



Oral interpretation of Dr. Seuss stories in the classroom

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This paper will examine the practical benefits of using Dr. Seuss children's stories in university classrooms in Japan for practicing the skills of speaking and pronunciation in an oral interpretation (OI) format. OI is communicating a piece of literature to an audience. The works of Dr. Seuss are ideal for OI because they are interesting, unintimidating, and have a unique poetic verse. Studies such as Markova (2006) have shown that poetry reading practice has a very positive effect on English pronunciation and is well received by students.

The writers will show how Dr. Seuss is an especially effective way to focus on supra-segmental areas of pronunciation in an intensely communicative way. Methods to address rhythm, blending, reduction, and intonation using the cleverly unique four-beat style of Dr. Seuss stories will be examined. The paper finishes with a few anecdotal observations from the authors' personal classroom experience.

本論文は日本の大学の教室におけるオーラル・インタープリテーション(OI)フォーマットでの会話・発音練習のため、スース博士(Dr. Seuss)による子供のための物語を使用することの理論的な考察と実用的な効果の両方を検討する。OIは物語を相手に伝える。スース博士の作品は興味深く、怖がらせるような要素を持っていない。また独特の詩的韻律で書かれているのでOIにとって理想的である。Markova(2006)などの研究は詩の朗読の練習が英語の発音にかなり効果的であり、生徒の評判も良いと示している。

しかしながらスースを使用することは、重度にコミュニケーション方法での発音の超文節素領域に取り組むのに特に効果的な方法である。本論文はスース博士の物語における巧みで独特な4拍子のスタイルを使用してリズム、プレントニング、リダクション、イントネーションにどのように取り組むかを特に検討する。最終部分では実際の教室における体験の分析を試みる。

The ability to orally communicate a message in English has always been the weakest link in the English education of Japanese high school graduates. Despite six mandatory years of study, even the most basic English communication is often beyond their grasp. In 1991, the Japanese Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*) declared that one of the goals of English education should be to create students who are able to actively communicate using English. How can this be done? Actual focused practice is one rather obvious way to improve any skill, and speaking is no exception (Schmidt 1992; Nation 1994). This paper suggests that having students practice and then orally interpret excerpts from Dr. Seuss is an excellent way to specifically practice the skill of communicating in English. It is also by virtue of its poetic rhythm, and easy-to-understand text, an ideal method to address the nuts of bolts of *communicative* pronunciation skills such as rhythm, intonation, consonant blends, liaisons & reductions. Seuss works are universally popular stories that naturally lend themselves to storytelling and thus help to keep students focused on communicating the deeper meaning of the story rather than merely practicing pronunciation in an abstract and contrived manner. The authors have found, however, that how one addresses pronunciation and communication through the oral reading of texts is very important. Too often students will settle into the mindless droning of reading without really understanding what they are saying. The popular appeal of Seuss combined with the discipline of oral interpretation make for a particularly effective combination in addressing this problem.

Input Precedes Output: An Introduction to Oral Interpretation

Oral interpretation (OI) is “the art of communicating to an audience a piece of literature in its emotional, intellectual and aesthetic entirety” (Lee and Gura 1953). While the word “recitation” also can fit this definition, OI is much more involved and offers a much more specifically defined, more demanding goal. Successful OI requires not only deep understanding of the text, but also intensive focused practice on the art of oral delivery of the text’s deeper meaning. Professor Makoto Omi of Nanzan Junior College has written and researched at length about applying this concept to Japanese learners of English. Omi suggests that acquisition takes place not only through input as Krashen (1982) has famously suggested, but also through the process of intensively practicing focused output in which the speaker is completely aware of what he or she is saying. More specifically, he believes that the *process* of producing high quality output necessarily *requires* intensive input (Omi 1984).

Much has been written about how content based/immersion style methodologies have attained the highest rates of success (Genessee, 1994; Met, et al, 1991). This is thought to be because of the concurrent intellectual stimulation taking place through the L2 (Grabe & Stoller, 1997): It is more interesting to learn about the world around us through English than it is to do a contrived information gap activity based on an unreal situation, and this increased interest leads to deeper acquisition of language. Intensive focus on the complete understanding of the author’s intellectual and emotional nuances, and the subsequent

practice and oral delivery of it involves high levels of oral competence, *and* intensive intellectual stimulation. This stimulation takes place through the English language

In this way, OI is a very intensive content-based methodology. The learner must completely understand the content of what they are saying. Depending on the forum the teacher chooses, OI can be used to engage a wide variety of subjects. Studying famous speeches could be an ideal way to learn history and culture, for instance. What better way to understand the American civil rights movement than to study and interpret Martin Luther King's *I have a Dream* speech? To perform it well, the speaker would need to know every nuance of every word delivered, which would necessarily involve a great deal of input in the form of historical background information.

Finally, practicing a reading over a period of time provides beneficial repetition, which "allows greater time for processing and creates a generally more secure and relaxed atmosphere which may aid receptivity" (Cook, 2000, p. 30). Repetition also provides an opportunity for re-exposure both within the story and as the story is repeated. This repetition is neither forced nor uninteresting (Cook, 2000).

OI As a Systematic Method of Teaching Communication

There are indeed several compelling and more practical reasons as to why OI works well. High school English education rarely addresses meaning in any consequential manner. OI, however, *systematically* forces the learner to fully and deeply understand what is being said. Students

robotically reading aloud texts and dialogues without the slightest concern as to what they are actually saying is a pervasive characteristic of younger Japanese students of English. OI forces the student to directly address this problem. Moreover, Japanese students respond well to clearly defined goals (Wadden and McGovern, 1993). Performing an OI piece in front of peers is daunting, but the goal is also very clear and well defined (e.g., communicating the author's intended meaning to an audience). If the teacher is able to facilitate student interest, students often put forth a surprising amount of effort. The authors have personally witnessed students at Nanzan Junior College intensively practicing speeches in very loud voices outside in public. We are skeptical that the same fervor and enthusiasm could have been achieved through a standard commercial textbook based on a supposedly communicative syllabus.

Why Dr. Seuss?

There are a wide variety of possibilities for OI readings ranging from Mother Goose to Shakespeare. The authors have found, however, that Dr. Seuss stories work particularly well for several reasons. First of all, as evidenced by their popularity, the stories are very well written. Millions of English speaking children grew up with Dr. Seuss. Second, while the language level is reasonably simple, the thematic content and writing style is appealing to both children and adults. It provides a dynamic interaction between meaning-driven language use (transactional) and form-driven language use (the playful) (Cook, 2000). Sustaining interest is the key to learning. Chomsky has said, "about 99% of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material" (1988, p. 180-182).

In addition, Dr. Seuss stories have become such a part of popular English speaking culture that they are relevant content in and of themselves. Especially in the last several years there has been a Seuss explosion: Jim Carrey's film adaptation of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* was the number one grossing film of 2000. Mike Myers successfully brought the *Cat in the Hat* to the screen. *Seussical the Musical* played successfully on Broadway and very recently *The Grinch* has started performing on Broadway. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the poetic rhythm of the story makes it an excellent way to intensively focus on aspects of pronunciation such as intonation, linking, blending, consonant clusters in a *communicative* framework. We do indeed devote much attention to these specific pronunciation issues as is explained later. Emphasizing the final goal of interpretation keeps the pronunciation practice more clearly in perspective as a very important aspect of competent communication and not merely an end in and of itself.

Practical Classroom Application

We will now outline a practical example of how an oral interpretation project of a Seuss story can be used in the classroom over a period of 3 to 4 class meetings. It is hoped that this outline might present a workable starting point for a teacher actually considering incorporating this idea into their syllabus. Lower learner levels are most easily taken into account by shortening the length of the passage. This practical project outline will be followed by a more detailed academic point by point discussion of the individual issues as well as anecdotal observations from our own personal experience.

Sample Three-Day Lesson Grinch Project

Day One

Step 1) Introduce Project to Class

- Introduce this project as a 3-4 week class project which will be evaluated and will constitute a significant part of the final course grade.
- Students must orally interpret a one-minute (approximate) section of *The Grinch* in front of the class.
- It is important to explain the benefits and rationale of oral interpretation directly to students at the start of the activity.

Step 2) Teacher Reads Story to Class

- The teacher hands out a copy of the story (or selected passage) and then reads it.
- It is important to read it with feeling--not only for the obvious purpose of modeling language, but also to entertain and get students interested in both the piece and the art of rhythmic, poetic storytelling.
- The teacher may also wish to hand out a copy of the story without marking the stressed beats ("stressed beats"= Every WHO down in WHOville liked CHRISTmas a LOT.) In this case students must discover beats for themselves from listening.

Step 3) Be My Metronome (pair work)

- One student practices reading the story while the other taps out the beat, acting as a metronome.

- It is advisable to switch partners often to keep the activity fresh.
- This step of the activity is probably the most appealing for students.
- Students will quickly notice that it gets very, very difficult at higher speeds.

Day Two

Step 4) Climb the Ladder (pairwork)

- Explicitly explain to students the concept of chunking and all of the related pronunciation features: linking, consonant blending, reduction (detailed explanation and examples of these terms follow).
- The students are asked to read each line in a “steady stream of sound” without breaking their voice at all between words.
- Teacher modeling and choral repetition is especially important here.
- “Climbing the ladder” means the teacher models slowly at first while clearly enunciating the above mentioned chunking pronunciation features. This is essentially fast spoken English delivered at a slow speed which allows students to clearly hear how natural English is spoken. Students are then asked to gradually increase their speed (i.e., “climb the ladder”) until they can confidently deliver the story in naturally “chunked” English.

Step 5) Read me a Story, Mommy!

- Students role-play a bedtime story situation with partners.
- The focus here is 100% on communicating the meaning of the story.
- Students are instructed to let their “mothers” [add quote marks] know if she’s overly obsessed with rhythm, or is sounding robotic in her delivery.

Day Three

Step 6) Final Presentation

- Students must recite the story to the class (or at least a sub-group of the class).
- Students are assessed on their pronunciation and delivery (by both their peers and their teacher).
- Sub-standard performances must be repeated in the following lesson.

Discussion

While much of the practice described above is devoted specifically to pronunciation, teachers need to keep in mind that the main purpose of oral interpretation is communicating the author’s intended meaning to an audience. This is precisely why much of this paper is dedicated to explaining the background and meaning of oral interpretation. It is imperative that the teacher not lose sight of this during all phases of the practice period, or OI can quickly degrade into

mindless droning. In this sense it is vital to remember that pronunciation practice is a means to an end—that end being competent, meaningful oral interpretation of the author’s intended meaning.

That being said, we have in essence broken up the specific pronunciation practice into three basic phases: rhythm, smooth pronunciation & delivery. Specific pronunciation practice is, we believe, a very weak link of most commercial English conversation textbooks. If texts include pronunciation at all, it is usually very contrived and completely outside of any relevant communicative context. Celce-Murcia, et al, for example, note that supra-segmental pronunciation features involved in linking streams of words together into chunks (e.g., linking, reduction, consonant blends and clusters) are often neglected in the classroom (1996). This highlights a reality of language processing and pronunciation that Dr. Seuss addresses with a particularly keen insight: the brain naturally diffuses language into chunks of words linked together into a steady stream of sound. This is the main reason why word-by-word reading and memorization (so pervasive among high school classes) leads to unproductive and inefficient methods of communicative language practice.

NOTE: For simplification of understanding in the classroom (and this article), the authors have chosen to avoid hard to-understand academic phonological jargon and instead use terms such as: chunking, linking (or liaison), reduction & elimination (or “swallows” as we refer to them).

Rhythm

One unique aspect of English pronunciation is that it is a stress-timed language. We focus our stress and intonation onto the words that we most want to emphasize. These are the words where we express the emotional content of what we want to say. Good rhythm requires first that we understand the basic meaning of the story, and convey this through the intonation and tone of the stressed syllables. The most unique feature of Seuss stories is the constant, 4-beat, structured rhythm of the verse:

Every WHO down in WHOville liked CHRISTmas a LOT
but the GRINCH who lived JUST north of WHOville did NOT

The aforementioned “metronome activity” naturally draws student attention to this. A very common problem here though is a sometimes humorous obsession on the part of some students with hitting the rhythmic beat words—accompanied by dramatic rises in pitches and laborious head jerks! A simple reminder that the purpose is storytelling and not merely rhythm is strongly suggested.

The students will surely notice as they attempt to speak at increasingly faster speeds that it is impossible to clearly enunciate all of the sounds unless they learn to link and reduce the sounds between the stressed beats. The “climb the ladder” activity specifically focuses attention on this area which is probably the most inherently difficult aspect mechanically for the students to master, and is accordingly worth devoting the most effort to.

Smooth Pronunciation

Many of the words native English speakers enunciate are integrated into a steady stream of blended sounds (e.g., “chunks”). In order to do this, the unstressed phonemes between the stressed syllables are reduced, eliminated and blended together in varying degrees. The phrase “**what** are you going to **do tomorrow**” often sounds something like “what’re ya’ gonna do dumorrow.” As the sentence in actuality represents one single unit of thought in the brain, it usually is enunciated in a steady stream of voiced phonemes or “sound.”

In order to make the story sound natural, this feature of pronunciation is perhaps the most important. Students very often pronounce words in a stilted staccato drone. This can be at the very least distracting for the listener to follow, and beyond that possibly indicates that the speaker does not have much of an idea or strong conviction about what he or she is actually trying to communicate. Smooth pronunciation can be mechanically divided into three main areas: linking, reduction and in our classroom terminology “elimination.”

Linking

This is the most easily understood of the three areas. Words beginning with vowels that follow words ending in consonants will be linked together:

“Every Who down in Whoville” is pronounced
“Ev’ry Who **down** **in** Whoville.”

Reduction

Unstressed sounds are very often reduced. One of the most commonly reduced sounds (particularly in American English) is the letter “t” at the end of an unstressed syllable

when followed by a vowel. In this case it comes out sounding like a “d.”

“But I think that the most like reason of all” sounds like:

“Buh-die thinks that the most likely reason nov
vall”

Elimination

In everyday English it is surprising how many sounds are eliminated altogether. This is especially true with consonant clusters where it is too difficult to enunciate the sounds together.

“But the Grinch who lived just north of Whoville did not.” often sounds like:

“Bu’the Grinch who lived juss north thuv Whoville did not.”

The “t” of “but” is kind of swallowed into a glottal stop and the air is released with the “th” phoneme of “the.” The two phonemes “t” and “n” are difficult to enunciate in succession, so “just north” often becomes “juss north” in casual spoken English.

The necessity and value of teacher modeling--or as it is most likely referred to in the classroom “repeat after me”--cannot be overstated here. Motivated students will be very eager to get as much teacher modeling as they can get—for this reason, one of this paper’s authors actually supplies his students with CD copies of himself reciting the story.

Explicit vs. Implicit Learning

Another major issue here is whether or not it is necessary to explicitly point out all of these pronunciation features throughout the whole story. It is obviously time-consuming and takes students away from the overriding communicative aspect of the activity. For many students however, simple modeling and focusing on the meaning is sufficient. We have found it very beneficial, though to at least point out two or three examples of each key pronunciation features initially and have noticed that students who take the time to mark down these types of pronunciation features usually do the best performances.

Reading vs. Memorization

Yet another issue is whether or not to allow students to read their script. When performing choral repetition, students should avoid looking at their scripts since seeing the script often encourages them to revert to the word-by-word mode as English is written, rather than how it is spoken. On the other hand asking students to memorize often leads them to appear to be reading off of an imaginary paper and painfully searching for that next line somewhere on the ceiling. While we don't require memorization, we realize that in reality, it is quite difficult to skillfully interpret a story without being at the very least extremely familiar with it. A possible compromise or intermediate step to memorization is to allow a script, but only allow one look per line.

Intonation

In the final phase of the process, focus is usually on the

quality of delivery—that is the ability to communicate the author's intended meaning to the audience (the essential definition of OI). Students may at this point want to know what the “correct” intonation is. It is, however, misleading and counterproductive to suggest that such a thing exists. An infinite variety of intonation styles exist not only amongst different speakers, but also with any one given speaker as well. A native speaker's intonation will always be at least slightly different with each reading, and perhaps significantly different depending on setting, mood and audience. Intonation is a tool used by speakers focusing on communicating a message—they are focusing on the content and intonation is a subconscious tool. We believe it is therefore a more useful skill for students to practice the basic skill of focusing on communication and letting appropriate intonation follow naturally. Practice is the only way EFL speakers can master such a skill. Oral interpretation by virtue of its intensive focus on communicative content is thus an outstanding way to address intonation.

While one officially correct intonation may not exist, there surely is one commonly repeated mistaken one: monotonous, looping intonation patterns that develop from rushing the reading while focusing solely on keeping the rhythm rather than communicating the story's meaning. The student will settle on one prosodic pattern, and then repeat that pattern in each line they read. The “read me a story, mommy” role-play asks S's to monitor each other's communicative competence. They are specifically instructed to point out if their partner reads monotonously or robotically. Another good way to bring attention to this would be to videotape or tape record the students and let them see and/or hear themselves. Indeed

taping students for the purpose of “noticing” learnable material and examining one’s performance compared with previous performances is useful in many ways and has been well documented (see Murphey and Kenny, 1998; Cotton, 2001).

Final Performance

Finally, on presentation day, the students must “perform” in front of the class. In order to motivate students, they are told that unacceptable performances will result in having to perform again in the next class. The added pressure of performing in front of people also provides additional motivation for practice. Students are told that they have to be “better than good” on presentation day in order to counterbalance the pressure of performing in front of others. It might also be a good idea to have a quick “rehearsal” the week before presentation to give the student a chance to understand the difficulties of reciting in front of an audience, and thus increase motivation.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that using the art of oral interpretation to teach the Dr. Seuss stories *The Cat in the Hat* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is an excellent way to practice spoken English for at least four reasons: 1) Oral interpretation leads to intensive English input by virtue of the fact the students must deeply study every nuance of the meaning in order to skillfully recite a text; 2) as two of the most popular children’s stories written in English, they are important parts of the cultural background knowledge

of many native speakers, and worth studying for that reason alone; 3) the stories are well-written and appealing to students; and 4) the two stories are written in poetic verse, and thus have an explicitly structured rhythm which offers a clear framework upon which several specific areas of English pronunciation can be explicitly taught without losing sight of the fact that the main goal is communication of the content.

In conclusion, we can say that we have been satisfied with the results of our Seuss activities. The charm of the story combined with the systematized rhythmic structure seems to appeal to students. Getting good results, however, requires a significant level of passion and dedication on the part of the teacher. The students may be hesitant and unenthusiastic at first about the idea of standing in front of other people and truly putting their heart and soul into skillfully delivering the meaning of a story. Students need to be completely sold on the idea that this is beneficial to their learning. We have found over the years that indeed they usually do recognize the value of this exercise and appreciate a teacher dedicated enough to push them and to demand nothing less than their best effort.

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Appendix

How the Grinch Stole Christmas
(beginning of story only)

[Note: 1) Underlined words are vocabulary items that are defined for the students. 2) Stressed beats are *italicized*.]

1. Every *Who* down in *Who*-ville liked Christmas a lot.
But the Grinch who lived just north of *Who*-ville did not.
The Grinch hated Christmas the whole Christmas season.
Now please don't ask why no one quite knows the reason.

It could be that his head wasn't screwed on just right.
It could be perhaps that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

But whatever the reason, his heart or his shoes.
The Grinch stood there on Christmas Eve hating the *Whos*!
Staring down from his cave with a sour Grinchy frown
at the warm lighted windows below in their town.
For he knew every *Who* down in Whoville beneath
Was busy now, hanging a mistletoe wreath.

2. And they're hanging their stockings he sarled with a sneer.

"Tomorrow is Christmas! It's practically here!"

Then he growled, with his Grinch fingers nervously drumming,

"I must find some way to stop Christmas from coming!"

Then the *Whos*, young and old, would sit down to feast.

And they'd feast! And they'd feast! And they'd Feast! Feast!
Feast! Feast!

They would feast on *Who*-pudding, and rare *Who* roast beast.
Which was something the Grinch couldn't stand in the least.