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E NGLISH teachers in Japan often struggle with the problem of student passivity. Shyness, insecurity, and low participation not only make lessons frustrating, but also negatively affect practice time and overall development. Passivity creates a downward spiral where insufficient speaking practice contributes to low speaking proficiency which, in turn, affects self-confidence. Insecurity causes shyness and a reluctance to speak up in class. (Doyon, 2000; Fukuchi & Sakamoto, 2005; Gondor, 2005; Ueba, 2006).

To remedy these problems, a one year *English through Acting* class was created, encouraging students to practice speaking English in a safe, enjoyable environment. Students participated in a variety of drama activities that eventually contributed to more personal and creative conversations. These activities improved pronunciation skills, boosted self-confidence, and increased participation, ultimately improving the students' English speaking proficiency.

Advantages of teaching drama

A review of the literature suggests that drama-based activities focusing on meaningful language, interactive communication, and cooperative group/pair work can stimulate participation. Drama activities include physical/vocal warm-ups, role plays, improvisations, pantomimes, chants, songs, and dances, as well as watching, discussing, reading, writing, and performing skits, scenes or full length plays. This wide range of activities helps teachers create lessons which cater to the needs and personalities of their students. However, teachers using drama should be careful not to get overly excited and rush students into performing without proper preparation.

When using drama, it is crucial to create a safe environment of trust, which will encourage risk taking and creative expression (Dodson, 2000). A relaxed, supportive classroom increases motivation because participation increases when self-consciousness and anxiety are minimized (Piassetki, 2001). After a gradual introduction to breathing/vocal exercises, physical warm-ups, trust exercises, and drama games, students will feel more comfortable and

Acting out: A one-year drama class to increase participation

Keywords

English through Drama/Acting, increased participation, self-confidence, speaking proficiency

English teachers in Japan often struggle to get students to participate in class. As a potential solution to student passivity, a one-year English Through Acting class was created, introducing a variety of drama-based activities to a small group of Japanese college students. This action research project evaluates the effects this unconventional English course had on the students' participation, confidence and English speaking proficiency.

日本の英語教師は、学生を授業に参加させようとしればしばしば奮闘している。学生の受動性に対する潜在的な解決策として、1年間の English through Acting クラスが作られ、ドラマ仕立ての多様なアクティビティが日本の大学生の小グループに導入された。本アクション・リサーチでは、この慣例的ではない英語コースが学生のクラス参加度、自信、英語スピーキング力に与えた影響を評価する。

confident. Establishing that mistakes are inevitable, acceptable, and beneficial also reduces student anxiety (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Teachers should provide plenty of praise and regularly remind students that mistakes are valuable learning opportunities.

One of the most often stated benefits of using drama is that drama activities are fun. Students overcome inhibitions in a playful, entertaining, and enjoyable class atmosphere (Ranzoni, 2003). When students enjoy class, they are more relaxed and more likely to participate. In addition, drama activities are extremely effective in stimulating students with low motivation or rejuvenating students who are losing interest (Sato, 2001).

Drama is an effective language learning technique because it is student-centered and meaning based. Exercises focusing on meaningful communication rather than structural/grammatical aspects create more motivating learning experiences (Sato, 2001), and students retain more while practicing English in communicative activities in real contexts (El-Nady, 2000). Drama teaches that language is more than just words and grammar – it is also emotions, motivations, and meanings (Miccoli, 2003). Students learn English not to pass a test, but to achieve effective communication and express themselves as individuals.

Drama connects thought to action and emotion and allows for authentic communication (El-Nady, 2000). Role-playing involves the recreation of real-life situations and can provide the necessary goal orientation for effective language learning (Sato, 2001). Drama activities develop important conversational skills such as topic changing, turn taking, and leave taking. Psychological and social benefits include working with groups, increased self-esteem, developing problem-solving skills, risk taking, and overcoming fears of participation. Additional benefits include improved oral communication skills such as pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and increased vocabulary (Dodson, 2000).

Drama is interactive. When learners interact, language acquisition is more likely to occur than when they sit passively taking in information (Tsou, 2005). In fact, interactive communication activities are preferable to lecture or memorization techniques for long term retention of information (El-Nady, 2000). Drama creates more natural, extended speaking experiences, helping students apply relevant information to a variety of settings (Royka, 2002). The more students interact and practice speaking English, the more confident they will become. Increased participation, interaction, practice, and confidence can therefore lead to

overall improvement in students' English speaking abilities.

Participants

Thirteen students joined the English through Drama class at a small commercial business college in Fukuoka. Their instructor had received a Masters degree in Education from the University of Phoenix, a bachelor's degree in Theater from the University of Illinois, and had worked as a professional actor in Chicago. The class met every Friday for 90 minutes.

Methodology

A series of drama activities designed to stimulate participation and speaking practice were gradually introduced. Students engaged in a variety of activities, including physical/vocal warm-ups, acting exercises, role-plays, and improvisations. Active participation was emphasized as a principal component of the course. Social communication activities such as dialogues, group discussions, and team projects were used to produce maximum student interaction. Students studied cooperative learning, peer evaluation, and constructive criticism techniques. The conventional lecture-style class was transformed into a relaxed, interactive environment with students either sitting or standing in a circle or moving freely about the room. Students moved the desks to the back of the room and cleaned the floor as a group before each class. The teacher implemented an English-Only Rule to discourage chatting in Japanese.

Surveys (written in Japanese) were distributed on the first and last day to evaluate student interest in specific drama activities and reactions to them. Students also evaluated their own English speaking proficiency and participation levels on a scale of one to ten. Students kept weekly journals as homework and gave them to the teacher at the beginning of every class. The teacher read each journal entry and wrote back one page responses mindful not to over-correct grammar mistakes (unless specifically asked), but simply to communicate with students on a more personal level. This weekly written communication was very interesting and beneficial to both the students and the teacher.

The first three months were dedicated to creating a relaxed, safe, supportive atmosphere of trust where students felt comfortable taking risks, asking questions, and expressing themselves creatively. The teacher was careful not to rush students into performing without proper preparation and acted as a supportive coach to encourage participation. The notion that mistakes were essential in the learning

process was continually emphasized. Students understood that evaluations were based on individual effort, positive attitude, and participation.

Each 90-minute class began with physical/vocal warm-ups and exercises to help students relax, trust each other, and feel comfortable. Traditional acting warm-ups were modified to teach participation strategies such as asking questions and providing feedback. Warm-ups became progressively more challenging. As students gained confidence, they began writing and performing short skits related to their everyday experiences or personal interests. The teacher spent time with each group answering questions, offering suggestions and giving performance advice. At the end of the first three months, students performed their skits for the rest of the class.

The second three months focused on students performing and discussing simple role-plays and improvisations such as attending a party, applying for a job, or asking someone on a date. Ample preparation time was given and group discussions followed. The teacher praised effort and gave simple grammar and vocabulary pointers. Students also read and discussed the full-length play, *Death*, by Woody Allen. This activity encouraged reading with emotion, listening, and participation in a large group conversation. At the end of every page, students asked questions about unknown vocabulary or grammar.

In the final three months, students watched, discussed, and performed scenes from the television show *LOST*. Conversations about characters, situations, and relationships led to activities about basic survival and helping others. For the final project, each student, along with several acting partners, chose their favorite scene to perform. This resulted in every student performing in at least three final scenes. Groups wrote out their dialogue, rehearsed and then performed their scenes on the last day of class. Following the performances, students discussed each scene and filled out their final surveys.

Results

The following list consists of expected outcomes and whether or not these goals were achieved.

- *Students would demonstrate increased participation by voluntarily asking questions and adding to conversations.* This outcome was achieved with 10 out of 13 students. Field note observations showed an overall increase in participation. It was particularly satisfying to see how initially shy students came out of their shells and gained confidence over the year.
- *Students would voluntarily answer teacher questions without long, painful silences.* This outcome was achieved to a small extent; however, students were not as responsive to open-ended questions. Gradually, they became more comfortable with the Western-style class and discussions became more natural.
- *Students would ask questions for clarification or assistance.* Field notes showed that 9 out of 13 students began voluntarily asking for assistance, especially during the play reading and role-play activities.
- *Students would initiate discussions and bring up new topics of interest.* This outcome was not achieved. Only three students began to initiate discussions. The rest kept discussions limited to what was suggested by the teacher.
- *Students would work together and help each other, providing support, constructive criticism, and positive feedback in English.* This outcome was achieved with coaching. Students used the supportive phrases studied in the first month after being reminded.
- *Students would refrain from speaking Japanese in class.* This outcome was not achieved. Despite the English-only rule, many students continued to chat in Japanese, especially during pair work activities. Students sometimes answered questions in Japanese, but when reminded of the English-only rule, they rephrased their responses in English.
- *Attendance rates would improve.* This goal was achieved. During the year, more than half the class displayed perfect attendance. The rest only missed eight classes in total and two new students actually joined the class after summer vacation. In comparison with the previous year's elective class, this was a noticeable improvement.
- *Students would be able to have conversations in English without making numerous rudimentary mistakes.* This outcome was not achieved. Students continued to make mistakes; however, students appeared less afraid of mistakes, less embarrassed and began to enjoy learning from them.
- *Students would demonstrate an improvement in the ability to use English to discuss a variety of topics and issues that are important to their lives.* This outcome was achieved to a small extent. Conversations were never spontaneous; however, role-plays, improvisations and scene writing activities provided students the opportunity to communicate their ideas, opinions, and feelings in English.

- *Students would feel confident enough to speak in voices that could be heard.* This goal was definitely achieved. Vocal warm-ups at the beginning of every class greatly helped students feel more confident using their voices. Every student displayed improvement in vocal projection and pronunciation. Two students commented in their weekly journals that the vocal warm-ups were very helpful to their pronunciation and projection skills.

Journals

All of the student journals reflected positive reactions. One student commented, "I am enjoying the play. I want to study accurate pronunciation and natural phrases." Another noted, "Last lesson everyone had fun and made effort. We are getting interesting chances to speak English." A third student said that the class was helping him become more manly and confident. Finally, more than half the students wrote that they were enjoying the activities and looking forward to the next lesson.

Survey results

Six point Likert-scale questions (in Japanese) ranging from 1-Strongly Disagree to 6-Strongly Agree helped students evaluate class activities and personal progress. The Final Survey Results graph (Figure 1) demonstrates the positive reactions to the drama activities.

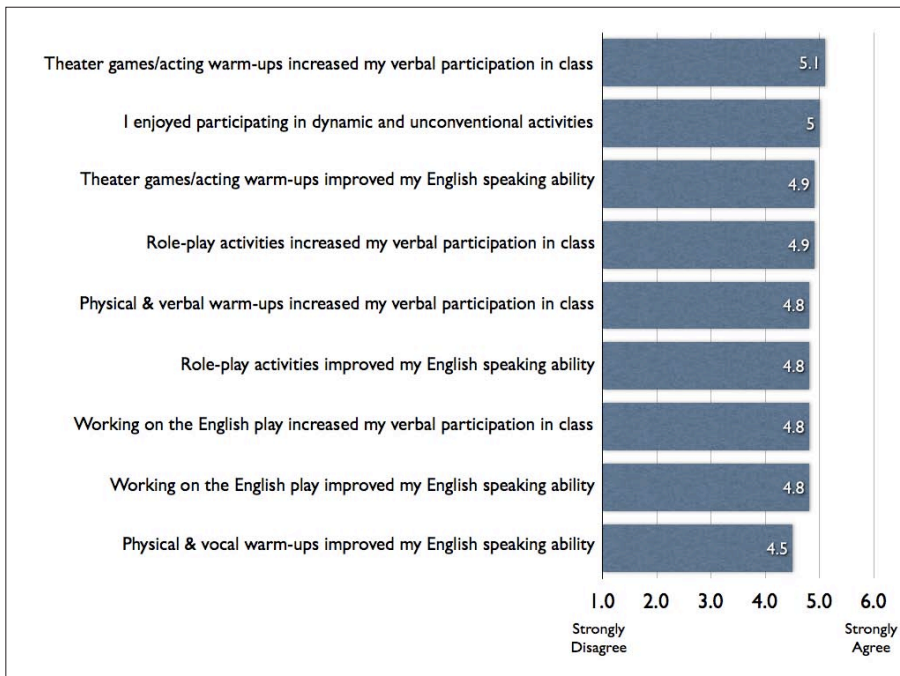
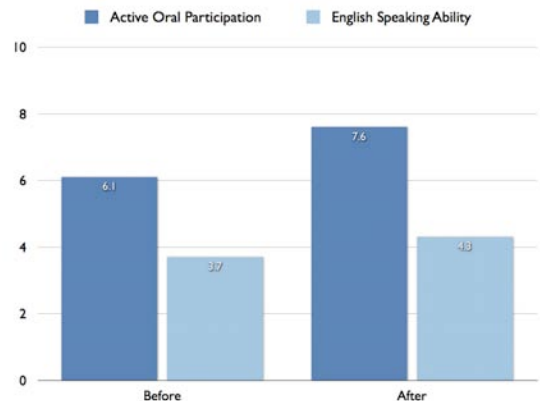


Figure 1. Final Survey Results

Figure 2—The Self-Evaluation Results graph—shows the average self-evaluation on the first and last day of class. On a scale of one to ten (one being very bad and ten being very good), students evaluated their oral participation and English speaking ability before and after the drama activities class.

Figure 2. The Self-Evaluation Results



The Self Evaluation Results graph shows that students believed the drama activities helped improve their English speaking abilities, as well as, increase their active oral participation in English class.

Discussion

These positive results should be appreciated in the context of the project. All 13 students voluntarily joined this class expressing interest in drama and improving their English speaking abilities; they were motivated and the class size was relatively small. Attempting similar activities in large, mandatory classes of disinterested students may not work as well. The teacher's acting/directing experience may have also contributed to the project's success. Enthusiastic demonstrations and passion for theater may have inspired students to

overcome their inhibitions.

Unachieved goals were possibly the result of the casual class atmosphere. For example, students spoke Japanese because they were relaxed and comfortable. Despite some occasional Japanese, at least students were participating and not passively silent. Mistakes were no longer viewed as taboo and began to be embraced as learning opportunities. The carefully planned series of drama activities broke down the frustrating walls of silence and encouraged participation from even the quietest of students.

Conclusion

The implications of this study suggest that alternative, creative methods of teaching EFL in Japan should continue to be explored. Drama activities emphasizing meaningful language, interactive communication, and cooperation stimulate participation and speaking practice. Drama transforms traditional classrooms, provides exciting opportunities to speak English and helps students overcome shyness. Increasing participation, confidence and speaking practice ultimately improves students' English speaking abilities.

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