

Teaching outside the Teaching Machine: Analyzing and Adopting Geoffrey Kendal's Approach towards English Plays

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Introduction

English Language Teaching is younger than the desire to learn English in Indians. Many methods of English language teaching have been developed in less than a century. This paper is written based on an experiment done at the GLA University Mathura to teach English language to select students of B.Tech. Second Year, Mechanical Engineering.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first part deals with an approach developed by Geoffrey Kendal. This approach maintains that training in theatre can be a tool for teaching English. The second part reports, elaborates and analyses the experiment done to teach English to students with the help of the approach explained in part one.

English plays are more often read as play-texts in Indian schools, colleges and universities rather than as stage-texts. When the students of English literature write about the plays, the resultant is mere textual comprehension, instead of the theatrical one. Such a practice mars the appreciation of the genius of the

playwrights. In this context, the British director-actor Geoffrey Kendal (1909 – 1998) and his professional repertory theatre company, *Shakespeareana's* methods of introducing English plays, specifically Shakespearean plays, to the educational institutes of India could be seen as an essential supplement for the comprehension of English plays. Generating the discourse of teaching outside the teaching machine by allowing it to re-acquire its interdisciplinary nature, Kendal has thus served a purpose of initiating fresh discussions in the recent times. A student of literature feels lacking in sufficient tools of understanding if s/he seeks to remain within her/his own discipline. The way one approaches the social sciences for answering various unsolved questions, s/he may also have to consult the performative aspect for similar reasons.

Tale of the Locale

In the first half of the British rule, India observed the first staged version of English plays. The performance of Shakespearean plays in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1770 and in Calcutta (now Kolkata) can be treated as

the first few examples of performing English Plays in India by the professional English troupes. But these plays have very modest influence on the Indian viewers. In 1822, through the performance of some celebrated scenes from various plays of Shakespeare in Dhurrumtollah Academy, Kolkata, Indians got the opportunity to enact English plays. In 1817, Serampore College and Hindu College were established in Bengal Province. Forty years later, in 1857 three universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were established. These institutions basically were the prototypes of their British counterparts, specifically, the University of London. Though at that time the people of India were familiar with the enactment of English plays, the performative aspects of the dramas mentioned in the syllabi were overlooked. The fact that the Indians bare the pride of upholding the heritage of their predecessors, can be found in the contemporary scenario where the respective universities follow this tradition of negligence. Interestingly enough the relation between English Plays and Indian audience has always been confined within the affluent, aristocrat, upper or upper-middle class society. In India, the students of English as L2 has never been able to get the exposure of the performance of the plays mentioned in the syllabi of their respective courses. In this scenario, the tour of Geoffrey Kendal with his professional repertory theatre company, "Shakespeareana" as the first British professional theatre company was of great significance. It exhumed English plays from the theatre halls and the drawing rooms of the upper-class and

unveiled him to the common Indian mass through their pan Indian performances; especially in Indian schools and colleges.

Achievements of Kendal

The performance of the English plays was much needed for the Indian audience. This was needed not simply to get right entertainment, but also to see those plays performed with the flavour of their original British context. It is interesting to note that Kendal had never been appreciated in his home-land as a great director of Shakespearean plays. But to the Indian audience and most prominently to the young Indian people he associated with his troupe, the impact of the man could never be undermined. Taking English Plays specifically, Shakespearean plays to the educational institutes he played a highly significant role of preparing the young minds so that they might look at them in a specific way. In a television interview (Beautiful People, CNBC TV 18, 2012), the famous Indian stage-actor and film personality, Nasiruddin Shah has clearly expressed his debts to Kendal in receiving the performative knowledge of Shakespearean plays. When Shah came in contact with the members of Shakespeareana, he was very young having his early dreams of being a professional actor. The spirit and zeal of professionalism in taking Shakespeare to the theatre aspirants seemed extra-ordinary to Shah and for this at the heart of his heart he made Kendal his theatrical guru.

Much earlier in 1947 and almost in a similar context, an identical thing happened with

another renowned theatre and film personality of India, Utpal Dutt who fell in love of Kendal during the visit of Shakespeareana to the St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. Dutt, a promising student of the college at that time had his own small troupe of amateur artists producing *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*. This troupe called "The Young Shakespeareans" also tried their level best to stage *Richard III* in their college which was seen by Kendal and his family. This was the event which allowed Dutt to come closer to Kendal and learn the art of Shakespeare production at his feet. However, the training he received at the Shakespeareana was not a very easy one. It was not for him to simply to read and memorize the plays and perform them on the stage. Kendal was an extremely disciplined teacher who perhaps believed in the totality of the theatrical production and wanted to train his pupils beginning from sweeping the stage till the final nods to the audience at the end of each performance. He happened to be an ardent advocate in giving heart and soul to theatre by letting his associates know every meticulous detail of all aspects of the stage-craft. The regimentation he brought to his team was sometimes extremely harsh to the individuals and Dutt too received furious treatments from Kendal. Gradually, he grew up showing every sign of development as a seasoned actor. In her essay, "Shakespeareana to Shakespeare Wallah: Selling or Doing Shakespeare in India", Paramita Dutta describes the cordial relation between Kendal and Dutt:

A pioneering figure of modern Indian

theatre and National Award winning actor, Utpal Dutt, who had been awarded the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship for contribution to theatre in 1990, had worked with the Kendals in the beginning of his tryst with theatre. His association with them began the first time they had come to Calcutta in 1947, and then again in 1953 when they called him to join them at Madras for their India and Pakistan tour. In an interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay, Dutt claims to have learnt all the rules and methods of a professional repertory company from the Kendals and said that their theory of carrying everything with them on their tour was the correct theory. He had learnt from them that "There is no art without discipline and no discipline without sacrifice." Dutt even dedicated his book *Shakespearer Samajchetana* (1972) to Geoffrey Kendal, proclaiming him to be his "guru" one who had trained him to act Shakespeare. (124)

At the time of writing the obituary of Kendal, Kuldip Singh perfectly portrays the uniqueness of this actor-director. This piece of writing also gives us the vivid description of the "Indian Chapter" of *Shakespeareana*. Singh Writes:

For two generations of schoolchildren – now in their fifties – Kendal's Shakespeareana Company provided them their first introduction to the Bard.

.....He had begun his theatrical career treading the boards of repertory companies across England those were

shrinking fast, but he never gave up. He performed at boarding schools, colleges, small town squares - wherever anyone was willing to defray basic costs, from the turbulent North West Frontier Province now in Pakistan in the north to the sylvan settings of Ooty in the south. In its meanderings his troupe slept on crowded station platforms, suffering privations even the most dedicated of actors would have happily foresworn.

When money was tight Kendal's retinue travelled third class by rail, which in India has always been nothing short of a nightmare. (N Pag)

'Why' follow Kendal?

Generally in India, plays are read and discussed in the classroom rather than performed. This is due to the fact that our educational system is more prone to give degrees to the students through the process of allowing them pass through examinations. One has to write on the plays, especially the students of literature to express their knowledge of the texts, which to them as well as to their teachers are nothing more than letters printed on page. The actual appreciation of the genius of the playwright is nevertheless left out in such a practice. A student of literature feels lacking in sufficient tools whenever he or

she seeks to remain within its own discipline. The text printed on a page itself poses various challenges to the reader for which suitable answers need to be sought in various other texts which may not belong to that very discipline. To appreciate a play in a better way, one may also take refuge to the discipline of performance. Though English plays entered into literature classrooms almost hand in hand with the introduction of English language in India, the very necessary training of performing the plays perhaps came much later. I would not claim here that Geoffrey Kendal and his Shakespeareana has taught our academia the performance of English plays for the first time, but I have no hesitation at all in putting forward my opinion that he was the one who felt the necessity of teaching English plays through performance.

Response to Kendal's Stimuli

The application of the proposed theory is done with a particular set of students at the GLA University, Mathura. The authors have done this experimental training with B. Tech. (Mechanical Engineering), Second Year students of Section F. Section F had the majority of students who may be either termed as 'slow learners' or, factually stated, they were the students with below average marks in the university examinations of spoken as well as written English.

Initially, a test was conducted with around 30 students of the class. Following is the result of the language test:

S. No.	Skills observed	Maximum marks (Out of 10)	Minimum marks (Out of 10)	Average marks (Out of 10)
1.	Use of correct simple sentences	7.25	1.5	4.9
2.	Use of correct complex/compound sentences	5.0	0.25	3.9
3.	Use of proper lexical items	4.75	1.25	3.8
4.	Pronunciation	7.5	1.5	4.9
5.	Error free sentences	6.5	1.5	4.8

Chart 1: The Table of Marks of the 30 Students in the Beginning of the Semester

It can be clearly observed that in each of the five parameters the average marks of the group are less than 50% of the maximum marks. An analysis of the minimum marks shows that they are less than 20% of the maximum marks. Referring to the use of proper lexical items, it can be said that most of the students could hardly use any adjective beyond 'good', 'bad' and 'great'. The frequency of using adverbs is even worse than the usage of the adjectives.

This is to be noted here that the course in which the students were registered had an input of 'skit presentations' in the syllabus. The course code AHE 3083 taught to the third semester students had around 3 contact hours for the skit presentation. The 30 students referred here attended and performed in the 3 contact hours allotted for the activity. The 10 students (preferably those who scored less in the test) out of these 30 students were given extra inputs on practice and performing scenes from the following three plays:

- i. *Macbeth* of William Shakespeare
- ii. *Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare
- iii. *Chakravyuha* by Ratan Thiyam

Here is a brief introduction of the scenes enacted as the part of this experiment:

The Banquet Scene of *Macbeth* (Act II, Scene IV) is one of the most significant scenes of the play with the dialogues like:

"the feast is sold
That is not often vouch'd, while 'tis a-making," (n pag)
and
"Blood hath been shed ere now, i' the olden time,
Ere human statute purged the gentle weal;
Ay, and since too, murders have been perform'd
Too terrible for the ear: the times have been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again,

With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
 And push us from our stools: this is more strange
 Than such a murder is.” (n. pag)

The Banquet Scene proves to be one of the most powerful and moving scenes of the play. Once the students were out of the burden of English learning, their natural play came into act. They performed some parts of the scene really well both at the time of practice as well as the time of the final performance. The performance was followed by a discussion. The Court Scene of *The Merchant of Venice* (Act IV, Scene I) was the second piece that was enacted by the students. The efforts made and confidence gained during the first performance was quintessentially visible at the time of performing the Court Scene. The

performance once again was followed by a discussion. The third but perhaps the most important performance was of the English translation of the Manipuri play, *Chakravyuha* (1984) by Ratan Thiyam. Thiyam’s *Chakravyuha* exploits the story of Abhimanyu’s assassination from the *Mahabharata* to depict the contemporary socio-political scenario. Abhimanyu, the protagonist, represents an individual who succumbs to the social machinery and his assassins the *Saptarathis* (seven charioteers), the social system. Often this play has been related with the insult and denial of civil rights experienced by the Manipuris at the hands of the state machinery empowered by the ‘Armed Forces Special Power Act’. The students were given the specific parts of the play to practice and perform.

Once the training sessions and performances were over, a test on spoken English was conducted and the result was surprising.

S. No.	Skills observed	Maximum marks (Out of 10)	Minimum marks (Out of 10)	Average marks (Out of 10)
1.	Use of correct simple sentences	9.5	3.5	6.9
2.	Use of correct Complex/ compound sentences	7.5	3.5	5.9
3.	Use of proper lexical items	5.5	2.5	4.1
4.	Pronunciation	7.5	2.75	6.3
5.	Error Free Sentences	7.5	4.5	5.9

Chart 1.1: The Table of Marks of the 30 Students at the time of the Conclusion of the Semester

The result of the select ten students is worth analysing here. The analysis falls in line with the goal of the paper. The result shows the improvement of the spoken and other related skills of these 10 students:

S. No.	Skills observed	Maximum marks (Out of 10) (Before - After)	Minimum marks (Out of 10) (Before - After)	Average marks (Out of 10) (Before - After)
1.	Use of correct simple sentences	2.5 – 6.5	1.5 – 4.5	2.2 – 5.5
2.	Use of correct Complex/compound sentences	1.0 – 4.2	0.25 – 3.5	0.8 – 3.9
3.	Use of proper lexical items	2.5 – 5.8	1.25 – 2.5	1.9 – 3.9
4.	Pronunciation	4.7 – 5.7	1.5-2.75	2.9 – 4.0
5.	Error Free Sentences	4.4 – 6.7	1.5 – 4.5	3.9 – 5.1

Chart 1.2: The Table of Marks of the 10 Students in the Beginning and at the end of the Semester

Some of the important points to be observed are:

- a. The difference between the average marks under the category 'The use of the correct simple sentence' for the entire group is 2.0 whereas; for the ten students, it is 3.3. It is undoubtedly clear that these ten students have learnt the correct use of the simple sentences much better than their other counterparts.
- b. The difference between the average marks under the category 'The use of the correct complex/compound sentence' for the entire group is 2.0 whereas for the 10 students it is 3.1.
- c. The difference between the average marks under the category 'The use of the correct lexical items' for the entire group is 0.3 whereas for the 10 students it is 2.0
- d. The difference between the average marks under the category 'Error free correction' for the entire group is 1.4 whereas for the 10 students it is 1.1.
- e. Under the category 'Pronunciation' the average growth of the entire class was better than the average growth of these ten students. It may be understood that pronunciation is an act that requires longer duration to be improved as it deals with many other aspects which are not the part of this paper.
- f. The difference between the average marks under the category 'Error free correction' for the entire group is 1.1 whereas for the 10 students it is 1.2.
- g. Some other data that were recorded were a clear shift in the 'managerial skills' and in the 'confidence level' of the students selected for the experiment.

Conclusion

Kendal's inception as a brand is essential for the globalized Indian mass to preserve their linguistic dignity: to preserve the Indian English from linguisticism (meaning, linguistic genocide; as Tove-Skutnabb Kangas terms it).

The analysis in this paper has succeeded in showing:

- a. How English can be taught with the help of a training in theatre.
- b. How students can be given additional input simultaneously with the teaching of English.
- c. There is need to revisit the kind of teaching of English Language is being done, particularly at the engineering colleges across India.

Loss of formality (breached by words and expressions like 'wanna', 'gonna' and so on in the glitch of linguistic matrix) – a tug-of-war between British and American dictums of English can lead to a resulting 'no zone'. The performance aids the students to minimize different types of Communication Barrier in L2 (as analysed in this paper). Being a facilitator in diverse dramatic events in the institution, even a teacher earns cultural and managerial skills

through multi-personal and multi-situational cases thus getting acknowledged as a director – an identity more dynamic than just a 'trainer'.

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