

Performing Language: Stepping into the Shoes of a Character

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Abstract: This paper reports on my experience as a teacher at Kansai International High School in Japan instructing students on drama as a literary genre during “Japanese Literature in English” class. To effectively contrast it with the other genres discussed (non-fiction and poetry), and to draw out the specificities of language usage in drama, the students were asked to perform Kinoshita Junji’s *Yūzuru* after translating/interpreting it into English themselves. While describing how performing the language of a character helped the students to step out of their own ‘character’ and embrace the (spoken and body) language of the ‘other’, the paper provides the materials and key points that made the activity successful and presents the positive effects this activity had on the students’ confidence and motivation in language performance.

Keywords: language learning, drama, translation, promoting self-direction, enhanced classroom experience.

Goals of the Paper

In Japan, many pedagogues have to work around low student responsiveness and seeming lack of enthusiasm that become the most apparent when teaching a language. The following project, while not devised initially to address such issues, turned out to be an effective way to increase the levels of class-participation and student confidence. The paper will therefore share the details of this particular experience explaining why it was successful. Similar activities, parts of it, or some of the methods used can be successfully applied in a variety of educational situations, adapted to the demands of curricula and the students’ age or field of interests, to create an enhanced experience for language and literature learning. The primary goal of the paper, however, is to contribute to the discussions on how to adapt or improve English language education for the Japanese learners.

One of the biggest benefits of educating students in performing arts is found in improved levels of students’ self-expression and confidence. Most courses at high school level are not of an interactive type and there is a great pressure on teachers and students to cram as many words and grammar points into 45-minute-length classes in order to prepare for university entrance examinations (センター試験), TOEIC, or EIKEN (英検), neither of which require any oral examination or original input from the student. Thus, naturally, free self-expression or speaker confidence become of secondary importance. However, there is hope that this will change. In 2015, a proposal was made to implement changes in the system of students’ admission to universities (to materialize in 2020)¹. The new system would require candidates to display skills in teamwork, performance in a variety of set-up situations, and proof of intercultural awareness/communication. If carried out, such changes would affect the way the system of examination is viewed in Japan and thus could relocate the focus of education in high schools and earlier levels. It is thus an opportune time to seek initiatives that would place importance on performing arts and

¹ Nippon. com (2015), The Japan Times (2015) .

appeal to the students, and their parents, by being innovative and different in terms of the quality of the educational experience they provide.

Theory and Method

While working, initially I was not following any guidelines apart from the wish to expose students to literature and the way it uses language, broaden their mind-sets, and help them enjoy the learning process. All the devices created were first tried with the students to ascertain that they ensure smooth learning experience and that nothing is (too) forced. I did not use any reference sources and relied solely on my rapport with the students and my own experience of drama activities acquired as a high school student in Lithuania learning English as the first foreign language, and of teaching drama to elementary and middle school children in four day camps during the holiday periods as a university student in Japan. Gradually, however, I discovered a great wealth of sources, especially from the last twenty to thirty years, written in English about the benefits of drama in second language teaching².

To reflect on my experiences, I mostly referred to other teachers' experiences with similar projects in the Japanese context, such as Shiobara (2015) and Duff (2015), both working with university level students, and Hirata Oriza and his practices as an educator in Japan and abroad.

Shiobara provides an insightful reflection on her experience teaching English literature in Japan, lamenting how literature is unnaturally separated from language learning and pointing out that drama activities help tackle artificial reading and promote active understanding of the text. In her experience, students were not initially keen to learn language through literature, as is often the case, yet, when involved in the right activities, they came to read the text carefully, interact with it and each other, and enjoy themselves. To facilitate English language learning and students' approach to the text, Shiobara encouraged various drama activities in her class, such as mime, puppet show, adlib performance, role play, and then students performing their own skit. By placing emphasis on encouraging the students to interpret emotions and body language she also facilitated acquisition of communication skills, both an integral part of face-to-face communication. In her case, as she was teaching English literature, the 'translation' processes involved referred to changing the written text into a performance.

Duff writes about 'releasing' the already-acquired students' English language knowledge by encouraging them to put such knowledge to practice in real-time interactions. Thus, the students are placed in a situation where they must acknowledge their language ability and its gaps and feel enticed to build up on their existing knowledge. He proposes drama activities as highly suitable for such release, as students involved have to actively build up on their language knowledge, and, while in the midst of a drama activity, are too busy to be self-conscious. He suggests using scenes from students' personal lives to be enacted to make the activity more pertinent to the students and to decrease the level of 'foreignness' in their learning, thus approaching the issue of internal barriers such as anxiety and overemphasis of correctness that impede the language learning.

According to Hirata Oriza (2004), we are all our own stage directors and this is very true in language performance, where we have to interact responding to the requirements of the social settings we are placed in. For high school students with little life experience, performing accordingly might be a challenging task. However, by

² Refer to the bibliography for a list of recommendations.

placing them in comfortable settings, we may draw the students out by letting them move from situation to situation, from character to character, exploring different worldviews and the interaction among people from a variety of backgrounds. Hirata's suggestion while acting or 'directing oneself' is not to jump straight into the new role, but to try to analyse the situation and to relate it to one's previous experiences or emotions, making the scenes one's own, and the acting natural.

The consensus seems to be that ensuring improvisation, personalization of settings and keeping the acting 'natural', all while preserving comfort in the learning experience, are the main guidelines for the teacher taking up drama activities in teaching.

Background of the Project

From 2014 to 2016 I had a unique opportunity to teach at Kansai International High School, where international and intercultural awareness and communication are emphasized and great attention is paid to English language instruction. One of the characteristics of the school is that the students are grouped not according to their years spent at school, as is the regular practice, but following an alternative approach where the English classes are formed of small number of students (up to 16) based on students' scores at an English placement test created by reworking TOEIC exam questions and placing emphasis on grammar. As the students come to the school from various backgrounds (some being returnees or foreigners), the higher level classes are then made up of students exhibiting varied levels of familiarity with English and Japanese languages and various sets of skills. In the two classes I worked with (levels 5 and 6 in a scale from 1, beginners, to 6, advanced), the situation was that some students were returnees struggling with written Japanese yet very active in expressing themselves in spoken English, while some were skilled in reading English and understanding grammar yet passive in tasks related to speaking. Such a disparity was the biggest hurdle to overcome while coming up with activities for both groups and was one of the reasons that led to the idea of having a drama project, where such diversity of skills, experiences, and personalities could then be turned into an advantage by students collaborating on translating an original Japanese drama piece into English and then selecting characters appropriate to their aspirations in language learning.

In "Japanese Literature in English" we would concentrate on translating activities, mostly from Japanese to English, reading comprehension of English texts (mostly translations from Japanese to English, comparing the original with the translation), and creative writing. The course was designed in a way that it would deal with a variety of types of literature in progression. First semester was dedicated to literature used to express oneself and one's emotions, the first half treating non-fiction such as speeches, letters, diaries, and essays, and the second half dealing with poetry and drama. The second semester started with mythology and ended with fiction, allowing the students to re-evaluate their understanding of what is treated as true and fictional in writing and see the genres that they were so far the most exposed to, from a new perspective.

Preparations

The drama section started by covering the general background of the genre and its characteristics and devices. I decided to read Kinoshita Junji's³ *Yūzuru* (夕鶴)⁴, selecting the text as it was readily available in both Japanese⁵ and English⁶, the language being not too difficult, yet interesting in structure and displaying a variety of uses, such as dialect, songs, games, language defined by gender, age, and cultivation, etc. The text was also suitable due to the students' familiarity to the story, as it is a drama adaptation of a well-known folktale *Tsuru no ongaeshi* (鶴の恩返し).

Even though there are variations, *Tsuru no ongaeshi* stories are usually quite simple. A young man saves a crane by buying out her freedom, even though he is not rich himself. The crane returns to him in a form of a young and beautiful woman. They get married and are happy, yet they struggle to sustain their livelihood. The crane decides to help her husband by weaving cloth that he could sell. She hides herself from the eyes of her husband every time she weaves, growing increasingly thinner and weaker. Worried and intrigued (she is weaving without any supply of thread), the man breaks his promise not to peek at her weaving. When he does, her true nature is exposed. She leaves him and he presents the cloth to a temple where it is still treasured.

*Yūzuru*⁷ introduces more characters and more depth to their emotions, especially to signify the change occurring within the two main characters, the man Yohyō and his crane wife Tsū. They are first portrayed with village children, innocently playing traditional games together. Yet, by being exposed to the greed of two grown male characters from outside the village Unzu and Sōdo, who have come to know the crane's secret, the couple's feelings morph into greed, hurt, and despair. Kinoshita also played with language, making the crane speak in standard polite Japanese, while the other characters were using a dialect devised by the author to sound regional yet unspecified.

It was great to see students approach a variety of emotions and it proved both a challenging and fun task to 'translate' them. The dialect was hard to reflect in translation, but we made it a point to keep the crane's words polite and literary while the other characters were attributed rougher, colloquial expressions.

We would meet twice a week, for two academic hours once and then for an additional hour later in the week, and it was an arrangement that proved to be very convenient to work on a bigger project. The classroom space was, however, limited, and we had to make arrangements to move to a larger room when necessary to move around freely.

The progress of the activities was the following. The students were asked to read the Japanese text as homework, so that in the following class we could discuss the personalities of the characters and assign the roles. For the text we used a version for young readers, with explanations of special items or games appearing in the play, *furigana* phonetic readings, and illustrations. It served well as not all the students were comfortable using the Japanese language. As the text provided a good opportunity to learn about the Japanese culture, the students were encouraged

³ 木下順二 (1914-2006)

⁴ The play was written and first performed in 1949, maintaining great popularity through the coming years, and being adapted to opera (1952.) and Noh (in 1954).

⁵ 新美南吉, 木下順二 (1986) 『ごんぎつね・夕鶴』 講談社.

⁶ Rimer, J. Thomas, Van C. Gessel. *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

⁷ Kinoshita's version is based on Yanagita Kunio's selection of folktales (柳田国男編『全国昔話記録』).

to consult their parents or look up the unknown games or words themselves. They were also encouraged to think about what could possibly be done with the dialects and character names while preparing for the translating activities.

They were allowed to use dictionaries or phones while reading and translating the text, yet I made sure that they interacted and discussed the arising issues in groups of co-appearing characters, the students themselves then making sure that there was consistency in the conversations of their characters.

During the next class, we split into two groups in each class to accommodate for the number of the characters and the length of the play, and started translating in groups of interacting characters. The two groups were assigned depending on the classroom seating, that had been previously chosen by the students themselves, but they selected their characters freely. As there are three groups of characters appearing in the play at separate times, teams were easy to form. Due to the variety of ages and students' acknowledgement of each other's skills, the teamwork played out nicely and I barely had to intervene.

I helped with the translations, when necessary; when they were ready, the first and the second groups practiced performing in front of each other. Rather than me giving detailed comments, the students were asked to fill out evaluation sheets (see Annex) for each member of the group they were observing and then it was the performers' task to try to incorporate those comments into their next performance. I decided it was more effective to encourage peer feedback and it seemed to work very well with the students. The idea was to leave the agency in the hands of the students as much as possible, encouraging the peers to help each other in polishing their translations, especially in terms of stage direction. For props and costumes, for example, I suggested to the students to look up some previous performances of the same play that can be found on "Youtube" to help them visualize the play better, yet I did not overstress it, as the goal was to come up with an original version.

Students were free to interpret the language of the characters and that resulted in very contemporary and colloquial language use. I focused on pointing out grammar mistakes while respecting their language choices. More attention could have been placed on this in a more advanced language learning setting by asking the students to decide when and where the play is taking place to increase their awareness of how the styles of language they use affect the mood and setting of the play. Instead, I referred the students to an authoritative source for reference. When the translations were finalized, the students were given a copy of a published English translation and were asked to compare their versions to it while paying attention to what different approaches had been taken in the translation process. The fact that there is no 'right' or 'correct' translation was emphasized in previous activities and this task was for those who found they needed more help or those keen on making individual linguistic discoveries.

After the students were done with final adjustments to their lines, we made arrangements for the main performances by setting up a 'stage' and getting ready with the props. We could not gather a large audience due to scheduling difficulties, and the students performed within their level's to their classmates, one group observing the other. However, as the plays turned out quite different depending on the students' personalities and their interpretation of the characters, it seemed to be an enjoyable experience to all.

One Play, Two Classes, Four Versions

As mentioned above, both levels 5 and 6, 15-16 students each, had split into two groups of 7-8 students and provided two versions of the play per level. There appeared similarities between the performances by classmates in separate groups, possibly due to the students getting influenced by each other while sharing the working space. For instance, in one class both groups decided on a gender-reversal for the main couple, while the other class had both the groups split the role of the crane between two students, providing different interpretations of the same character within one play.

When observing the recitals of other groups and providing feedback, the students were asked to notice differences in the performances: how important it is to be audible (good voice projection), enunciate (proper pronunciation), and suitably portray a variety of emotions (appropriate tone and voice flexibility). It translated well into their 'main' performance.

As an afterthought, it is a shame I did not explore the option of recording the students' performances and then asking them to watch and reflect on it.

Aftermath

As the project turned out very popular, during the last remaining classes of the year we decided to repeat the activity of performing a drama piece with the students from the top level English class, as they had finished their assignments early. This time we skipped the translating stage, as we could not dedicate the same amount of time to the activity as before. I selected a play for high school students, *Alice in Wonderland* adapted by Jason Pizzarello⁸. The students carried on with them the enthusiasm from the previous performing assignment and readily approached the task; however, there were a few issues. The language in the script was difficult and had to be explained, especially the humour and numerous references to the original Lewis Carroll's text that we did not read together. As the students had less time to interact with the script, in addition to a great number of them not being familiar with *Alice in Wonderland* and its visuals, the sailing was less smooth, yet still turned out to be an enjoyable experience. It was a more fun (after spending considerable effort in explaining the puns) and youthful play than "Twilight Crane". Also, as it was the last project before the graduation of half of the students in class, the involvement levels soared.

The play required a great number of roles, thus it occupied the whole group of 15. It was trying to schedule the performance in a way for other groups to be able to see it, but it proved feasible.

Familiarizing the students beforehand with the original text, possibly with the help of a Japanese translation, would have been a much more beneficial language-learning exercise, especially if the students could have translated it and used their own wordings for their lines. However, the excitement of approaching a script that was ready to use, the glamour behind *Alice in Wonderland* being a famous piece of literature, and the fact that it was easier to devise funny and colourful attires and props, in addition to dashes of action and comedy in the script, served as a great way to build up on the experience gained while performing *Yūzuru*.

⁸ Available on www.playscripts.com. The school kindly paid for our access to the text.

This time we were not exchanging feedback sheets, as only one group performed and the other level prepared for viewing the performance by reading the text and analysing it in class without enacting it. They were, however, asked beforehand to notice if the performance reflected how they have visualized it while reading it in class, if there were any surprises to them in the performance, and what they generally thought of the students' interpretation of the text, in order to help raise their awareness of text-in-action. As an additional device, this time we appointed a director, a student especially keen on drama, to help maintain consistency in the performance. While it was beneficial in *Yūzuru* to have everybody work together, by establishing a director I hoped to make the students depend on me less. It is a shame we did not have enough time to explore the possibilities of working with a director, yet it was clear that it helped to promote teamwork, group self-reliance, and increase the confidence levels among the students.

When I asked the students to provide me with overall class feedback at the end of the year, apart from horror stories (taught in the fiction section), the most favoured texts we read turned out to be *Yūzuru* and *Alice in Wonderland*, proving that reading through acting the text out was a memorable experience. It provided them with a chance to bond with their class members and to express their personalities. Even the students that usually would be unresponsive were positively influenced because of the weight of shared responsibility. The activities had a lasting effect and the students participated in the following classes more eagerly, feeling more at ease to express themselves in English and having a better rapport amongst themselves and with the teacher.

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Appendix
Sample of an evaluation sheet

Name of the performer _____

Evaluation (from 1 to 5)

- a) Voice projection ()
- b) Enunciation ()
- c) Posture ()
- d) Phrasing / Grammar ()
- e) Teamwork
- f) Overall impression ()

Comments:
