as emphasized by Fleming (2006, p.3), not only for students but also for instructors who must be willing to acknowledge that several difficulties may arise. These challenges include: (1) potential embarrassment experienced by students when performing in front of their peers; (2) issues of discipline arising from heightened excitement during theatrical activities; and (3) potential fluency obstacles if students have a limited command of the second language, which can hinder effective communication during the performance. It is crucial for teachers to be aware of these aspects beforehand and be prepared to address these obstacles. However, educators should not be discouraged from using theatre as a means of teaching a second language.

There are a number of studies which support theatrical skills to be incorporated for teaching a second language. Bolton (1984), an earlier researcher suggests using drama skills in all aspects of language teaching. Theatrical skills can develop, decision making, critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal skills, expressions and emotions and the ability to deal with new situations as propagated by Brumfit (1991), Maley and Duff (2001), Philips (2003), Aldavero (2008). The oral skills like control of voice, pronunciation, intonation and fluency can also be facilitated as suggested by Casteleyn (2019). Students can 'live their experience' through immersing in real life roles.

With the help of the discussion above, it is concluded that communication skills are essential for pre-service teachers to make their lessons and instructions effective. The elements and properties of communication; language fluency and situational learning targeted by the current study can be well inculcated with the help of theatrical skills through action-oriented methods like role plays, dialogues, mimics, improvisation, which provide the opportunity present daily life to the classroom environment.

Statement of the Problem

Recently Sabih-Ul-Hassan, Gul and Imran (2023) have reported that elementary English language teachers in Pakistan themselves have poor fluency and wrong pronunciation resulting in distorted language learning in students. Many studies in Pakistan have highlighted Elementary teachers' incompetence in language fluency and situational learning with reference to adapting to the diverse and new situations (Alam & Bashir Uddin, 2013; Zhang, 2023; Muhammad, & Gurmani, 2023). However, a few studies suggest any practical technique and provide evidence based information about using theatrical techniques to make pre-service teachers fluent in English language. Therefore, the current study attempted to determine the possibilities of using theatrical skills like role plays,

improvisation, adapting situations and managing expressions for language teaching in order to improve students' fluency in language and their situational learning through experimental method.

Research Objectives

The study was designed to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To identify the effect of theatrical skills; role plays, improvisation, adapting situations and managing expressions, in improving the fluency in English language of pre-service teachers.
2. To determine the effect of theatrical skills; role plays, improvisation, adapting situations and managing expressions, in improving the situational learning of pre-service teachers.

Research Hypotheses

The study has tested the following Null Hypotheses:

H₀ 1: There is no significant difference in the language fluency of preservice teachers taught with theatrical skills and those taught with traditional method.

H₀ 2: There is no significant difference in the situational learning of preservice teachers taught with theatrical skills and those taught with traditional method.

Literature Review

Using theatrical skills as an engaging pedagogical tool is primarily beneficial for kinesthetic learners, although it can be effectively employed for all types of learners. It enables students to engage socially and interact with one another by providing a contextualized, real, and three-dimensional experience of language (Arpentii, 2020). Theatrical skills assist students in utilizing language thoughtfully and appropriately. By enacting scenes and acts and practicing dialogue delivery, it enhances students' listening and speaking abilities. Additionally, their writing skills are refined and polished through these practices. Moreover, theatre fosters a sense of unity and connection among students and their teacher, promoting class bonding (Aladgem, 2018).

Many practitioners and educators like Moreno-Guerrero, Rodríguez, (2020) Gillette and McNish (2023) Ødegaard (2023) and Mohamed and Barakat (2023) have worked on developing the imagination of the students in a language learning situation through drama and theater. Theatrical skills provide a situation for which teaching /learning language can be made through contexts which are full of activities. Theatrical skills encourage students to become dynamic and collaborative users to learn all the four language skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW).

Schwenke and Dshemuchads (2021) advocate that drama is a collective activity engaging students in different roles who have their own contribution in the story. Students feel importance and value while performing their role. It is competitive and diverse for students to perform in a team. They are acquainted with verbal and nonverbal language cues and learn to understand symbols and expressions. The more they immerse themselves in the character, the more they adopt their personalities, actions and accents. It is a rich source to familiarize students with societal characters, their real portraits and functions (Lee, Avgar, Park, Choi & 2018).

The educational value of drama both as an arts subject and as a teaching method is now broadly recognized (Clipson-Boyles, 1998; Van de Water, McAvoy & Hunt, 2015 Athiemoolam, 2004). Different people have different opinions about practicing drama and theater in language teaching. Some claim that drama is a pure art form with creative expression but distinguish theatre as performance. They are against the concept of drama and theater being used in teaching other subjects as it weakens the art form and its status. On the other hand, people also see drama as a means of self-discovery and advancement. There are numerous findings (Clover, 2013; Saksono, 2023) for positive effect of teaching social and scientific concepts through drama and it is a well-established source for teaching a second language. However, it is rarely used for teaching communicational skills in teacher training programs to improve teachers' own situational learning or language fluency.

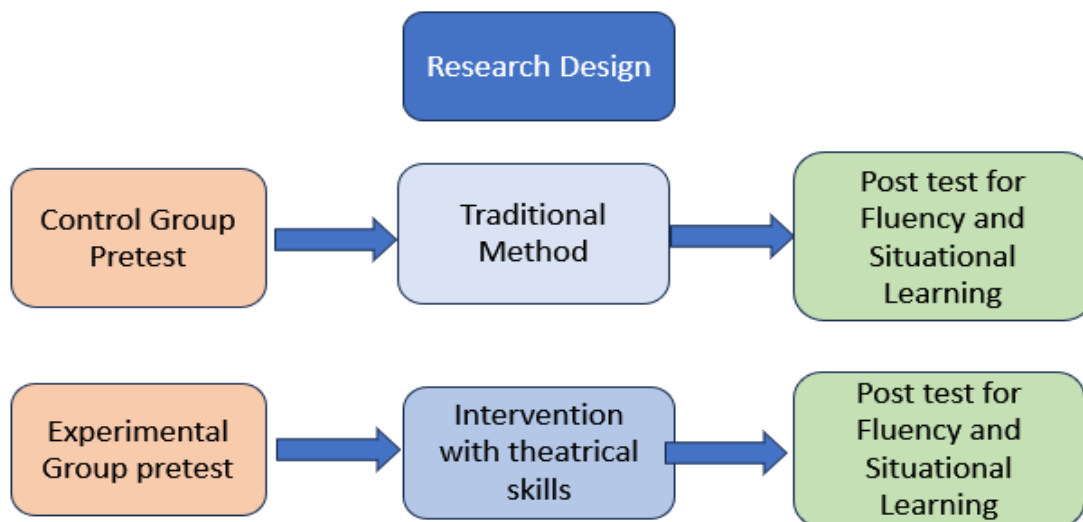
Practicing improvisation helps in developing drama and theatrical skills. The intention here is not to make or produce trained actors but to make use of drama for learning. The main objective is to generate a sense of belief and confidence in the students by focusing on their understanding of characters and creative power which ultimately permits them to write scripts. The main stress is placed on skills development with children (Clipson-Boyles, 1998, p.39) by putting them in a situation to bring their own knowledge of the world to create the characters. In addition, drama and theater also aid students to express and share their ideas freely and independently in a comfortable environment and promote mutual and collaborative learning.

Many speech deficiencies can be treated through learning theatrical skills. It is successfully used in psychotherapy and clinical problems. Dramatic expressions help students to facilitate several features like spontaneity, fluency, empathy, self-esteem, and motivation. Dramatic performance is diverse, dynamic, and versatile so students learn how to adapt to new situations, context, and environment (Chan & Tang, 2022). Language learning becomes a fun and lively activity through practicing theatrical skills. It helps students to practice their observation and understand real characters of the society around, finally developing empathy with them. Therefore, the researcher opted for theatrical skills to enhance pre-service teachers' communicational skills; fluency and situational learning.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted under the positivistic paradigm and the quantitative approach was used. A Quasi-Experimental 'Pretest-Posttest Control Group Design' (Rogers & Revesz, 2019) was opted by the researchers. A pretest posttest design was selected to control certain threats in an experiment. A pretest was administered to the study groups to ensure their homogeneity before the commencement of intervention (Leatherdale, 2019). The experimental group underwent the changed variable whereas the control group was treated with a traditional or different method. The pre and post tests helped the researchers to identify actual differences in the groups those intervened or those without intervention. The differences in scores at the end of the intervention supported the causal effect of the intervention (Miller, Smith & Pugatch, 2020).

The study incorporated theatrical skills as the independent variable and Language fluency and Situational learning as the dependent variables.



Study participants

All students of pre-service teachers' programs, B.Ed, BS Education at universities of district Lahore were the target population of the study. The accessible population from which the study sample was drawn consisted of pre-service teachers at B.Ed. level at a women university having three sections at the same semester. Following the research design, two intact groups were selected randomly. These two sections were randomly assigned as a control group N = 30 and the experimental group N = 30 through 'flip a coin' technique. The experimental group underwent intervention of using theatrical skills for teaching the subject 'English Communicational skills' for one semester (16 weeks), whereas the control group was taught by the traditional method; chalk and talk, presentations, paper pencil activities etc. for the same semester. There were total N = 60 female students as the participants of the study age ranging from 19-25 years.

Instrumentation

Corroborating with the nature of dependent variables, two instruments were constructed by the researchers. Language fluency was measured by a 'verbal communicational inventory' and the situational learning was determined by an observation checklist. Both of the instruments held 40 marks each, i.e. four stages of mastery ranging from the beginner, progressive, accomplished and the final level of 'outstanding' performance. Each stage was elaborated with relevant required skills needed to the desired level.

Validity and the reliability of the instruments

The verbal communication inventory and the observational checklist for situational learning were validated by seeking expert opinion. After the feedback obtained and iterative corrections, the instruments were pilot tested to ten participants other than the study participants by the three researchers and an inter-rater reliability of .785 and .892 were obtained for inventory and the checklist respectively. The instruments were considered satisfactorily suitable for the implementation.

Control of Experimental Threats

The subjects were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups to control the history of the participants and the pretest-posttest measures helped to cover maturation, mortality and statistical regression. The researchers tried to control selection error by random assignment to the control and experimental groups. Different teachers taught the two sections to avoid the experimenter bias. Both sections were taught the same content and syllabus of ‘English Communicational skills.’

Procedure of Intervention and Data Collection

University approval was obtained prior to implementing theatrical skills (role play/drama, vocal communication games, improvisation, adapting situations and managing expressions,) during the session. It was assured that participants were at minimal risk. The selected groups were pretested on the two instruments separately before introducing the intervention. The group difference was calculated by applying the independent sample *t-test* on the pretest of both experimental and control groups. The results revealed that both groups were approximately equal in language fluency and situational learning.

For the next sixteen weeks, including the class mid term and final term exams, approximately for 14 weeks, students were taught with the help of theatrical skills using specific lesson plans offering activities like vocalizing, sound control, movement games, identifying facial and body expressions, verbal and non-verbal delivery of scripted content, mimicry, singing, circle games for performance and showing videos of drama and theatrical techniques. Students selected characters and presented role plays of their interests. Whereas students of control group were taught with the traditional method including lecture, paper pencil activities, chalk and talk and showing PowerPoint presentations.

After completing 42 credit hours, the students of both sections were post tested on Verbal Communication Inventory. A final performance was arranged and recorded by the researchers on the observation checklist also.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data obtained from all four tests ‘underwent the test of Normality’ to see if it was suitable to apply further tests of significance and it was found normal (See Table 1). An independent sample *t-test* was calculated to examine the difference between the control group and the experimental group in terms of language fluency and situational learning for the posttests of both groups. A paired sample *t-test* was conducted to compare the mean scores of pretests and posttest for both the control group and experimental groups to find out whether theatrical skills were helpful for improving language fluency and situational learning of pre-service teachers.

Results

Table No. 1: *Test of Normality for cumulative scores*

Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Ex	.103	30	.200*	.935	30	.067
Exp2	.099	30	.200*	.967	30	.454
Cont	.114	30	.200*	.966	30	.446
Cont2	.110	30	.200*	.961	30	.324

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The table 1, establishes the fairly normal structure of the data with both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality. All four values > .05 level revealed that the data sets were normal in distribution. The analysis supported the use of *t-test* for identifying significant differences in the control and experimental groups.

Figure 1. *Normal Q-Q Plot*

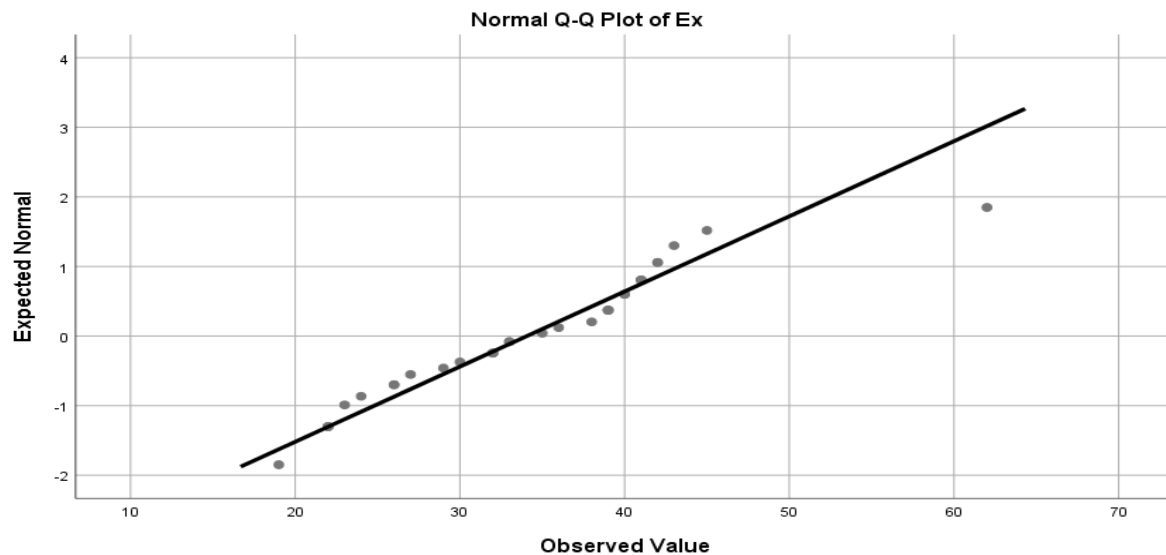


Table No. 2: Group statistics for the pretest comparison of control and experimental groups of Language Fluency

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Experimental	30	17.90	2.92	.53
	Control	30	15.60	3.06	.56

Table 2 shows group scores of pretest of control and experimental groups before the intervention of introducing theatrical skills. The groups have M = 17.90 for experimental group and M = 15.60 for control group on the ‘Verbal Communication Inventory’ scale. The experimental group performed slightly higher than the control group before intervention. Therefore, a test of significance was applied to determine the real difference in the groups.

Table No. 3. Independent sample t-test for pretest of control and experimental groups for Language Fluency

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Score	Equal variances assumed	.118	.732	2.97	58	.004	2.30
	Equal variances not assumed			2.97	57.872	.004	2.30

A t-test for independent sample was run to determine the significant difference in the control and experimental groups before the intervention and it was revealed that with $t = 2.97 (58)$, $p = .732 > .05$, there was no significant difference in the groups, and they were nearly equal in Language fluency before intervention.

Table No. 4: Group statistics for the post test comparison of control and experimental groups for Language Fluency

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Experimental	30	33.20	3.10	.56
	Control	30	21.63	1.24	.22

Table 4 shows group statistics of post test of control and experimental groups after the intervention of introducing theatrical skills. The groups have M = 33.20 for experimental group and M = 21.63 for the control group on the ‘Verbal Communication Inventory’ scale. Values identify that teaching through theatrical skills enhanced preservice teachers’ language fluency. To know the significance of the increased values, a test of significance was applied.

Table No. 5. *Independent sample t-test for post test of control and experimental groups for Language Fluency*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Score	Equal variances assumed	19.164	.020	-5.337	58	.000	-13.133
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.337	43.252	.000	-13.133

A *t-test* for independent sample was run to determine the significant difference in the control and experimental groups after the intervention and it was revealed that with $t = -5.337 (58)$, $p = .020 < .05$, there was a significant difference in the groups' performance in Language fluency measured by 'Verbal Communication Inventory'. The first null hypothesis that 'there is no significant difference in the language fluency of preservice teachers taught with theatrical skills and those taught with traditional method' was rejected.

Table No. 6: *Group statistics for the pretest comparison of control and experimental groups for Situational Learning*

Group Statistics					
Score	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Experimental	30	9.83	1.416	.258
	Control	30	6.70	2.641	.482

Table 6 shows group scores of pretest of control and experimental groups before the intervention of introducing theatrical skills. The groups have $M = 9.83$ for experimental group and $M = 6.70$ for experimental group on the 'Situational Learning Checklist'. The experimental group performed slightly higher than the control group before intervention. Therefore, a test of significance was applied to determine the significant difference in the groups.

Table No. 7. *Independent sample t-test for pretest of control and experimental groups for Situational Learning*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Score	Equal variances assumed	1.290	.261	2.870	58	.006	1.800
	Equal variances not assumed			2.870	55.77	.006	1.800

A *t-test* for independent sample was calculated to determine the significant difference in the control and experimental groups before the intervention on the scores of Situational Learning Checklist, and it was revealed that with $t = 2.87 (58)$, $p = .261 > .05$, there was no significant difference in the groups, and they were almost equal in Situational learning before intervention.

Table No. 8: *Group statistics for the post test comparison of control and experimental groups for Situational Learning*

Group Statistics					
Score	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Experimental	30	32.20	3.100	.566
	Control	30	13.45	1.245	.227

Table 8 discloses group statistics of post test of control and experimental groups after the intervention of introducing theatrical skills. The groups have $M = 32.20$ for experimental group and $M = 13.45$ for the control group on the 'Situational Learning Checklist'. Values identify that teaching through theatrical skills enhanced preservice teachers' situational learning. To establish the substantial effect of the experiment, a test of significance was applied.

Table No. 9. *Independent sample t-test for post test of control and experimental groups for Situational Learning*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Score	Equal variances assumed	24.356	.000	32.075	58	.000	19.56
	Equal variances not assumed			32.075	38.1	.000	19.56

A t-test for independent samples was calculated to determine the significant difference between the control and experimental groups after the intervention. Table 9 revealed that with $t = 32.075$ (58) and $p = .000 < .05$, there was a significant difference in the groups' performance in Situational Learning, as measured by the 'Situational Learning Checklist'. The second null hypothesis, stating that there is no significant difference in the situational learning of pre-service teachers taught with theatrical skills and those taught with the traditional method, was also rejected with strong evidence.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings of the current research support many previous studies, such as Phelps (2021), Schwencke et al. (2021), and Gillette and McNish (2023), who have used theatrical skills to improve students' pronunciation, enunciation, vocabulary, and language fluency. The study at hand has provided evidence that students are more engaged, pleasant, and active during drama classes, participating enthusiastically. Adopting different characters from real life and imitating their actions and accents enables them to adapt to new situations and become sensitized to human nature and concerns. The findings support the concept of language teaching through drama and dialogue (Özdemýr & Çakmak, 2008; Lee, Patall, Cawthon & Steingut, 2015; Kardas & Koch, 2017; Kumar, Qasim, Mansur & Shah, 2022) to prepare students for future life and future teaching, which require clear, concise, and fluent communication. The study suggests that theatrical skills may be incorporated and integrated into teachers' training programs and their professional development activities to make them confident in the use of language for teaching purposes.

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