

Drama and English Language Teaching : Their Interaction in the Learning Process

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Introduction

A growing number of Japanese students have become less able to concentrate during oral English lessons, especially those not majoring in English. I believe that the present economic and social problems plaguing Japan and the world have direct and indirect effects on the students' behavior. Since there is little or nothing we teachers can do to remedy this situation, refreshing the English language "menu" with more active tasks may be a way to enliven the classroom atmosphere and stir motivation in the students.

When we think on how people acquire their native language, we turn to children as good examples. They practice repeating, imitating, and mimicking sounds, words and meaningful activities that are always contextualized. The important factor is that everything they do is purposeful. Facial actions alone or together with body movements naturally accompany their verbal production. It seems certain that we all acquire our native language in a "dramatic" context from the very first moment. Thus, making use of dramatics, language acquisition and learning procedures can be made more effective in a less academic fashion. Such effectiveness lies in students performing a drama in which they duplicate sociocultural situations where people's speech and behavior reflect their thoughts and feelings. I envision a curriculum that includes activities that ask for action from the students, thus fixing vocabulary and structures that have been learned cognitively and solidifying the learners' English ability and actual proficiency.

Learning to speak a foreign language is more than just learning the vocabulary and grammar. Haven't we often met Japanese speakers deliver an English sentence in such a way that, although the words selected and used in it and the grammatical construction may be perfect, it is incomprehensible to a native resident in an English-speaking country? This happens because the sentence was uttered lacking the proper pronunciation, intonation, stresses, and rhythm that are characteristic of that language. If these Japanese speakers had been trained to project their voices and personalities, i.e., if they had been trained in some dramatic context to speak with "feeling," they would have been understood.

Emotion is at the heart of every thought and action. Emotional factors explain both success and failure in the language acquisition process. By understanding and controlling such factors, young and adult learners can improve comfortably their English skills. Let me briefly go over some steps that explain identity development and the implications of affective factors. It is believed that, as Alexander Guiora (1972) indicated, a person develops an identity in reference to the language

he* speaks. One's self-identity is formed as one's language and ego develop. Since the child's ego is flexible in its growing process, the acquisition of a new language does not inhibit the ego and adaptation is done in a relatively smooth way. We see innumerable cases of children born in Western and other Asian countries relocating to Japan. These children acquire Japanese, i.e., the language and all the cultural aspects that come with it in a very natural way no matter what they think of the Japanese at that moment. The physical and emotional changes of puberty, however, give rise to a defensive mechanism in which the language ego, which is part of self-identity, develops a reflex of rejection toward a new language. Very often foreign teenagers who move to Japan and attempt to learn Japanese at this age have to fight their inhibitions when they speak in that language. Another affective factor that deserves mention in language learning is the role of attitudes. Young children, who have not developed attitudes toward races, cultures, classes of people, stereotypes of people or prejudiced images of languages, rapidly and naturally learn a foreign language. When they reach school age, they acquire attitudes toward the people who speak the second language and toward the second language itself. It is not surprising that the attitudes adolescents and adults bring with them affect their success in learning a second language. We can't forget that other factors condition a learner. Intrinsic factors, i.e., personality factors such as empathy, self-esteem, extroversion, inhibition as well as extrinsic factors, i.e., sociocultural variables which also influence in various ways the learning process of an individual. Since, in the Japanese educational system, the learning of English starts in adolescence, the teacher, aware of the notions of personality variables, can or should directly tell the students that people who venture to learn a new language and wish to reach a desirable level of mastery have to be willing to turn themselves into actors and actresses, acquiring a "second identity" when engaging in some learning activities.

Let's consider an example of how the notion of the use of drama in the classroom can be utilized in practical directions. Here is a very simple two-sentence dialogue:

Mary: John, come here. (She looks at John, raises her arm and beckons him with her hand).

John: In a minute.

This is a meaningful, contextualized authentic example of communication. In this dialogue, the grammar structure used shows the command Mary is making. It is accompanied by gesture that among English-speaking people means "come to where I am." In John's answer the words "I will come" are deleted. The shortened form "In a minute" is commonly used in daily conversation.

The advantages of utilizing drama are numerous. First, the students not only gain an understanding of a grammatical structure in context but also experience how the language is used to inform, command, request, persuade, and so on. They learn the dynamic aspect of a language which is the function of the sentences in that specific context. At the same time, reading and acting practices expose the students to the "melody" that characterizes the English language. Second, they experience physical actions that may accompany utterances. And third, a drama introduces cultural aspects of the language and the people who use it.

I suggest four types of drama activities in English conversation classes. They range from making

* In this article I have used *he* and *his* to designate persons of both sexes.

use of minimal language skills to longer and more complex utterances commonly used in daily conversation.

I . Minidramas

Minidrama, a short drama, is presented initially in the command form. Here is an example of a minidrama.

1. This is a bus. You are a passenger and you are a driver.
2. The bus door opens. Passenger, look at the driver and ask, "Excuse me. Does this bus go to University Avenue?"
3. Driver, look at the passenger and say, "You have to transfer at Mason Street."
4. Passenger, get the purse, open it and ask, "How much is the fare?"
5. Driver, look at the passenger and say, "One-twenty. Exact change."
6. Passenger, hand the money to the driver and ask, "Can you tell me when we get to 42nd Street?"
7. Driver, point at the fare box and say, "Sure thing. Put your money here."
8. Passenger, drop the money in the fare box and say, "Thank you."
9. Driver, say, "Transfer to the number 9 or K bus at 42nd Street."
10. Passenger, close the purse.
11. Driver, give a transfer to the passenger and say, "Keep the transfer to show the driver."
12. Passenger, get the transfer and say, "Yes, thank you very much."

Minidramas initiate the students into roleplaying and improvised conversations. The educational value of this activity lies in the combination of acting in response to commands with a story line incorporated. Through the above activity, it is possible to teach and/or review grammatical structures such as: "Does this bus go to ...?", "Can you tell me when we get to ...?"; new vocabulary like "fare", "fare box", "transfer"; conversational expressions like "Sure thing.", "Exact change."; the word order commonly used in conversation: "number 9 bus", for which Japanese students tend to say "9 number bus". This minidrama presents a basic survival context any visitor to the United States has to cope with when using the bus. The task provides cultural information and gives the teacher the chance to briefly explain the public transportation systems in the United States. He can show the students a map and explain that subways or commuter trains are found in heavily populated metropolitan areas such as New York, Washington D.C., Chicago, San Francisco, but not in Los Angeles, and mention the few cities such as Portland or San Francisco which have streetcars or light-rail transit systems. The function of taxis could also be mentioned. Geographical knowledge can be informally furnished here. (I have observed that Japanese students do need to be instructed where major cities are located in the world.) This classroom task consequently gives opportunities for the students to compare the transportation systems in Japan and in the United States.

When applying a minidrama, the following points should be kept in mind.

(1) Based on the premise that although the language level of the student may be in the developmental stage, (a common type of learner in today's college classrooms) his intellectual capacity is not that of a child. It is the teacher's job to respect the student's cognitive competence and need for helpful information, making him practice real situations he may have to face when using English. Therefore, basic survival contexts should be first considered as the plot. The teacher

should help the learners build their confidence to use English in these contexts. Then, later, as time permits, any other situation of interest to the student could be used. The selected situation should preferably be expressed in simple words in English. However, depending on the students' level, a brief explanation may have to be done in Japanese. If this is the case, it should be followed by the same explanation in English (students should be trained to listen to explanations in the target language).

(2) Whatever grammatical structure or vocabulary is being taught, the utterances have to be authentic language, a contextualized example of communication. Structures and vocabulary items can be presented in the context of the drama itself through actions demonstrated by the teacher when the minidrama is shown to the students for the first time. When actions cannot clarify meaning, an explanation using simple words in English should be tried. If not successful, simple and brief comments of all the dialogue in the entire drama should be given in Japanese, to make sure the students can relate the utterances to the appropriate speaker. If Japanese has to be used, the equivalent of each utterance in the drama rather than a word-for-word translation should be given.

(3) The commands should function as the listening component of the listen-act/speak. With lower-level students, they should usually be longer than one utterance. For example: Passenger, get the purse, open it and say, "You have to transfer at Mason Street."

(4) Preparing and bringing the props that appear in the minidrama may sound simple, but it is a time-consuming job and sometimes costly. Props do not necessarily have to be the actual objects. For example, a stapler could be used instead of a ticket punch, a book instead of a tray, etc.

The actual application starts with the following step.

(5) When demonstrating the minidrama, it is recommended that the script be recorded so that the teacher has his hands free. As the tape plays, the teacher acts out the roles three or four times. The teacher has to make sure all students can see his mouth and his gestures.

(6) The entire group repeats each segment three or four times. Each segment is acted out by the teacher before the group repetition.

(7) The teacher asks one student to be the reader of the script and selects an able student to come to the front of the room to take one role. The teacher takes the other role. The able student and the teacher act out the minidrama as the reader reads the script. Only the reader will have the script. The teacher will dramatize the actions and encourage the student to dramatize the utterances and gestures as in a real-life situation.

(8) This procedure is followed at least one more time. The teacher will then take the role he didn't play the previous time.

(9) The class is divided into groups, and one script is given to each group. The reader of each group will direct both the speech and action segments. All groups will perform at the same time in different corners of the classroom. Each member of the group will experience playing every part, as well as being the reader. While this practice is being conducted, the teacher will move around the class and help the less able students and encourage dramatization (voice projection, expressing feelings and using actions) in their performance.

(10) Scripts are finally passed out to all students for a clear understanding of the dramatized situation.

II. Role-playing simple dialogues

Although the dialogues often used in oral English lessons are also minidramas, they do not have the commands. They contain the essential dramatic elements: plot, characters, action. They do not usually exceed 20 lines—mostly greatly condensed, as they are written to highlight a grammatical structure, a vocabulary item or serve as a model of a communication context. The essential ingredient in dramatizing a dialogue is action. Reading a dialogue sitting at the desk will not produce the relevant and long-term results achieved when incorporating the appropriate physical behavior. Several experiments have proved that dialogue practiced with body movements is more effectively fixed in the mind. Since the dialogue segments are not long, incorporating action while reading should not demand too much on the students' part.

Coaching the students to dramatize a dialogue with varying emotions prepares them to express in the future their own thoughts in a way much closer to the usage of native speakers. Very few Japanese students project their voices in imitation of the way native speakers of English produce an utterance unless they are encouraged to do so by the teacher. The dialogue is usually read in a lifeless way, lacking the natural English rhythm and intonation, which is often the reason why Japanese speakers cannot make themselves understood when they use their English in an English-speaking country. I suggest that from time to time the teacher models an utterance accompanied by an appropriate physical action, e.g., "I said I'll call you tomorrow." speaking excitedly, then angrily, "He's so funny!" humorously and, later, sarcastically. This affords a good chance for Japanese students to try expressing emotions in ways not familiar to them in their native language and culture. Some students may discover an artistic self they did not know they had when expressing themselves and their feelings in a dramatized activity not in their native language. Whether they opt to actually use those facial and body movements when communicating in English in the future is up to them. They were at least shown how actions should accompany speech in English communication.

III. Creating, improvising conversations

More motivated students will find themselves stimulated by improvised conversation practices. More complex communication situations do not necessarily mean more complex language.

Most high school students come to college with very little ability to use the language in a real-life conversation. Some, however, were fortunate enough to acquire and develop language habits from dialogues and other related activities while learning grammatical structures; others just learned grammar patterns and memorized vocabulary. A class of uneven orally skilled students is the norm. Under this condition, the teacher has to adapt practice to the language ability the students already have and also to introduce new linguistic forms to help them communicate their own ideas and interests. The more orally accomplished students will use their skills and confidence to develop their own original dialogue using expressions and vocabulary previously learned in high school. The reticent group usually does not participate actively. This group includes students whose English is basically poor, and those whose English ability is average or good but who feel inhibited in speaking English because their English education emphasized mere knowledge accumulation rather

than practice sessions.

Conversation practice is conducted in pairs and small groups of no more than three students. Students may be divided based on simple random sampling, their ability levels or their common interests. The most common group arrangement, cooperative grouping, requires some degree of equality of skills as Hill (1982), and Johnson et al. (1981) have demonstrated in their research. I tried to form heterogeneous groups with members at various skill levels in the hope that higher-level students could function as model speakers to lower-level students in terms of motivation and incentive to improve their skills and reach a higher level of proficiency. The results were mostly disappointing as the less skilled students felt inhibited by their poor English, remaining silent or using only Japanese. Moreover, the skilled students felt uncomfortable building dialogues using more fluent English as they were often not understood by their partners. Thus, in any cooperative group arrangement, I try to pair and group students of a similar language level.

Before assigning improvised conversations, students should be engaged in guided practice, starting with mini-dialogues and then longer dialogues. Later, students are guided to create dialogues. It should be remembered that all the dialogues should be closely related to different socio-cultural situations; from simple greeting exchanges to situations such as taking the bus, ordering a soft drink, shopping at a supermarket or department store, etc. When practice is being conducted, it is normal procedure for teachers to help the learners understand the language items or notions within the communicative functions as well as the rationale for the formality, informality or appropriateness of the language in a particular situation. Teachers should at all times encourage the students to project their voices and use actions at the appropriate moments.

If most students in the class are highly-motivated or their English level is high enough to cope with improvised conversations, the teacher need only briefly suggest a situation and ask the students to dramatize it using not only language but also actions. Some suggested situations are: complimenting a close friend on his/her success, angrily disagreeing with a friend over an order given from the management of a company, asking, with a lot of concern, about some mutual friend who has been sick for several weeks, etc. Improvisational activities prompt the students to experience the pressure of the unpredictable in class as in real life. Responding to unpredictable situations leads students to think in English and prepares them for what they may actually have to face outside of class.

IV. Play-reading

Practice in reading daily conversation-like materials prepares the students for real language situations. The students have the opportunity to see in printed form actual English conversations which they might not have been able to understand if they had merely heard them. Such conversations are rich in linguistic examples such as shortened forms, deletions, colloquial expressions as well as how and when emotions are expressed in that particular situation. Besides, variations based on regional, social and emotional factors can be played. These reading materials range from classical and contemporary plays to skits for children and young adults, and screenplays. When selecting the materials, the teacher should, obviously, consider the students' interests and needs, but never forget to evaluate the language used in the dramatic piece, i.e., its structural

complexity and vocabulary. The playwright may be famous and the story well-known and enjoyed by the students when played and read in Japanese, but not suitable as teaching material in the English version because of its language and/or plot complexity and difficulty. Screenplays such as "Ghost" and "The Bodyguard" are popular among teenagers and young adults but may present problems if used with students whose vocabulary does not equal the actual language level of the production. Teachers should thus be cautious when selecting these materials. On the other hand, screenplays of a much more traditional nature for a much younger audience (e.g., "Anne of Green Gables", "The Sound of Music", "E.T.") have passages that could be easily extracted and used for play-reading practice.

The benefit of reading a role in a dramatic play is that students do not have to memorize their parts and can feel safe as they assume another persona. When taking a role, Student X is no longer totally "responsible" for what he says, nor for the reading mistakes he may make. Tension and inhibitions are relieved. Moreover, any corrections the teacher may make of his pronunciation or reading mistakes are more readily accepted. Play-reading is for shy students a valuable vehicle for active participation in the classroom. This activity gives every student a part to play. All students learn to "project" their voices, an important exercise for adolescent and adult learners who tend to speak much lower than when using their native language, since they feel hesitant and fearful of being heard if mistakes are made. The more fluent and outgoing students may take the more prominent roles, the shyer ones the lesser roles, and those unwilling to participate in this activity may take part as members of the crowd or be in charge of sound effects.

Before distributing the handouts with the screenplay scenario, the teacher introduces the reading material and explains the plot. If it is a movie and the video cassette is available, the part of the movie that is going to be used for this activity is shown. Depending on the level and interests of the students, a "preview of coming attractions" can be given with a brief explanation of the new vocabulary and structures that are difficult to understand. Comments on culture insights that appear in the scenario can be more quickly understood if explained within the context after the students have received the script. Once the scripts are distributed, the teacher draws stick figures on the board, naming them after the characters that appear in the drama. Before reading the script, a role is assigned to every student so the entire class is involved from the very beginning. There will be five or ten students playing Ms. Y depending on the number of characters in the drama. The teacher will point to Ms. Y on the board and model the lines of this character. All the students assigned that role repeat the lines. The same procedure is followed for the other characters. When Ms. Y is reciting her lines, the student should address whomever he is talking to in the drama. The teacher should tell all students not to recite all lines. Actions should accompany speech from the very first repetition. Unfamiliar conduct, gestures, facial expressions and cultural insights are explained during or after the first modeling. One group of students is then assigned to read. The other students listen. The students in charge of sound effects can start doing their part. As present English conversation classes have an average of no more than about 30 students, small groups can practice in different parts of the classroom. The teacher walks around the classroom and assists the students correcting pronunciation problems so that the utterances are intelligible. Students should be told to take notes of their pronunciation and intonation problems. Too many corrections only confuse and frustrate the

students. Practice is assigned for homework, and in the following class each group is called to the front of the class to perform.

Concluding Thoughts

This article is a collection of observations and guidelines I gathered before, during and after I used drama activities with two different mixed groups of mostly freshmen and sophomores (both female and male non-English majors) in two different academic years.

The major benefit of all four variants of drama introduced above is that they provide primarily natural forms within which to practice linguistic features in situational and cultural contexts. The scripts are vital and live tools rich in new linguistic items to be learned and combined with familiar ones, thus allowing constant reviews to take place. These different forms of drama contribute to enhancing the ability of students in the four language skills: to understand, speak, read and write, as scripts can be read, copied, summarized in narrative form, adapted, or altered in part. The students' creativity is challenged when they are called on to create new dialogues and to perform improvised conversations. Dramas are excellent sources for conversation and discussion of socio-cultural matters. They give the students the opportunity to learn and understand the unfamiliar values different people have and the culture these people live in. The plurality of cultural backgrounds of those born and living in English-speaking countries can also be brought up for discussion when the opportunity arises. Moreover, discussions about the social roles and psychological attitudes of the speakers in the drama toward each other do not necessarily have to be done in English. They can be carried out in Japanese. If the English teacher cannot join in such discussions in Japanese, he could simply allot time for this activity without any personal involvement. Considering other people's lives and cultures, students naturally compare them with their own and come to appreciate cultural differences they may never have thought of. Dramas broaden the students' mind and awaken perceptions that might otherwise have lain dormant.

The benefits a dramatic performance can bring to students in terms of psychological development and lessons in humanism are many. As the student performers assume fictional, historical or simply different characters from themselves by reading or acting out roles, they extend their knowledge of the variety of human personalities and learn to appreciate the universality of human beings. The notorious "lack of creativity and imagination" of Japanese students is challenged, providing them situations in which to explore their individual potential for expression and creativity. By interpreting unfamiliar characters, they come to understand and realize their own limitations as well as those of their partners and other classmates. Thus, they learn to compromise, developing the spirit of cooperation.

Finally, I find worth mentioning some comments made by students who practiced these drama activities. Both the diligent ones with a good command of spoken English, and the rather shy ones not very fluent in the language, confessed that when they read or perform a dramatic activity in *English*, they can be more relaxed about themselves, and are not ashamed of showing their real personas. They reach a new comfort level and experience some feeling of fulfillment when the characters they play are close to their ideal person. I have concluded that not having to use their native language frees students from the pressure to assume certain rigid roles and attitudes

prescribed by their social group and by Japanese society as a whole.

Because I am convinced of both the personal and academic benefits my students will enjoy, I will always find a place to incorporate drama in my English conversation programs.

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