Starring Roles: Learner Autonomy in Drama Activities

Gary Scott Fine
Tokai University
Peter J. Collins
Tokai University

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Second language educators have long recognized dramatic performance activities as a means of promoting language acquisition. Also worth exploring, however, is how participating in drama encourages students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. This paper describes a range of dramatic performance activities developed and implemented in Japanese secondary school English classes. Each activity provides students with various chances to engage in social practice; these opportunities encourage students to take on progressively more active roles in their own learning. Ideally, students will eventually be able to develop and adopt "L2 selves" (Dörnyei, 2009), which, in this case, include both the characters they are playing and themselves as activity participants. Each example highlights how drama activities can advance linguistic knowledge, promote communication abilities, and encourage autonomous learning attitudes.

第二言語の教育者は、長い間ドラマ発表活動を言語習得の促進方法の一つとして理解してきた。だがドラマに参加することがどれだけ生徒を勇気づけ、自分の学びに対して多大な責任を持つことになるかを調査する価値がある。この論文では、日本の中学校・高校の英語授業で実際に行われ、進化してきた一連のドラマ発表活動を紹介する。それぞれのドラマ活動は、生徒に社会実践に従事する様々な機会を提供する。この機会を通じて生徒は次第に自分の学びにおいてより積極的な役割を果たせるようになる。理想的に言うなら、生徒は最後に "L2 selves (L2自己)" (Dörnyei, 2009)を発展させ、取り入れていく。つまりここでは、生徒は自分が演じる登場人物と活動参加者としての自身の両方を成長させている。例えば、ドラマ活動がどのように言語知識を促進させ、コミュニケーション能力を引き出し、自主的に学ぶ姿勢を育てるかを明らかにする。

L2 learners hoping to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitude necessary to communicate in today's globalized society need opportunities to express themselves autonomously (Little, 2007) through the medium of the target language. Many junior and senior high school English classes in Japan, however, continue to prioritize teacher input, in the form of linguistic knowledge, over student output. Few "productive" classroom activities conducted in this context invite students to do more than superficially manipulate this input.

Dramatic performance activities have been recognized by educators as a means of promoting SLA. Studies have tended to focus on how drama can impact learner motivation (e.g., Járfás, 2008; Maley & Duff, 1982), confidence (e.g., Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Peirce, 1995), language proficiency (e.g., Byron, 1986; Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004), and critical thinking skills (e.g., Di Pietro, 1982; Murillo, 2007). More recently, Fraser (2012) and Kojima (2012) have exam-

ined the impact that introducing supplementary drama activities in Japanese secondary schools can have on both teacher and student autonomy.

In this paper, the authors seek to answer the question: How can junior and senior high school English teachers in Japan design and implement drama performance activities that not only encourage students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, but also emerge from and are integral to the target language and topics featured in the required textbooks? The authors suggest criteria and steps for designing and facilitating textbook unit content-specific drama activities and describe a range of concrete sample dramatic performance activities they developed and implemented in collaboration with Japanese English teachers at secondary schools. Each example points to the ways in which drama activities can advance linguistic knowledge, promote communication abilities, and help learners play more active roles in their own learning.

Perspectives From the Field

Learner Autonomy

Holec (1981) is credited with first defining learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). Candy (1991) further characterized autonomous learners as "aware of alternative choices, both as to learning strategies and to interpretations or value positions being expressed, and making reasoned choices about the route to follow in accordance with personally significant ideas and purposes" (p. 62). For learners to begin making these choices, Little (1995) asserted, they must be able to draw on two strengths. The first is socio-affective: a positive attitude toward learning itself. The second is a cognitive strength, described by Little as the "capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning with a view to bringing them as far as possible under conscious control" (p. 175). Surroundings are also recognized as playing a key role in learner autonomy; Wall (2003) included "access to an environment that provides one with a wide range of valuable options" (p. 308) in his list of requirements for realizing autonomy.

Recognizing the uniqueness of SLA contexts, Little (2007) asserted that an understanding of language learner autonomy is required "in which the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency are not only mutually supporting but fully integrated with each other" (p. 15). Activities underpinned by this assumption nurture learners' ability to acquire knowledge for their own purposes and then share and negotiate that knowledge with others; they are able to develop a sense of self, which, in turn, earns them membership in a "culture-creating community" (Bruner, 1986, p. 132).

Drama as an Educational Tool

The rationale behind drama activities assumes that students should be able to (a) draw upon their past experiences to imagine new situations; (b) engage in real social practice (Little, 1991) through authentic, meaningful activities; and (c) engage in *whole-language learning*. In other words, if participants grasp the context of the activity, as well as their roles within it, they will understand the role of the English used (Fine & Collins, 2011). Additionally, drama offers rich potential for authentic communication using all four of the language macro-skills, as well as organic opportunities to develop linguistic proficiency, including "oral proficiency, reading comprehension, knowledge of language structures and idioms, and writing proficiency" (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004, p. 380).

Another benefit of dramatic performance activities in the second language classroom is that they provide a context for language use. Teachers have recognized the importance of providing context since the 1960s, if not longer (Slager, 1973). According to Maley and Duff (1982), a context or "situation"

is an integrated totality that includes considerations of setting, role, status, mood, attitude, feeling, and shared knowledge. On one level, then, context functions within the world of the dramatic scene to describe the time and place an event occurs, the backgrounds and motivations of the characters involved, and their relationships and relative social statuses—in short, the information needed to understand the pragmatic dimensions of the interaction depicted in the scene.

At the same time, context is also created on another level: in the classroom. On this level, learners who are interpreting or performing the material must communicate with each other *about* the scene and its characters (Fine, 2012; Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004), providing a forum for authentic, meaningful communication. In this way, drama activities support students in imagining and constructing parallel "L2 selves" (Dörnyei, 2009). Students have the opportunity to envision themselves not only as fully developed, English-speaking characters within the drama, but also, at the same time, as actors in a theatrical community and as highly functioning members of a classroom community, using their L2 (supported by their L1, when necessary) to articulate their ideas and negotiate with others throughout the planning and performance phases of the activity.

Some dramatic performance activities nurture autonomy more effectively than others. At the structured end of the spectrum are what Kao and O'Neill (1998) call *closed and controlled* activities, including language games, warm-ups, and scripted or rehearsed role-plays, in which discourse is prescribed and instructional in nature, roles are fixed, and the focus is on accuracy. Such activities are the easiest to orchestrate, but provide only superficial contexts and few opportunities for learner autonomy or real communication. In *open* activities, on the other hand, spontaneous discourse is encouraged, roles are negotiable, and the focus is on fluency. Open activities are more difficult to organize and facilitate but afford enhanced opportunities to explore language and its uses as well as greater potential for intellectual and emotional involvement (Fleming, 2006). The most popular dramatic activities among L2 teachers fall under the *closed and controlled* category. In the authors' experience, one reason for this is teachers' self-perceived lack of expertise with planning and facilitating dramatic performances.

Another reason is the weight of pedagogical tradition. Common to most secondary school English classes in Japan is the grammar-translation approach known as *yakudoku*, which views English as a body of knowledge to be mastered through internalization (Hanks, 1991) rather than a tool for communication (Suzuki & Collins, 2007) and the purpose of individual communication activities to be merely language practice. Pressure from administrators, parents, and even students themselves for teachers to cover a prescribed, exam-oriented curriculum discourages student-centered approaches and activities through which learners might develop autonomous attitudes and behaviors (Sakai, Takagi, & Chu, 2010).

These cultural and institutional limitations are recognized in a report by Fraser (2012) on the ways in which a five-session drama workshop allowed learner autonomy to emerge in a high school setting. Although she noted that those participating in her study seemed enthusiastic, she also predicted that students motivated primarily to succeed on university entrance exams might "distance themselves from anything that appears to be a deviation from traditional receptive teaching and learning methodology" (p. 162). Kojima (2012) reported on another drama activity, this one implemented and reflected on by pre-service junior high teachers. Although largely successful in terms of allowing teacher and learner autonomy to develop, student motivation to learn English was cited as an occasional challenge. The drama components in both of these studies supplemented, rather than emerged from, the language and topics featured in the students' textbooks. Would more students be motivated to

participate autonomously in drama performance activities that extended textbook topics?

Considerations in Planning and Facilitating Drama Activities

Planning

The authors have been involved in the planning and facilitation of a series of teacher development in English (TDE) programs aimed at supporting and advising in-service Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) at junior and senior high schools around the country. Some have included a *drama for education* component in which teacher–participants were asked to extend four-skills textbook units by planning and carrying out drama activities with their own students. The authors developed a planning tool to help teachers understand and develop drama activities as integral to a curriculum and to visualize ways of conducting them (see Appendix A). This tool draws attention to a variety of considerations specific to Japan's secondary English education, including the following:

1. The context in which the final performance will take place. Although some advocates of drama for education encourage an exclusive focus on process and see performance as needlessly stressful and potentially demotivating, others identify performance for an audience as an extremely motivating positive affective factor (Moody, 2002; Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004).
2. Script options and potential for sets, costumes, and props. These invite students to enter the world of the dramatic activity and connect language with meaning.
3. Grouping options. Using multiple scripts, for example, requires more effort but may increase audience interest, whereas using a single script for multiple groups shortens preparation time and can result in varied interpretations of the same material that are both entertaining and educational.

The teaching context sections of the planning tool include numerical scales; a higher sum total suggests a greater likelihood that students might be able to create original scripts, and a lower total suggests that it might be better to provide them with scripts. The tool is not intended to represent a step-by-step process, but rather a range of fluid considerations that are often cyclical in nature. Thus, the items on the planning sheet are not numbered.

Facilitating

In order to capitalize on learner and actor roles, it is useful for teachers to support students explicitly in seeing themselves as actors and dramatic characters. This support may take the form of encouraging students to explore the identities, motivations, and mannerisms of the characters they are interpreting. Although Kao and O'Neill (1998) place short dramatic performances at the *closed and controlled* end of their continuum—presumably because such activities generally involve scripted dialogue—students and teachers might take a more *open* approach to interpreting scripted material, experimenting with a virtually limitless range of possible character motivations, subtexts, and styles of verbal and nonverbal delivery, just as professional actors do.

When facilitating discussions, rehearsals, and other activities in preparation for dramatic performance, teachers are encouraged to assume the stance of fellow explorer, rather than instructor, asking questions that draw out the students' own ideas about the scene and characters, thereby promoting their sense of ownership in their performances. Asking questions can also help students become aware of alternative options from which they can choose—a vital requirement for realizing autonomy

(Candy, 1991; Wall, 2003). The stance adopted by the teacher, however, will depend on the needs of the students at any given time, and there may, of course, be times when some students will benefit from being given explicit direction.

Exploring a Range of Drama Activities

The knowledge, skills, and attitudes of individual students and classes, as well as the institutional limitations within which teachers at a school must operate, make each teaching context unique. The JTEs in the six examples below, however, shared a common aim: to use drama to supplement the traditional linguistic objectives of their classes with communication and "whole person learning" goals (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Dramatizing Target Language

The first example is that of a Junior 2 English class. At first glance, the context seemed ideal: 12 highly motivated students streamed into an advanced course. Their curriculum, however, was devoted almost entirely to preparation for standardized tests, and the students had little conception of English for communication. For the next target structure in the textbook—expressing the future tense—the teacher, as a TDE participant, was asked to plan and conduct a 3-day drama activity.

On Day 1, the teacher announced the Day 3 activity goal: to perform celebrity interviews for a guest assistant language teacher (ALT) who would ask follow-up questions and try to guess each celebrity's identity. Students then got into pairs, brainstormed a celebrity, designated roles—interviewer or celebrity—and began writing their scripts. Day 2 was devoted to finalizing their scripts, memorizing lines, and rehearsing. Pairs were given the option of using costumes and props, but were not given in-class time to create them.

Day 3 was an open class, attended by the authors. The teacher found that each pair had autonomously worked on costumes and props after school and done extra rehearsing. Each pair had also decided for themselves when their script provided enough clues for the ALT to ask questions and make guesses. At the follow-up meeting, the ALT expressed surprise at the students' careful preparation, noting that "They were using some of the new vocabulary and sentence patterns . . . . They'd picked up a lot during preparation time."

Dramatizing Unit Contents

The second example emerges from a different Junior 2 English class. This TDE participant was faced with over 40 students in a general course and was experiencing some discipline problems with the class. She was optimistic, however, that drama would provide them with a positive way to channel their energy. The teacher chose a textbook unit featuring a traditional Japanese folktale and announced the upcoming drama activity. As she had predicted, the activity goal lent purpose to each phase of the unit plan; students understood why they needed to master the target language and comprehend the storyline. After reviewing the unit, the students got into groups and chose a scene from the folktale to dramatize. Before assigning roles, each group was given an *emotions worksheet* on which they wrote down the various emotions each character might have felt at key moments in the story. This process helped them consider the subtexts and readings of some of the characters' lines. After her students performed for their classmates using scripts she had written, she surveyed them on their experience. From their responses, as well as from their behavior in class, their teacher concluded that "even students who seemed disengaged at first became positively motivated" and that the activity had developed "not only their English, but also the structure of their classroom community" (authors' translation from Japanese).

Example 3 is from a Senior 1 class. The team of three teachers, all members of a departmental TDE Program, admitted that they had never before asked students to autonomously consider or share their own reactions to the contents of a textbook unit. They decided on a unit featuring a mother-daughter story and designed a set of materials to help students collect and organize the key information they needed to rewrite the unit as a short drama. In groups, students summarized the contents of each of the three parts of the unit, and then they recycled the contents as lines in their drama. They then performed their scenes in their English conversation class for their ALT, who, rather than evaluating their linguistic output or performance skills, asked clarification questions regarding the characters and events in the drama as well as follow-up questions about the students' own reactions to the storyline. The JTEs, whose job it was to facilitate the ALT–student communication, reported in a follow-up departmental meeting that they hoped to extend future textbook units with similar activities.

Dramatizing Extended Unit Contents

Using an Existing Script

The students in Examples 1-3 all worked to reconstruct the contents of specific textbook units through dramatic performance activities. The teacher in Example 4, however, decided to expand the unit topic by having students perform selected scenes from an existing script, in this case from a movie. Potential obstacles to the success of the activity included the large class size and the students' seeming indifference to learning English. The message of the unit chosen by the teacher centered on the importance of choosing a career suited to one's character. After announcing the drama activity, she supported students' comprehension of the unit's content and their acquisition of its target language. She then allowed them far greater autonomy in the activity phase than they were used to in their usual teacher-centered classes, having them group themselves and inviting them to choose one of six scenes from a popular movie related to the theme. After they had performed their scenes for their classmates, the teacher asked them to complete a brief questionnaire about their experiences. Many reported that although the activity had been hard work, they felt that it had not only helped them understand the content of the unit more deeply but also connect it to their own lives.

Using an Adapted Script

As part of a departmental educational-reform project, the teachers in Example 5 decided to use drama to showcase the strength of their school's English education at an orientation event for prospective incoming students and their parents. In order to extend a Senior 3 textbook unit on the theme of sportsmanship and, in so doing, focus students on the nuanced delivery of dialogue rather than on the mechanics of writing, the teachers chose to adapt a popular manga series about a high school basketball team. This material offered several advantages: first, most of the students in the class were familiar with the story and characters; second, because the students were more knowledgeable about the material than the teachers, the students were well positioned to take leadership in interpreting and staging the dramatic scenes; and third, the availability of most of the series in English translation would greatly facilitate the preparation of scene scripts, leaving more time to concentrate on performance. Together, the students and teachers adapted scenes from the manga, with students determining the essential points to be retained when abridging the original text.

As hoped, students voluntarily took the initiative, not only in the interpretation and staging of the scenes but also in the creation of a slideshow intended to introduce the setting and characters to audience members unfamiliar with the manga.

At the request of the Senior 3 teachers, two administrators played important nonspeaking roles in a scene. This cooperation suggests that the administration agreed that (a) the drama project was an effective showcase for the students' autonomy and English ability, and (b) the Senior 3 teachers had succeeded in designing a project consistent with both the curriculum and textbook unit goals—important considerations to parents of prospective students.

Using an Original Script

The Example 6 project was envisioned by Senior 1 teachers involved in the same departmental educational reform project as the Senior 3 teachers in Example 5. They decided to expand a textbook unit about nature photographer Michio Hoshino and his life-changing trip to the US. Presented as a first-person flashback, the textbook reading included significant moments from Hoshino's memories but contained only one line of dialogue and too little detail to serve directly as a basis for scripts. With support from the authors, the teachers gathered information about Hoshino from a wide range of sources and shaped it into 10 short supplementary articles on different aspects of his life and career, each roughly 250 words in length and recycling target grammar and vocabulary from the unit. Then, based on a skimming of the articles, students in small groups selected a few to read closely as resources for writing original scene scripts. The project was designed so that scenes would not overlap, but otherwise students were free to create their own scripts. Teachers corrected linguistic errors in the scripts, but did not otherwise change what the students had created.

During rehearsals, which one of the authors attended, students seemed particularly engaged and proactive in developing effective performances, perhaps because writing and working with their own original scripts promoted such a high degree of ownership. Teachers also reported a sense of empowerment through the autonomy they had exercised in creating resource materials that so effectively extended the unit themes and contents. The outcomes of this project for both students and teachers were so powerful that the English department resolved to make dramatic performance activities a distinctive feature of the school's English education program from that time on.

Conclusion

The forms that dramatic performance activities can take as a tool for SLA range from the simplest of warm-ups to full-fledged theatrical productions, each providing its own contexts and inspirations for the use of the target language. As the examples in this paper indicate, drama activities can also be flexibly designed and facilitated to promote autonomy among students with unique learning styles and needs, once teachers are made aware of options such as those presented in the Appendix A Planning Sheet. A drama component need not be merely a supplement or interruption to regular routines; it can extend the target language and contents of textbook units. Students' increased engagement with both was evident in each of the drama performance activities described above, whether they were motivated by the chance to use English in communication or to reinforce their linguistic knowledge for an upcoming exam.

Dramatic performance activities can provide organic opportunities for purposeful and autonomous language use within multiple contexts that are intrinsically motivating. When working through drama, students are motivated to take charge of their own learning because they are fully engaged in and enjoying the activity, and their "enjoyment comes from imaginative *personal* involvement, not from the sense of having successfully carried out someone else's instructions" (Maley & Duff, 1982, p. 13). As the six examples described in this paper have shown, drama also affords learners the opportunity to envision and develop multiple L2 selves, including as their characters in the drama, as

actors in the theatrical community they are constructing, and as members of their English-speaking classroom community. The number of studies exploring the connection between dramatic performance activities and language learner autonomy will inevitably grow as drama is shown to be a versatile and powerful instrument of second language acquisition.

Bio Data

Gary Scott Fine is an Associate Professor at Tokai University's Takanawa Liberal Arts Education Center. His research interests include pragmatics and the applications of drama, film, and television in second language acquisition.

Peter J. Collins is an Associate Professor at Tokai University's Foreign Language Center (FLC). His research interests include teacher development, team teaching, and situated language.

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Appendix A

Planning Sheet: Considerations in Designing and Facilitating Drama Activities

Textbook Reading Passage

Subject, textbook, lesson	
Genre *(see Bank A)*	
Contents	
Communication functions *(see Bank B)*	

Teaching Situation: Students

	Low					High
English level	1	2	3	4	5	6
Motivation to learn English	1	2	3	4	5	6
Motivation to communicate	1	2	3	4	5	6
Autonomy	1	2	3	4	5	6
Previous experience writing	1	2	3	4	5	6
Previous experience speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6
Knowledge of contents	1	2	3	4	5	6

Teaching Situation: Other

	Low					High
In-class project time	1	2	3	4	5	6
Outside class project time	1	2	3	4	5	6
Support from other teachers	1	2	3	4	5	6
Support from admin	1	2	3	4	5	6
Chance to perform *(see Bank C)*	1	2	3	4	5	6
Response from others	1	2	3	4	5	6

Script Writing Options

Students write, teachers assist	
Teachers write	
Teachers use pre-existing script	
Teachers transcribe from a movie	

Script Content Options: The script will be…

taken entirely from the lesson content.	
an extension of the lesson content.	
a combination of the above.	
related thematically to the lesson.	

Script Elements

Setting	
Characters	
Action	
Set, costumes, props	

Grouping Options

Number of groups	
Number of students per group	
Non-student group members	
Number of different scripts needed	

Division of Responsibility Within Groups

Writers	
Directors	
Actors, narrators	
Camera / video operator / editor	
Sets, costumes, props	

Reference

Bank A: Textbook passage genres		
(Auto)biography	Fairy tale/Short story	Excerpt: Fiction
Interview	Essay	Poetry
Speech	Dialog	email / letter

Bank B: OC Functions		
(Dis)agreeing	Making someone laugh	Asking, answering questions
Expressing feelings	Making someone cry	Describing a process
Asking, granting a favor	Persuading	Giving instructions
Making small talk	Complaining	Talking about the past
Responding to news	Eliciting opinions	Giving, receiving advice
Giving reasons	Explaining	Apologizing
Clarifying	Lying, deceiving	Other

Bank C: Audiences (live or on video)		
Classmates	Other schools in area	Events
Schoolmates	Local community	Local TV
Teachers	Schools elsewhere in Japan	School website
ALTs, ALT community	Schools outside Japan	Video sharing website
Parents	Eliciting opinions	Other, content-specific