



Drama for Foreigners' Japanese Learning and Integration: Theatre vs Video

Philip Head

Osaka Jogakuin University

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The Genki Tosaben Musical (Genki), an annual theatre production started in 1996, has foreigners in Kochi Prefecture staging an original musical in *Tosaben*, the local Japanese dialect. Once the show is ready, the troupe tours the prefecture to promote grassroots cultural exchange. In 2020, the musical was canceled due to COVID-19 restrictions. In response, the organizers transformed the musical theatre production into an online video created using Zoom and remote actors. This paper discusses qualitative data gathered from interviews with the key players (director/writer, producer, lead actor, and video editor) conducted before and after the production. The interviewees discussed their motivations for participation and the effect the experience had on their Japanese language learning and community integration in Kochi. They stated that Genki was important for forming connections within the local community, with both Japanese and non-Japanese, as well as increasing their Japanese ability. However, while a positive experience, online video was less effective than live theatre for achieving these goals.

Genki土佐弁ミュージカル (Genki) は、1996年に高知県内の外国人が土佐弁でオリジナルミュージカルを上演し、草の根の文化交流を目的に県内を巡回する毎年恒例の演劇公演である。2020年、新型コロナウイルス禍の制限により公演が中止となったが、主催者はミュージカルをZoomを使用してリモートで作成したオンラインビデオに変更した。本稿は、ビデオ制作前後の主要人物（監督・脚本家、プロデューサー、主演俳優、映像編集者）へのインタビューから得た質的データを取り上げる。インタビューでは、参加の動機とその経験が日本語学習と現地でのコミュニティ参画にどのように影響したかが語られ、地元の外国人と日本人コミュニティ内でのつながりの構築と日本語能力の向上に、Genkiが重要な役割を果たしていると述べられている。公演開催はポジティブな体験ではあったが、オンラインビデオでは、これらの目標に対する効果がライブ公演ほどには得られなかったことがわかった。

The Genki Tosaben Musical (hereinafter referred to as Genki) is a unique theatre production that has taken place annually in Kochi Prefecture since 1996. Genki involves foreigners, primarily Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and Coordinators of International Relations (CIRs), producing an original musical theater production in *Tosaben*, the Japanese dialect spoken in central and eastern Kochi Prefecture. The plays typically adapt Western stories (such as *The Wizard of Oz*) and combine these with local historical figures (such as John Manjiro) and local Kochi culture. The purpose is to promote grassroots cultural exchange, and the production tours the prefecture collecting donations to fund study abroad scholarships for local students (Genki Seinenkai, n.d.). For a more detailed overview of Genki, *Tosaben*, and the living conditions of JETs in Kochi, see Head (2022).

Unfortunately, the 2020 production of Genki, *Tosa Quest*, was cancelled two weeks before the first performance in April due to COVID-19 restrictions. The cast then decided to film a final dress rehearsal and upload it to YouTube, but this plan was also abandoned due to further official COVID-19 restrictions. Faced with travel bans interrupting the arrival of new JETs, and inspired by *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical* (Moss, 2021), the Genki organizers decided to create a socially distanced online movie version of Genki. The online format presented an opportunity to compare the two media (live theatre and online film) in terms of foreign language learning (FLL) and community integration through examination of the narratives of participants.

Literature Review

Although the primary purpose of Genki is cultural exchange with the local community, theatre has proven to be an effective tool for FLL. Research has found improvements in specific skills, such as oral proficiency and spoken grammar (Raquel, 2011; 2015). Further, theatre is also motivating as it sets a concrete goal participants can strive to achieve (Aita, 2009) and fosters interest in and knowledge of the target language culture



(Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004). Participating in theatre in a new language can even help teachers gain empathy for their students' struggles in language learning (Wiese, 2014). However, there has been little research on language learning of participants in theatre produced outside of formal classroom or educational settings.

In addition to language learning, theatre has also been used to help marginalized groups, such as adult refugees, integrate into new communities (Best & Guhlemann, 2020; Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019; Horghagen & Josephsson, 2010). Although the JET ALTs and CIRs who participate in Genki are arriving in Japan as skilled workers rather than asylum seekers, they might experience some of the same social isolation and language learning difficulties, especially since strong Japanese language ability is not required for incoming ALTs.

Kochi is rural and isolated, with a small English-speaking community compared to other areas of Japan, presenting several potential challenges for those JETs placed there. Hiratsuka (2022) conducted narrative enquiries with ALTs from mostly rural areas across Japan and found them feeling disempowered due to being Japanese language and culture novices. Scully (2001) likewise found, through interviews with JETs in rural Japanese communities in Shimane, that Japanese language acquisition was the most crucial determinant of acculturation. In addition, a majority of ALTs surveyed in Shimane felt like outsiders and experienced culture shock, while a lack of confidence in communicating with Japanese coworkers and community members lead many ALTs to have trouble making Japanese friends, choosing instead to socialize exclusively with other foreigners (Scully, 2001). Additionally, even CIRs or ALTs with high Japanese fluency may suffer from problems due to cultural differences (Scully, 2001). Jardon (2018) also found that ALTs may have trouble initiating engagement with the local community due to cultural and language barriers, resulting in low community involvement, although organized activities might help reduce these barriers.

There may be some advantages for JETs in a rural location, however. Minns (2021) found that being placed in rural settings gave ALTs high visibility and a role in the community where they could engage with locals in Japanese. In addition, Hiratsuka (2022) also found that living in a rural area often resulted in greater attention from locals and a more authentic Japanese experience, although the strong local accent can prove a barrier to communication and isolation restricts access to a community of other ALTs to rely on for support. In the case of the local dialect in Kochi, Lóránt (2015) observes that Tosaben, while based on the Kyoto dialect, is a “particularly foreign dialect, even among the various dialect of Japan” (p.7) resulting from the geographical isolation of Kochi from the rest of the country due to being sandwiched between the Shikoku mountain

range to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south. This isolation has resulted in the persistence of many archaic expressions, as well as unique grammatical, morphological, and phonological characteristics (Lóránt, 2015). This can make communicating with locals difficult even for people, such as CIRs, with high proficiency in *hyojungo* (standard Japanese).

Considering these issues, Head (2022) used an online survey of 35 former Genki participants to gather qualitative responses regarding why people joined Genki and how it affected their language learning and community integration. That study found that the primary motivation for joining Genki was to create social connections, both with other foreigners and the local Japanese community. In addition, many participants reported improvements in Japanese language learning and motivation.

Despite the benefits of live theatre for language learning and integration, there is little research on how these transfer to online theatre. One study by Best and Guhlemann (2020) on moving theatre courses online during the lockdown found more intimate meetings between instructors and participants. Conversely, there was also a decrease in physical presence, which is particularly important for lower-level language learners to express themselves, as well as opportunities for higher-level participants to help lower-level ones overcome their language deficiencies. However, this study focused on instructors and there has been little research on how the performers themselves felt during this migration to online theatre.

With these research gaps in mind, this paper focuses on the following research questions:

- RQ1 How did doing live theatre in a foreign language in a non-classroom setting influence language learning and community integration?
- RQ2 How did the experience of collaboratively producing an online video differ from live theatre regarding language learning and community integration?

Methods

In order to investigate the process of producing the online video production of Genki in 2021, the researcher (a Kochi ALT from 2010 to 2015 and former Genki cast member) contacted the Genki Seinenkai organization by email to arrange for interviews with people involved in the current production. All subjects gave informed consent for the video conferences to be recorded and their interviews to be published. The research project was given approval by the ethics review committee at the researcher's university. Two sets of semi-structured interviews (see Appendix for a list of questions) with four



cast members of *Journey to the Wishing Tree* (Genki Seinenkai, 2022) were conducted and recorded online using Google Meet (in March and September 2021, respectively). The first interview (90 minutes) was conducted with all members before filming began, while the second interview (80 minutes) occurred after the film had been uploaded to YouTube and featured all members, except for one (SC) who was interviewed individually three days later (30 minutes). The first interview focused on participants' background, previous experiences with Genki, language learning, and community integration. The second interview focused on the process of creating the video and how the experience compared to traditional Genki productions. Transcripts were automatically generated on the computer from the audio recordings and then manually checked for accuracy. Quotations used in this paper have been modified for clarity by removing discourse markers and sounds such as “like” and “um”.

Results and Discussion

Participant Backgrounds

First, the four interviewees were asked questions about their previous theatre experience and Japanese language ability (see Table 1). The cast interviewed had a wide range of previous Japanese language abilities (from none to advanced), but all had some interest in acting before coming to Kochi and joining Genki.

Furthermore, all the interviewees enjoyed being creative and had a desire to make social connections with other people in the community with similar interests (see Table 2). In terms of language learning as motivation to join Genki, there were various elements. For RM, with a high level of Japanese, Japanese language learning was not a strong motivating factor to join Genki, whereas for SC (who had basic conversational level Japanese), it was an essential factor. Meanwhile, both KM (fluent speaker) and EB (rudimentary speaking) saw creating a play in Japanese as more of a personal challenge than solely a language-learning opportunity. These motivations echo results from Head (2022), which showed that most participants in Genki had an existing love of performance and that the most common motivation for participating was the formation of social connections, with language learning being a secondary goal (although language learning did occur, as shown in the next section).

Table 1

Interviewee Language and Theatre Background

Subject code	Position and nationality	Japanese language ability (self-assessed)	Theatre background	2021 Genki roles	Previous Genki roles
KM	Current ALT, American	JLTP N2 / Fluent heritage speaker, trouble with kanji.	Animation major in university.	Director and writer.	Director, writer, and actor
EB	Former ALT, British	Originally none, now basic conversational level.	Majored in drama and theatre at university.	Actor, song director, video editor.	Main actor and writer
SC	Former ALT, American	JLTP N3 / Conversational speaking ability	High school theatre productions.	Main actor.	Main actor
RM	Current CIR, Chinese	JLTP N1 / Studied Japanese for 12 years before going to Kochi.	Some film acting in university.	Producer (e.g., scheduling and public relations) and video editor.	Actor



Table 2
Reasons for Joining Genki

Subject code	Reasons for joining Genki (paraphrased and summarized)
KM	A chance to make friends with common interests and travel and meet people from across the prefecture. Enjoys being creative (writing and performing) and the challenge of using Japanese to write a script.
EB	Enjoys acting, making friends, and wanted to use theatre skills from university. Enjoyed the challenge of performing an entire play using Japanese.
SC	Loves musical theatre and the Japanese language. Likes being able to meet people with common creative interests.
RM	Was impressed after seeing a previous Genki performance. Likes acting, meeting people, and getting involved in the community.

Language Learning Through Live Theatre

Participating in a typical live stage production of Genki requires various language learning skills, including memorizing lines in Japanese and speaking them with the correct pronunciation and intonation. Tosaben can be very different from standard Japanese in both vocabulary and intonation, so local Japanese volunteers called *Tosaben Masters* help translate the script into Tosaben (i.e., *tosafying*) and do individual pronunciation and intonation coaching with actors.

RM was a Coordinator of International Relations (CIR) and therefore was required to already have a high level of Japanese and used it daily as part of their job. However, despite speaking standard Japanese fluently, they found that learning Tosaben through Genki was valuable for understanding their local Japanese co-workers. RM explained:

I can sometimes struggle a little bit because sometimes my coworkers speak Tosaben around me and [they] speak really fast, so sometimes it's kind of hard to catch up. ... since our dialogues were already in Japanese [and] in Tosaben, I got to know 'this thing means that, and that thing means that', and then sometimes I heard people around me use it. I was like 'Oh yeah, I learned it. I totally use that in Genki.' I think it helps.

For KM, who had grown up hearing Japanese from their mother but stopped speaking it in middle school, Genki led to a significant increase in spoken fluency ("I came to Kochi and then got involved with Genki and my fluency just skyrocketed"). Although KM was not involved in acting, the writing and subsequent translating of the script into Japanese led to Japanese vocabulary gains. In addition, discussions with Japanese co-workers, students, and volunteers about Genki led to increases in confidence.

Meanwhile, SC found that practicing reading script lines over and over led to great improvements in spoken fluency as well as gains in vocabulary and *kanji* knowledge:

So I was studying for the JLPT, and then I would read passages out loud. I was like, 'Oh my God, I read that so smoothly' and even though you're reading the same lines over and over, you're still getting that practice and you're still learning new words even without realizing it.

Finally, EB, who had no Japanese knowledge when she first took on the main role in a Genki production, learned all the lines phonetically without understanding their meaning. However, this familiarity with the sounds led to improvements in understanding Japanese vocabulary as she continued to live in Japan and study Japanese. EB stated:

But as I learned the lines and the longer I was in Kochi, I kind of understood more. I could pick out the occasional word and phrase and know what it meant... and now, I'm still learning, every week I have a Japanese lesson here [in the UK] and I learned something new and I think 'Oh I said that in the description in Genki' and now I actually know what I was saying and so, it's definitely helped me.

In terms of language learning, for all the interviewees, the support from *Tosaben Masters* was considered key for intonation and fluency practice. For example, KM said:

They were so important. Even for people who already know Japanese, the intonation alone is so different between standard Japanese and Tosaben, [to] get those tiny little details, you can't read that. If it's in *romaji* or *kanji*, you can't read the intonations. You really need somebody who's a native speaker to help you. Even if you're just mimicking them, it really helps a lot improving fluency.

Community Integration Through Live Theatre

In addition, to help with pronunciation, the support and encouragement from the local volunteers was essential to the positive community building experience within



Genki. In addition, EB also found that participating in Genki and learning Tosaben helped with connecting to the wider local community:

Tosaben, especially I think it helped me connect with my co-workers because I told them I was doing a show and in Tosaben and they'd try and teach me more Tosaben. So [it] definitely helped me connect to them in that sense. I'd started to have a conversation, it was still low, but definitely, from the community that we made with our Tosaben Masters [I'd] been able to have small conversations with them. And people were really kind and were teaching me a little bit, every now and then.

The interviews with participants in this section showed that the live theatre version of Genki had many positive language learning and community integration benefits. The next section will examine the experience when Genki was done as an online video.

Differences Between Online Video and Live Theatre

Timeline

Traditionally, Genki productions take place over eight months. Directors and writers are chosen, and they write scripts in the summer or fall. These are then translated into Tosaben by the Tosaben Masters. In January actors audition for roles and rehearsals take place in Kochi City during February and March. In April the production goes on tour around Kochi prefecture over two consecutive weekends, with the final performance in Kochi City. The entire production process (including editing) for the online video Genki, took 15 months, with dialogue scenes filmed on Zoom on weekends during May and June. The Japanese version of the film was uploaded to YouTube on August 28, 2021, and the English-subtitled version was uploaded on March 24, 2022 (Genki Seinenkai, 2022).

Language Learning

Due to scheduling problems resulting from accommodating actors in different time zones, the Tosaben Masters could not provide the same one-on-one coaching during Zoom sessions that occurred during the live theatre rehearsals. Additionally, it was impossible to have the backstage interactions with the Tosaben Masters, although they helped develop a Tosaben version of the script and provided a recording of the lines that actors could refer to. However, for SC, this lack of personal interaction with the Tosaben Masters was a considerable drawback to the online video production:

The disadvantage was, when I was in Genki before, I met with so many native Tosaben speakers and was really able to, first of all, I guess connect to the Japanese

language more. And also connect to them more, and see how they live, and learn about their life in Kochi, which I always find really interesting. ... I'm definitely more of an audio kind of learner and a visual learner. So being with a person helps me remember a lot better and helps me connect a lot better. Whereas learning the lines and stuff by myself was, it was still fun and I think I learned a lot, but yeah, I didn't probably learn as much as I would have with the native speakers.

That said, there were some advantages of the online format. First, there was less pressure because actors didn't need to memorize their script as they could have it on screen for reference during recording sessions. In addition, for EB, editing the footage together led to a great deal of repeated vocabulary exposure from the characters' dialogues. Also, retakes are possible when filming, so there were fewer problems if an actor made a mistake. As SC said:

If there was a hiccup or someone kind of fudged a line, we of course did a couple of takes, but it was a lot more chill because it was like, 'Oh, it's okay, well we can just edit it this way and it'll be fine.' So, I think the fact that you can manipulate it to be exactly what you want it to be is a big advantage because in live theater, if you forget your line or mess up it's going to be awkward.

These interviews indicate that while potentially less stressful for actors than live theatre, online theatre presented less opportunities for language practice with native speakers. However, this may be due to COVID lockdown conditions more than inherent limitations of the online video format.

Community Connections

All the interviewees mentioned going on tour around Kochi Prefecture as a big advantage of live theatre. They said that connecting with the local audience after the show and seeing their reactions and engagement in person was a great experience. However, that community engagement was lost in the YouTube video.

According to EB, the emotional connection with the audience in live theatre cannot be recreated online and stated:

I think nothing can beat live theater. Especially when we've performed in Kochi, the audience has been kind of the older generation coming to see foreigners, like raving about Kochi. They love to see it. We've had some really emotional responses from it, and I think a lot of them might not even realize that we're online this year, [because of] being an older generation. So I think definitely going back to live theater, is important.



Likewise, SC stated:

I definitely think I prefer the in-person smaller one. ... I forget what town it was in, but it was some *inaka* [rural] town. And I think only like four or five people came, but after they were like, “Oh, it was so amazing” and I don’t know, seeing that maybe you kind of touched someone who speaks Tosaben when it’s not your native language feels pretty good I think. It’s nice to get out like, ‘Oh, foreigners can also do it’ or ‘They’re trying to learn Tosaben.’ Whereas with YouTube, you don’t really get that small town ‘good job’. You don’t know if it’s really reaching an audience.

On the other hand, doing an online musical was a way for SC to connect with their new co-workers in Japan after they left Kochi. SC explained:

I’ve told someone, a friend here, a coworker like, ‘Oh, I’m doing this online musical.’ They’re like ‘What? That’s so cool. What do you mean?’ So I think it’s ... a new concept to people because they maybe have never heard of this idea before.

In addition, having a YouTube video made it easier for participants to share their experience with those outside Kochi and have a permanent record rather than a fleeting experience. As SC put it:

Please try online musical because I think, it feels nice in the end to know that you worked on something and that you kind of forever have this memory and especially because it’s so accessible on YouTube. But you can always go back to it and show someone and be like, “look what I did.”

Based on these interviews, it can be concluded that live theatre results in intimate connections with the local community that cannot be easily felt online. However, an online format can reach a wider audience outside of the local community and serve as a permanent visible reminder of what was achieved.

Conclusion

This study examined how performing live theatre in a foreign language outside a classroom setting influenced language learning and community integration among JETs in Kochi. The results of this study mirror previous results (Head, 2022) that found participating in Genki led to perceived increases in both language learning and community integration. Interviewees in this study pointed to improvements in spoken fluency due to practicing dialogue with native Tosaben speakers, as well as increased

vocabulary knowledge through learning their lines. In addition, even participants with high levels of standard Japanese knowledge found that learning the Tosaben dialect through Genki significantly increased their ability to communicate with their co-workers and the local Kochi community. These results point to Genki being a way for JET participants in Kochi to mitigate some of the social isolation reported elsewhere (Hiratsuka, 2022; Jardon, 2018; Scully, 2001).

Regarding the second research question of how producing an online video was different from live theatre, the interviews suggest that there was less sense of community integration, due to the lack of individual interactions with audience members during and after performances. There was also somewhat reduced language learning due to the lack of individual practice time and interaction with local volunteers, leading to less spoken fluency practice and general conversation opportunities.

However, there were also advantages of making an online video. The first advantage was less pressure on actors to memorize lines. Similarly, there was less embarrassment if an actor made a mistake as the scene could be re-shot; there was no live audience to notice the error, only fellow cast members. In addition, having a YouTube video allowed participants to share their experience with a wider worldwide audience who would not normally be able to attend the performances in Kochi. It also provided a permanent product to show others. Finally, while not becoming involved in the local community to the same extent, doing online theatre was a novelty that allowed participants to engage in conversations with their new coworkers outside of Kochi. It was also an opportunity to continue Japanese study and maintain friendships that had formed during live Genki productions even after some JETs had left the country.

Overall, the people who did the online video version of Genki felt that the experience of making the video was worthwhile and rewarding. However, they also preferred the live theatre experience due to the increased social interaction with the local community and the audience’s reactions. It is also unclear whether this project could have succeeded without the pre-existing relationships the participants had developed through participating in Genki previously, as well as the specific skills (video editing and animation) that the creative team possessed. Regardless, the fact that Genki has continued to exist for over 25 years is a testament to how both participants and the local community believe in its value.



Bio Data

Philip Head is a lecturer at Osaka Jogakuin University and a doctoral student at Hiroshima University. His current research interests include the effects of listener language learning background on ratings of L2 English speech comprehensibility and the benefits of shadowing for English speech production and perception. He was a JET Programme ALT in Kochi from 2010 to 2015 and participated in Genki as an actor, writer, and photographer/videographer.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

First Interview, before filming began (March 11, 2021):

Began with introducing myself, my background as a former Kochi City ALT and Genki cast member to build rapport. This was followed by some background questions regarding type of job (ALT or CIR), nationality, number of years spent in Kochi.

- What is your role(s) in Genki?
- Why did you decide to join Genki?
- What was your previous background in Theatre?
- What was your Japanese level when you first came to Kochi and what is it now after doing Genki?
- How well could you understand Tosaben when you first arrived? How well do you know it now?
- How important was it to have the Tosaben volunteers for your learning of Tosaben?



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- How did participating in Genki affect your Tosaben abilities?
- What was your previous Genki experience?
- How was your experience on tour?
- How has your experience this year (online) compared to your experiences before Covid restrictions?
- Why did you continue with Genki after leaving Kochi? How does participating in Genki while outside Kochi feel?
- How will the online Genki be promoted compared to previous years?
- Will there be funds collected for scholarships this year? How important is the charity aspect of Genki?
- What equipment did you use for the online production?
- What are your thoughts on the new format?
- How did doing Genki affect your relationships with students and co-workers?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using theatre for language learning?
- How were the Tosaben volunteers involved?
- What were some advantages of the online production format?
- How did people get their props?
- How did the language learning compare to previous years?
- What were some issues that you ran into during production? How were they different from the past?
- How did you create the backgrounds?
- Any general comments for people who would like to try something similar in the future?
- What are the plans for Genki in the future?
- How was the overall experience? Would you do it again?
- Will you continue online or go back to traditional theatre?

Second Interview, after the Japanese YouTube video was released, September 4, 2021:

- What are your feelings about the finished video?
- How was the editing done?
- How was the directing done?
- How was the time commitment compared to a normal Genki production?
- What were your responsibilities for this production?
- How was the filming done?
- How was the script prepared?
- How was the rehearsal and production experience with cast members different from traditional Genki?
- How did non-JETs get involved in this production?
- How did having an almost all female cast and crew affect the experience?
- How does awareness of Genki among the public and the Kochi JET community compare to previous years?
- What has been the community reaction?
- How has your connection to the community been affected by the move to online?