

Drama and Language Learning

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Abstract

One of the duties of advisor to a university English Speaking Society in Japan is to oversee the production of a theatrical performance. This includes not only helping to direct the performance itself but also overseeing the writing of the play. As students have little experience with intercultural aspects of language use a great deal of rewriting must be done. The question of how much rewriting I can do without depriving students of the educational benefits of this club activity impelled me to explore this topic. Drama and language learning research describes how utilizing drama affords wide ranging positive returns for learners far beyond those involved with the writing of the script. It is with this knowledge that I am able to maintain the important educational elements of this club activity, while still helping students produce a high quality end product.

Introduction

This paper was born from the concern that in my role as advisor to a university English Speaking Society, I am overstepping my mark in how much I should do. My specific dilemma is how much script-writing help to give club members who are putting on a dramatic theatrical performance. In Nugent 2019 a similar issue was discussed in relation to the putting on of an ESS speech contest: As in that case, the challenge is always in achieving a balance between the club members' own work and how much help to give them. In trying to reconcile this issue I decided to consult the research concerning the educational benefits of drama and the language learning opportunities it affords. My hope is that in understanding the key features of drama that profit language learning, I will be able to maintain these important elements while still giving assistance and guidance to members.

English Speaking Society Advisor

The role of advisor to an English Speaking Society club in a Japanese university takes many forms. Arranging speech contests, helping to write and coach speeches and presentations and overseeing the theatrical productions that students perform are the main duties. As advisor for a university ESS club, I have always strived to make the activities as educationally sound as possible, not only in relation to the theories and best practices of learning, but also in not spoon-feeding the students. Getting the club members to produce high quality work is perhaps one of the most significant challenges however, and one that leaves me questioning what exactly *my* role is, and how much *I* should do vs. how much *they* should do. For example, when putting on the annual theatrical performance, the difficulty comes in finding a balance between a polished, high quality and well-presented end product, and the steps necessary for reaching that point. The main problems seem to arise from the students' lack of sophistication, experience and awareness of what's required: A lack in terms not only of language, but also of exposure to the target language culture. This manifests in the style of writing as well as the content, with little understanding of genre or socially appropriate language for particular situations. The result of these deficits is that the screenplay written by the club members, the script, has to be almost completely rewritten. Throughout the process of reviewing and rewriting the theatrical screenplays, I find myself struggling to maintain the content of the original script, while making it understandable to the audience, credible and realistic. Inevitably, it is with much resignation that most of the original content and storyline is lost during the correction process. At these times I wonder what the actual documented benefits of drama performances have been found to be on language learning. It seems obvious that in writing, memorizing and performing their original stage plays a great deal of language acquisition must be taking place, but how much benefit are students getting from acting from screenplays that are not written by them, i.e. that are written by me? It was with this question in mind that this inquiry was undertaken, with the hope that this knowledge would inform my practice as ESS advisor and so benefit the club members.

Drama in Language Learning

The word 'Drama' comes from the Greek meaning 'to act' or 'to be' and has been a staple of human expression for hundreds of years. In representing fictional situations, actors worldwide continue to entertain audiences and hold them spellbound in the realities they create as they portray the human condition.

Drama can be employed educationally in a number of ways and does not always aim for an end product of a finished performance. Some of the popular methods of implementing drama in the classroom include process drama, skits and role-plays. Process drama is one example of a dramatic practice that does not aim to create a final product such as a play or performance and so is said to be process-based rather than product-based (McGovern, 2017). Participants take on the roles of certain characters and seek to respond and interact in a way that is in keeping with their character and the situation they find themselves in. Although participants prepare beforehand, process drama is unscripted and depends upon improvisation. Other drama based activities such as skits and role-plays are often used by teachers to encourage students to use language in a more natural and fluent way, and may or may not involve a final end product of a performance. Whatever the approach of integrating drama into language learning, the main goal is to introduce aesthetic, creative and imaginative educational experiences for participants while they learn how to use the target language. Given that these aims differ from the approach of most textbooks, how does drama contribute to the skills and proficiencies necessary for learning a foreign language, and how do drama based activities aid learning? In order to examine such questions, let's first consider some of the relevant issues around learning a foreign language.

What makes a good language learner?

The skills associated with becoming a good speaker of a foreign language extend well beyond an understanding of grammar and the acquisition of vocabulary. They include such proficiencies as knowing *how* the language is used in terms not only of the linguistic choices that relate to meaning, but also those that take the social context into consideration. In the 1980's researchers Canale and Swain (Canale & Swain: 1980), introduced the idea that the ability to communicate effectively involved

four sub-competences:

- (i) Grammatical competence – the ability to create grammatically correct utterances.
- (ii) Socio-linguistic competence – the ability to make utterances that comply with social and cultural norms and expectations.
- (iii) Discourse competence – the ability to understand the communicative exchange within the larger context of the whole communicative event.
- (iv) Strategic competence – the ability to recognize and repair communication problems as they arise.

Building grammatical competence is the aim of most typical EFL textbooks, especially those found in the Japanese secondary school system. It involves an understanding of the forms and regulations of the language system itself and the ability to apply them for the purpose of communication.

Sociolinguistic competence entails an understanding of the way language is used within the social conventions of the target languages' culture, and is an important feature of being a good foreign language speaker. The genre, context and the audience must be taken into consideration in order to master this competence. Although textbooks and classroom lessons may try to introduce this knowledge, the variety of genres and situations that can realistically be experienced through a textbook are somewhat limited.

Discourse competence involves learners being able to see the bigger picture of the communicative event, including being able to interpret indirect messages. Like grammatical competence, discourse competence involves the knowledge and use of the linguistic system itself. It also depends however, upon familiarity with the cultural conventions that are embedded in the language choices speakers make.

Strategic competence is a skill important for language learners and native speakers alike, as any act of communication is one of a negotiation of meaning: All conversations involve a dynamic interplay of words as speakers express their individual ideas and attempt to reach a common understanding. Having this competence means that any failure or breakdown in communication is recognized and can be repaired.

In order to attain these different competences students need to have learning strategies to help them. Various categories of learning strategies have been defined and redefined since the idea first become popular in the 1970's. Although the categories vary, they all contain elements that fall

under these headings:

- Cognitive strategies: These include memory enhancement and methods of retention and retrieval.
- Meta-cognitive strategies: These are indirect learning strategies such as planning and evaluation as well as seeking opportunities to use the language.
- Affective strategies: These are ways learners regulate their emotions, keep a positive attitude and control their motivation.
- Social strategies: These are techniques that language learners use to interact with English speakers and use social information to aid in learning. (White, 1993).

There is some controversy concerning the idea of separating out the different strategies as those employed depend upon the context of the situation and may require the use of more than one strategy. Additionally, there is said to be a certain 'fuzziness' of terminology and disagreement of the definitions involved. This has resulted in many researchers preferring instead to list essential characteristics that learners need, for example the willingness to take risks and accept uncertainty, and using more psychologically based evaluations such as those for self-regulation. Notwithstanding these criticisms, the competencies and strategies above provide a framework through which to understand some of the aspects of learning a foreign language and how drama based activities can help students on their language-learning journey.

How does Drama help?

Consulting the research on drama and language learning has made me aware of the wide range of benefits accredited to these practices: From skills built through teamwork and cooperative learning to more specific language related abilities such as pronunciation and fluency. Belliveau and Kim (2013), in their informative study into drama and language learning research, report how drama based activities have been found to consistently improve students' fluency in the target language. Experiencing truly authentic communication, including the hesitations, repetitions and incomplete sentences that characterize natural speech, prepares learners to use English in a more realistic way themselves. Advocates of the TPR (Total Physical Response) approach to language learning also espouse the use of drama as a way to implement their key

concepts of total body learning. As drama based activities focus on the meaning of the language rather than addressing and deconstructing text into explicit points of grammar, it fits very well with the principles of TPR. The realistic contexts that drama activities promote makes the experience of using English multi-sensory and so more enduring and memorable. Studies have long shown connections between cognition, memory and emotional and physical experiences. Furthermore, theories of alternative ways of learning and knowing support the use of drama in its embodiment of a kinesthetic, interdisciplinary methodology (Cramer, et al. 2007). Aside from the learning implications of this integrated, whole-person approach, drama also involves many of the aspects of communication that are glossed over in textbooks and classroom lessons. Aspects such as eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, posture and the distance between speakers are important facets of communication, despite being non-verbal. In fact, non-verbal elements are said to account for up to 70% of human communication. Moreover, as anyone who has ever travelled to a foreign country knows, they are firmly rooted within the culture of the language and the people who use them, and are difficult to transfer. Through introducing these important and often neglected aspects of communication, drama based activities engender a greater cultural and social awareness as to the norms of conversation and language use of native speakers. Aside from developing non-verbal communication skills, there are many other ways that drama fosters more natural language use. Features of speech such as prosody, for example, are easier to understand and remember when encountered within a realistic context. Prosody is concerned with the properties of the larger units of speech, as opposed to individual phonemes, including such aspects of pronunciation as the pitch of the voice, intonation, pace, volume and tone. All these elements carry important meanings and messages and are grounded in social and cultural expectations and norms of use. Learning and applying such skills through the medium of drama, helps students to become familiar with and to practice using these important aspects of communication. Attending to such details of how native speakers communicate advances socio-linguistic competence, one of the four competences necessary to be a successful foreign language learner.

Developing intercultural communication skills is just one area where drama based activities contribute. Not only this but the learning that takes place is on a more broad-reaching level as students experience a deeper

engagement with the text. For example, in seeking to realistically portray a story, learners must consider the narrative and characters from multiple perspectives, (Belliveau & Won, 2013). In doing this, the culture and social situations of the characters and events must also be taken into account, and learners come to realize, possibly for the first time, that all actions and interactions take place through a filter of culture and context.

Drama based activities give learners opportunities to use authentic language in 'authentic' situations. Through this they can develop their understanding of the different genres of English and the interconnectedness of genre, register and style. Genre is the kind or type of interaction as defined by the situation or linguistic content; register is concerned with the language choices a speaker makes in relation to the particular purpose and social setting, and style is akin to the overall 'flavor' of the text. Because these features indicate, among other things, the levels of formality and politeness, they contribute much to the interpersonal aspects of communication. For example in English there are said to be five levels of formality, very formal, formal, neutral, informal and very informal or casual. Each category has a different register that reflects the context and the social position of the speakers in relation to each other. Consequently, even something as straightforward as which greeting to use, depends upon a juxtaposition of the particular situation and the speakers' social standing. Greetings ranging from, "How do you do?" to "Hey, what's up?" carry much more meaning than merely the function they both perform. The register to use depends upon the audience (the 'who'), the topic (the 'what'), the purpose (the 'why') and the location (the 'where'). Having an understanding of the different reasons for different linguistic choices helps learners to speak appropriately to native speakers without causing offence.

Discussion

Learning about the many advantages that drama brings to language learning eases my mind about my particular situation and the concern that I am overstepping my role as advisor. The particular challenges that I face include many caused generally by a lack of cross-cultural experience and understanding. Some of these, such as problems with genre, register and appropriateness of language choices are improved through drama in the ways discussed above. Not all challenges due to differences in culture are

as overt, however, or as easily resolved. One such problem concerns the discrepancy between the Western and the Japanese ideals concerning the structure of a storyline and plot. In the West, storylines are fundamentally confrontational with the plot revolving around a conflict and how the main character ultimately prevails. Typically, a problem appears near the end of the first act, and in the second, the conflict that this problem causes takes center stage as the character wrangles with his dilemma. Conflict is used in a story to create audience involvement, tension and to generate sympathy for the plight of the main character. The climax of the story involves a dramatic high point through which the hero survives, somehow transcending the difficulties he faces. Japanese writers however, use a plot structure that does not have the concept of conflict built in, but use elements of exposition and contrast to develop the story. Nothing impedes the protagonist, there may be no overt problem to overcome and nothing is pitted against anything else. This plot without conflict structure is called 'kishoutenketsu' in Japanese, and is found in all writing genres from poetry to manga-cartoon strips. While stylistic variation provides interesting elements to writing and storylines, a plot without conflict is considered by Western audiences to be dull. When I read the theater scripts written by the ESS members they are almost all lacking in the logic of the Western idea of a story; nothing significant happens and the main character has nothing to overcome, leaving the story itself seeming like a string of loosely connected events. While linguistic deficiencies can be remedied with dictionaries and teacher direction, and socio-cultural awareness can be deepened with more exposure to the target culture, bridging the gap between how different cultures represent reality appears to be an altogether greater challenge. Despite countless storyline meetings and explanations of Western story structure, it seems that this gap is just too great to be crossed. Even when a specific writing task is given, for example for some conflict to happen to the main character, it inevitably results in a minor event with no consequences or real meaning for the plot. This contrasting approach to the telling of a story results in a confusing and boring play for the Westerners in the audience, with the various characters seeming to behave in illogical and inconsistent ways. The amount of script rewriting that has to be done is largely due to this phenomenon, as students can't seem to grasp this very subtle yet important difference between Eastern and Western ways of thinking.

Conclusion

As a native speaking member of the teaching staff, not only am I here to guide students through their English courses, but also to exemplify the use of correct English, in terms of both grammatical correctness and equally as importantly, natural usage. This means that in good conscience I cannot endorse students producing presentations, speeches and theatrical productions in English in a form that amounts to incorrect or strange use of the target language. World English while growing in status, is still not fully embraced as an equal by the English speaking communities around the world. The consequence of this conclusion is that as advisor to the ESS club, therefore, I will continue to consider correcting English to native speaker level, as one of my duties. Despite depriving club members of the opportunity to arrive at a finished product by themselves, I feel this decision is justified. Through careful and very structured guidance I endeavor to get as much original content from students as possible, in reality however, I accept that the script has to be almost completely rewritten. And while performing from a prepared script can be considered, “non-interactive language use” and “skill-using rather than skill-getting” (Rod Ellis quoted in Kluge, 2018), students still benefit from the myriad of other advantages that putting on a theatrical performance brings. From pronunciation and fluency to an understanding of the social conventions for use; from self-confidence and motivation to a feeling of empowerment as they master their lines, performing a theater play in English is a fine achievement for any non-native speaker and one I believe, that contributes greatly to their progress as language learners.

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