Drama as a Practical Medium for Japanese Students of English[#]

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Abstract

This paper considers the utility of drama in language classes, especially for cultivating positive attitudes towards language learning and promoting communication skills in English. Following a brief discussion of the background to university general English courses, based on first-hand teaching experience, the significance and implications of drama as an aid to language learning are examined. Lastly, applications of drama techniques and practical drama activities suitable for Japanese university English classes are presented.

1. Introduction: University general English courses

In recent years, English language education aiming at students acquiring practical communication skills has become common in Japanese schools at all levels. This trend is seen in the requirement for university students (even non-English majors) to attend compulsory English classes.

Compulsory English classes for non-English majors often contain a large number of students with a wide range of abilities and a relatively low motivation to learn English. Under these circumstances, it can be particularly difficult to persuade reserved and low-level students to speak and participate spontaneously.

To lessen their anxiety and hesitation, as well as to encourage them to speak English, various techniques and approaches can be employed. Drama techniques seem to be especially effective in raising students' confidence, which may lead to increased general motivation to learn English.

2. Drama in language teaching

2.1. Conventional Drama vs. Drama techniques

When they hear the words 'drama in education', most people first imagine traditional drama, namely the study and performance of a theatrical play (Dougill, 1987): a class or school event where students memorize assigned lines, rehearse, and perform on the stage for an audience. The main emphasis is placed on production. However, Nixson (1982) and Heathcote (1984) see drama in education as an effective teaching instrument to enhance social, intellectual and linguistic development of students regardless of subject, with emphasis placed on the *learning process* rather than production. Heathcote (1984: 158) describes the difference as follows:

> ' ... *in the theatre everything is contrived so that the audience gets the kicks.*
> *In the classroom the participants get the kicks. However, the tools are the*
> *same: the elements of theatre craft.* '

Drama in language teaching, therefore, does not only focus on performing a play in the target language but emphasizes the techniques or process of drama production, including so-called communicative-approach activities such as role-playing, problem-solving, and simulation (Wessels, 1987). These elements of modern language teaching methodology have long been part of the theatrical process (Smith, 1984), and many agree that drama in language learning can aid students in their educational development. Teachers should, therefore, be prepared to draw on a repertoire of drama techniques to assist students in acquiring necessary social as well as language skills in a meaningful way.

2.2. The value of drama techniques

The many advantages of drama in language teaching have been expounded by a number of authors (see, for example, Burke et al., 2002; Whiteson, 1996; Rinvolucri, 1995; Klippel, 1985; Ur, 1981.) For the purposes of the present paper, four aspects of Japanese university students' learning styles will be discussed, based on first-hand teaching experience: (i) the fundamental concept of drama in language learning; (ii) developing analytical ability and responsibility for learning; (iii) promoting collaborative attitudes; and (iv) awareness of nonverbal communication.

2.2.1. The fundamental concept of drama in language learning

First and foremost, the central component of drama is 'communication.' Smith (1984) regards language learners in the classroom as equivalent to actors in theatre, as both share the same ultimate goal of communicating intended meanings effectively, while playing certain roles in limited situations, and the goal is often achieved through various types of interaction with others. Heathcote (1984) points out that incorporating drama techniques into the language classroom naturally creates situations in which learners are required to have precise communication. Moreover, this provides excellent opportunities to perceive the world from different perspectives through direct experience in imaginary situations, as well as to use the target language in a meaningful way. However, it should be noted that teachers cannot simply establish acting situations in the classroom and ask students to perform. Appropriate means and contexts must be supplied if students are to communicate effectively.

2.2.2. Developing analytical ability and responsibility for learning

Another important aspect of the process of drama production is a 'situation and role analysis.' When assigned an acting situation with roles, actors first need to analyze the situation thoroughly to identify the appropriate characters. This is done by asking various questions of themselves, such as 'What is the setting?' 'What is happening?' 'What are my objectives?' In other words, actors must " *move beyond the surface of the words to make sense of what is being said"* (Whiteson, 1996: 89). To implement this in-depth analysis, interpretation skills such as insight into human nature, creativity, critical thinking, and appropriate judgment are indispensable to successful acting.

A large number of Japanese university students seem to be lacking in these skills needed to deal with problems in creative ways, regardless their English proficiency. While a lack of relevant research prevents clear identification of the causes, one of the reasons may be their pre-existing learning styles developed through Japan's formal English education system, characterized by classes where memorization of linguistic patterns and grammatical rules is emphasized and students have few opportunities to express their own opinions. Situation and role analysis seem to be very useful strategies to foster these underdeveloped skills and to help Japanese university students become more independent and autonomous learners. The key point is to assign different roles to individuals within a group so that each will study his or her own role in depth, taking full responsibility for special contribution to group work at a

later stage.

2.2.3. Promoting collaborative attitudes

After situation and role analysis, the next step is evaluating the appropriateness of each student's character interpretation. An individual's interpretation may be unsuitable for a given situation, and Smith (1974) suggests that an effective means of modifying inappropriate interpretations is to seek advice and feedback from group members, who have mutual goals as a group. This also strengthens group solidarity and helps students concentrate on the coherence of their story. Moreover, from a pedagogical viewpoint, group work in the language classroom offers numerous advantages for both teachers and students: for example, increasing the opportunity to practice the target language through interaction in a less-threatening atmosphere; enabling effective handling of large classes with greatly varying levels; and allowing different groups of learners to conduct different tasks in the same class (Harmer, 1991).

On the other hand, one of the concerns with group work, especially in monolingual contexts, is the use of the mother tongue by students. Due to the limits of their English proficiency, most non-English majors are unable to continue speaking in English when sophisticated discussion becomes necessary. Ideally, students should engage in all activities in the target language. However, even if group work falls short of this ideal, at least students are gaining opportunities to promote social and intellectual skills through interaction with others through: for instance, expressing their own opinions and criticizing others in a constructive manner. Some use of the mother tongue is therefore unavoidable, but permissible.

2.2.4. Awareness of nonverbal communication

The final point to note is the significance of nonverbal communication, which includes gesture, facial expression, eye contact, spatial arrangement and tone of voice (See Tohyama, 1993: 45). Such nonverbal communication conveys our emotions towards others. Forms of nonverbal communication can vary in different cultural contexts. Consequently, knowing and understanding various aspects of nonverbal communication is a crucial factor for better communication and human relationships.

Language learners are apt to focus on only linguistic aspects in the classroom. As Maley (1987) points out, this might be partly due to lack of detailed information in course books,

where feelings expressed or gestures made are not usually taught along with dialogues. However, emotions in controlled social settings cannot be easily expressed by understanding written instructions, as people's moods or feelings naturally emerge from genuine communication.

Smith (1974) mentions that actors continually attempt to empathize with their characters to increase their understanding of the perceptions, feelings and physical behaviour of the characters. These empathic skills are developed as part of the continuing role-analysis mentioned above, and in the performance stage. Performance, which involves physical behaviour, is a significant aid for language learners in gaining awareness of aspects of nonverbal communication.

However, the practice of performance is not necessarily acting only for a play. It can be introduced in general English classes as a supplemental task, such as in *The Meeting* (Whiteson, 1996: 94), *Handshakes* (Maley and Duff, 1982: 39), and *Guess the situation* (Dougill, 1987: 14), all of which are focused on raising awareness of non-verbal communication.

3. The application of drama techniques to English teaching: A drama project

The utility of drama techniques in the language classroom is illustrated with reference to a small-scale drama project that has been successfully employed in English classes at TBGU. Groups of students are asked to analyze a given situation, determine appropriate roles, write scripts over a couple of class sessions and perform their own ten-minute plays as an end semester test. The basic step-by-step procedure follows.

3.1. Forming groups

First of all, the class needs to be divided into small groups. There are many ways of forming groups, but the majority of students seem to favour selecting group members on their own rather than having them assigned by an instructor.

Concerning a suitable group size for the activities, more than seven students can be an obstacle and may create a threatening atmosphere, especially for reserved students. Harmer (1991: 246) suggests that having an odd number in each group is an excellent idea because it makes 'split decisions' impossible and encourages discussion in problem solving. Thus, groups of five or seven seem to work fine for the activities.

3.2. Assigning acting situations

The next step is to assign an acting situation, but without detailed role-descriptions and dialogues. The reason why roles are not specified is to provide students with opportunities to identify appropriate characters through empathy, role analysis and discussions with group members. The theme of the situation is designed to be relevant to the students' language learning experience, so that they can make effective use of previously taught vocabulary, structure, as they create the script. The instructor therefore prepares several acting situations based on previous lessons, so that the members of each group can select one they regard as the most suitable for it.

3.3. Creating scripts

Creating their own scripts can be one of the most difficult tasks for students, but it has great potential for creative language production and development. For instance, rather than following controlled dialogues often seen in course books, students are encouraged: (ⅰ) to produce genuine language needed for a given situation; (ⅱ) to focus on the spoken style of English; and (ⅲ) to connect the new language with their own real life experience through interaction with group members.

Having a written script provides a format for students to obtain the instructor's support during preparation periods and offers security during the actual performance for those who cannot recall lines and are not able to paraphrase or improvise. For these reasons, a complete version of the script must be submitted prior to the performance.

It is very significant that each student should have a more or less equal involvement in the play. Thus, one member should not dominate the performance in a major leading role, nor should other students disappear in minor supporting roles. Allocating more than two roles to one member or dividing a major role into two parts could be a solution. Also, due to the scale of the activities, the appropriate length of a whole script should be kept in mind: approximately 4-5 pages with 15 lines per page appears to be optimal.

Preparations and rehearsals should be conducted over several classes with the instructor's frequently monitoring and advising groups. Especially when groups create humorous scripts, inappropriate expressions or over-exaggerated acting can damage the creativity and value of the performance. Therefore, care must be taken with suggestions or corrections to guide students appropriately without inhibiting their spontaneous learning and creativity.

3.4. Setting up a strain-free performance environment

Few Japanese university students are confident performing publicly in Japanese, much less acting in another language in front of their peers. One solution for this is to have each group perform only in front of the instructor without any other groups present. This freedom of pressure from an audience of peers seems to enable many students, especially the weaker and shyer ones to become more confident in their use of English. In addition, an empty classroom provides each group with sufficient room to perform in a dynamic way.

The use of supplementary items such as costumes, props and music is actively encouraged: they make performances more effective and realistic and help students to focus on the situational and nonverbal aspects of the states they are portraying.

3.5. Evaluation

Due to the nature of drama, it is not necessary to evaluate students' success in terms of their oral accuracy only. Students are therefore evaluated based on a complete version of the script (group evaluation) and on their performance in the play (individual evaluation). The criteria differ according to the composition and character of a class and the individual talents and limitations of the students: for example, the amount of work students involved and suitability of dialogues for a give situation. The students are clearly informed of the evaluation system at an early stage of the activities so that each student is motivated to co-operate with group members and to take responsibility for his or her own learning.

4. Conclusion

Drama techniques have great potential as useful teaching strategies in Japanese university English classes because they can help to overcome the problem of large mixed-ability classes by having students work as small coherent groups. Students can develop creative collaboration with others and responsibility for learning overall. Drama-based English language activities establish a creative framework for communication, which allows students to experience and explore the new language in real-life situations. It is emphasized that there is no need for instructors to become theatre directors, training students to act: the main purpose of drama is communication. As Wessels (1987: 11) points out, the use of drama in the

classroom involves a consideration of aspects of communication, including paralinguistic features (gesture, body language, facial expression), which are often overlooked in conventional language classes. Training in the use of these nonverbal features helps students to achieve the ability to communicate more effectively. Furthermore, they can also be a significant support for self-expression, especially for reserved and lower-level students. Qualification of the extent to which drama techniques can improve students' communicative language ability requires further research.

Acknowledgements

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