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A Student-initiated Drama Project

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What happens when students want to change the focus of a course? Third year junior high school students in an elective EFL class were dissatisfied with a focus on silent reading and expressed interest in performing a play in English—an activity that focuses on oral reading and performance skills. The Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) responded positively and, with assistance from an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), guided students through a series of steps which culminated in the performance of an original play. This paper tells the story of the project and how an ALT played a pivotal role as translator and playwright. The process of

creating a script in English from a Japanese story outline is detailed and the benefits of the project for students are described. It is suggested that drama activities in the EFL class connect with Japanese philosophy regarding fundamental learning processes.

生徒が講座の主な内容を変えたいと言われたらどうしますか。英語の選択講座を受けていた中学校3年生は黙読中心の学習に不満であった。彼らは英語で演劇を行うことに興味を示した。担任先生が生徒の依頼を認めた。ALT（英語指導助手）が生徒達を手伝い、最終的にオリジナルの劇を上演することとなった。この小論文は中学生のドラマ学習を語り、翻訳者や脚本家になったALTの役目も説明される。日本語で書かれたあらすじを英語の台本に変えることやドラマ学習の利点を述べる。英語教室での演劇活動は日本教育の原理につながっているところも考えられる。

What happens when students want to change the focus of a course? Third year junior high school students in an elective EFL class were dissatisfied with a focus on silent reading and expressed interest in performing a play in English—an activity that focuses on oral reading and performance skills. The Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) responded positively and, with help from an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), guided the students through a series of steps which culminated in the performance of an original play. This paper tells the story of the project initiated by students and suggests that drama activities connect with Japanese philosophy regarding fundamental learning processes.

Background: When students take control

During the 2002-2003 school year, a young third year teacher periodically asked me (a municipal ALT) to assist her with elective (選択) English classes. Elective classes met once each week and featured a much smaller number of students than regular lessons. During the first half of the school year (April to September), the classes were focused on reading English from a broader range of material than is available in the regular textbook or the usual supplementary materials. Students were allowed to bring in their own reading material or could use materials they selected themselves from a teacher-provided library. The course required students to write summaries of what they read and to make brief entries in a cumulative log at the end of each class meeting.

After about three months of the once weekly reading focus, some students expressed a desire to change the emphasis of the course. One student in particular said he wanted to try doing a play in English. When I asked the student why he wanted to change the course focus, he explained that he was disappointed by the lack of oral reading practice and added, “When you have a group of students assembled, it seems a waste to devote all the class time to individual silent reading. We can do silent reading at home.”

Because the focus of the elective course was clearly specified and had, I presumed, been determined by the school English department, I was surprised when the JTE granted the student’s request. At first, I was enthusiastic as I envisioned students reading a number of scripts or writing the play themselves. After some preliminary discussion though, it was decided that the students would produce a story outline in Japanese from which I would create a playscript in English.

ALTs or other EFL instructors without much ability in Japanese may read the foregoing and quickly dismiss the activity as beyond their reach. However, I am quite sure most JTEs or more mature students are capable of translating a story outline into English and would encourage JTEs and other instructors to consider a play project for students. Why? Rehearsing a play allows students to practice language with an intensity and purpose that is not usually present in regular lessons. Indeed, some students seem to enjoy repeated oral practice with a text and having an opportunity to spend more time than usual practicing and focusing on intonation patterns. Rarely is there time during regular lessons for memorizing lines, for working on intonation in detail, or for repeated practice of interactions with accompanying physical movement—an aspect which connects with what Russell describes as “deeply held beliefs about how learning should take place.”

“An emphasis on physical repetition echoes Japanese instructional traditions that value ‘doing’ as part of knowing. The phrase *karada de oboeru* (literally, ‘memorizing through the body’) is commonly used in reference to learning processes, whether one is learning to bow, ride a bicycle, master a *no* dance, or ... rapidly perform arithmetic calculations” (Russell, 1998: 268).

The discipline required to present a play is also, I believe, in line with and helps achieve some of the broader goals for contemporary secondary education. There is also, of course, the element of fun and glamour associated with the dramatic arts as well as the advantages of materials produced locally.

From story outline to playscript

The third year elective class devoted three class sessions to creation of the story outline. I attended the first of those sessions and saw that students had to struggle a bit to get their creative juices flowing. There were a total of 9 students in the class—6 boys and 3 girls. During the initial outline session, the student who had suggested the activity and his cadre of friends dominated the discussion to the point where the 3 girls hardly participated. The JTE and I stifled our urge to force the lopsided discussion forward, but offered a few subtle suggestions.

After the students settled on a genre (sports), I mentioned that many stories are structured on a common pattern consisting of situation, problem, resolution. I also suggested that if the leading character were a girl, the girls in the class might participate more actively (a hunch which proved correct) and that a story set at school would be a bit easier to produce. That was the only input I had on the students' discussion.

Just prior to the end of summer vacation, the JTE gave me a one-page story outline the students produced. Using the structure I suggested, the students created a straightforward tale about a junior high school judo club. I clarified the meaning of several passages in the outline and started visualizing the story as a short stage production. When I began dividing the story into scenes and pondered staging, I realized that the physical action students envisioned would be a problem. While students clearly expected to have judo matches as part of the performance, a judo match would not provide verbal dialogue. The remedy I devised was to set all of the dialogue on the sidelines and thus away from the physical action of judo competition. Thus, when characters engaged in a judo match, it took place off stage and only those watching from the sidelines appear.

The JTE seemed elated when I showed her a draft of the short play. In producing lines for young actors, I had written with an instinctive sense of a level appropriate for third year students at a particular school. On a few occasions, I consulted the third year textbook, but for the most part I limited the range of language by intuition. I did not, however, regulate the language I used for stage directions and anticipated that the JTE and students would have to clarify unfamiliar terms for themselves. That is exactly what happened, though I was a bit surprised that the stage directions did not evoke any questions.

Because my work assignment took me to another junior high school and because of scheduling wrinkles, I did not see the elective class again until students were ready to perform the play for the video camera. According to the JTE, the students devoted 2 class sessions to reading and practicing their lines and another 2 class sessions to complete the video tape. The JTE also indicated that it would have been preferable to allow an additional hour for videotaping.

The printed script students used was noteworthy. I sent the original playscript draft from my computer to the JTE's computer via the school's LAN. So, the first time I saw the printed script was at the first videotaping session. On having a look, I was a little disheartened to discover words divided in odd ways at the end of lines without hyphens—a sign that the play had been formatted on a Japanese word processor. I found the script somewhat hard to read, but neither the students or the JTE seemed troubled by the peculiar line breaks.

One thing I noticed in watching the two video taping sessions is that students quickly learned to take advantage of the video medium. Instead of setting the camera up to record the play

without interruption, students recorded individual scenes and did retakes when necessary with the idea that the final product would be edited. What the students produced, thus, was more like a film or television program than true theater. During the videotaping, it was clear that some students had practiced their parts thoroughly and had achieved a level of fluency one rarely sees in regular lessons. I do not know if the JTE offered guidance in intonation in my absence, but to my native speaker ear, some of the students interpreted the intonation quite effectively.

Comments from students

Unfortunately, students in the project described above were not asked for written comments on their experience. A very similar class (3rd year junior high school elective course), however, did provide written comment on another play production effort. The comments give a glimpse of the benefits perceived by young EFL students and reveal shifts in attitude toward foreign language learning. (Students wrote the following comments in Japanese; the translations are the author's.)

Mizutani Mai:

“I started to enjoy English as a result of the play. I didn't care for it much before. My test score improved.”

Sakagami Akiko:

“I had a lot of fun. It left an incredible impression on me.”

Kaga Ayako:

“I did better in the final performance than I did in rehearsals. It was fun. It left a good impression.”

Matsuba Shota:

“I said my lines cleanly. I was nervous, but it was a good experience. English seemed closer to me.”

Shibata Yui:

“Before the final performance, I didn't enjoy (acting) because I was embarrassed. But afterward everyone said, ‘Hey, it was good’. So I'm glad I did it.”

Inamoto Tatsuo:

“It was emotional. In the end after we finished, I was glad we did it.”

Iwai Kazuyuki:

“I was able to say my lines loudly. I was able to say my lines smoothly. I was pleased that the audience laughed. When the curtain came down, I really felt that we achieved something. Matsubakun's intonation on his lines was good.”

Kobayashi Ryota:

“I did it well!”

What ALTs and other native speaker instructors can do

I have to say that creating a playscript from the students' outline was an interesting experience. Visualizing action on a stage and literally putting words in young actors' mouths was stimulating and an enjoyable challenge. I came away from the experience with a number of positive impressions, the strongest of which regards one thing that ALTs and other native speaker instructors

can do for EFL students: We can write plays for them – plays which give students an opportunity to perform with a genuine, clear purpose; plays which allow students to rehearse expressive communication in the foreign language they are studying. Yes, a stage play is quite removed from the conversational or spontaneous oral ability that I think many native speaker instructors aim to foster. But the experience of producing a play—the repetition and physical movement combined with the pleasure and glamour of the dramatic arts—may form part of the foundation upon which students may continue to grow and blossom as learners and users of a foreign language.

References

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Appendix: Scenes 1 & 2 from the play

Elective Class A—A short play

Scene One—Observing school club activities

Narrator: Chie is 13 years old and a second year junior high school student. She lives in the country. When her father was a young man, he was a professional judo “senshu”. Now, he is teaching the secrets of judo to his daughter. Chie changes schools. During her first week at the new school, Chie goes to watch the various club activities. One day, Chie visits the judo club.

Chie (watching judo practice intently): Wow, that boy is very, very good. What’s his name?

Judo teacher: Oh, that’s Tomohiro. He’s one of our top “senshu”. He’s a third year student.

Motoki: He always beats me. He’s very strong.

Chie: Oh, really? Hmm.

Judo teacher: Chie, I think you would enjoy our club. Why don’t you join us. We need another girl.

Chie: You do? Well, . . . (long pause, thinking) . . . Okay, if you want me, I’ll join.

Judo teacher: Great!

Motoki (*to Eriko offstage*): Hey, Eriko, she’s going to join!

Scene Two—First day in judo club

Narrator: It's Chie's first day of judo practice. Motoki and Masahiro hear that Chie's father was a pro "senshu". They think it's unfair and both of them challenge Chie to a practice match. Chie beats them both easily.

Judo teacher: Well well, boys. Our new member is pretty good, isn't she?

(Humiliated, both Motoki and Masahiro nod their heads. Chiharu enters.)

Chiharu: Hey, the new girl looks strong!

Motoki and Masahiro *(together)*: She is! She is!

Motoki *(whispers)*: Shh, here she comes!

(Chie enters the scene, but says nothing. Fingers the towel around her neck.)

Chiharu *(proudly)*: Chie, I watched you against these boys. You did well, but these boys are wimps [弱虫]. *(Motoki and Masahiro react to the insult.)* You should have a match with me. Then, we'll see how good you are! What do you say?

Chie *(eyes Chiharu carefully, speaks slowly, coolly)*: A match with you? Hmm. *(Coughs)*. Okay....

(The judo teacher, Motoki and Masahiro watch as Chie and Chiharu walk away/offstage to the practice area.)

Motoki: Who do you think will win?

Judo teacher: I don't know, but this is going to be a good match. Oh! There they go!

Motoki: Hey! Chie is winning! Wow, she's really good.

Judo teacher, Motoki, Masahiro *(in unison)*: Oh! What a great move! Chiharu won. Tough luck, Chie!