

Making and Performing Drama in EFL Classrooms Based on “Starting Drama Teaching” by Michael Fleming

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Introduction

“Communication” and “Express oneself” Education are beginning to play an important part in the Japanese school curriculum. This is due to the shift in perspective of Japanese society towards a more multicultural outlook, people’s values are diversified. At Universities, students realize that they need to gain presentation and communication skills in order to get a better job and to be able to express themselves fully in multicultural settings. In English classrooms, communicative activities such as role playing, speech presentation, debate, etc. are now common. The use of drama is also becoming more widespread. Drama is not only entertainment but it is known to be a powerful tool for developing ideas and understanding feelings, both traits are also beneficial for foreign language learning. This paper will discuss some aspects of drama education theory and how to apply them to the EFL classroom describing the process of taking an idea through to a performance. The strategy outlined is from the Chubu University Oral Strategy course, which meets twice a week. The class size is 15. Students made their own script under a common theme, then after a series of improvisation activities and rehearsals they performed it at Oral Communication Festival, 2007 sponsored by Jacet Oral Communication Special Interest Group. I will also discuss the effect of presentation and watching someone else’s performance on student motivation and further learning.

1. Approach

Fleming (1994) suggests the following need to be paid attention to in planning drama

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- orientation: making, performing, responding
- organization: pair, small group, whole group
- mode: script, planned improvisation, unplanned improvisation
- techniques/conventions: tableau, questioning in role etc. (83)

I will discuss each of these four aspects of drama in turn.

1.1. Orientation

When drama is taught in the EFL classroom emphasis is most often on the ‘making’. The actual performance and the response to it are glossed over or even ignored completely. In this paper I hope to explain the vital part these latter processes play in both enthusing students and in language acquisition.

There are many techniques that can be applied to the making, I will discuss one, Play Building, in more detail later in the paper. Essentially, students use their own experiences as a guide for improvisation. Performing should not be the ultimate purpose of drama making. However, putting their own drama on the stage acts as a source of ‘tension’. Tension forces students to use the language they know. By using language in context acquisition is more likely to occur. I will develop this point later in the paper. Responding to the other people’s performance should be identified as an important aim of an EFL course by both teachers and learners.

The importance of having pupils reflect on the drama in which they have been involved has been a significant feature of drama practice, with writers[※] frequently asserting that it is in the reflection that learning actually occurs. (ibid)

In EFL classrooms it is common for students to watch videos/DVDs in the target language but they soon become bored with this sedentary activity. After being involved in creating their own drama, students are more interested in watching the presentation of class mates. They watch them critically, reflecting on their own presentation, which motivates them to improve in their next attempt.

1.2. Organisation

It is recommended to begin drama work with pairs/small group activities. It provides security, particularly for the participants who are new to drama. Also, it gives more chance for each student

[※]Burgess, R. and Baudry, P. (1985) *Time for Drama - A handbook for Secondary Teachers* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press) p. 145

to speak. Only when a class is comfortable and successful in small groups should whole class activities be attempted. Whole group work can provide a dynamic presentation and high quality of learning. However, it requires strong leadership from teachers and a huge amount of preparation. The pressure on the teacher is high. For some groups whole class activities may not be suitable.

1.3. Mode

Mode deals with the source of ideas, eg. from script or improvisation. For scripted work, drama is a useful way for understanding literature. By involving themselves in the scenes, participants can appreciate the context; characters and their feelings, why the story is carried out in a particular way, etc. Improvisation is work created without a written text. In this paper, I will focus on pre-planned improvisation, which may sound like an oxymoron because improvisation should not be planned. However, participants would be at a loss if they are thrown into a situation without any time to prepare. A typical mistake a teacher could make is giving an instruction such as; "You are the mother and you are the daughter. Act out a conversation at the dinner table." Another form of improvisation takes place where the context and the characters are all planned in advance. Perhaps students are directed to discuss or decide on their own, roles, the time, the place, the context, the outcome, etc. In the more detailed situation that develops from this method, learners concentrate on the meaning of the language they are creating. Fleming (ibid) asserts that the participants show higher quality of work; ...when the outcome of the drama is known in advance pupils are more at liberty to focus not simply on the meaning but on the way meaning is created. (89)

1.4. Techniques/Conventions

There are various drama techniques which are suitable for the EFL classroom. As stated earlier, pairs/small group work provides a secure structure. Another technique, interviewing each other in role can also be rewarding. Here participants answer questions from the viewpoint of their characters. The key elements are "conflict" and "tension" which will be discussed in the later chapter.

2. Play Building

This section outlines my attempt to introduce second year English literature students to

drama. Prior to this, they had been on a four month English experience program in the U.S.A. or Australia. In November, they started to prepare for a presentation at the Oral Communication Festival in mid December.

2.1. Discussion

Students were asked in groups of two to five to discuss misunderstandings between cultures. At the beginning they tended to focus on their own experience overseas - huge shopping malls, the size of food, fashion on campus, etc. Then they were asked to think about what they felt as strange or awkward when communicating with people in Japan. What would make a non-Japanese person feel strange? People tend to be keen on showing how to take a bath Japanese style, or how to eat with chopsticks etc, but these differences are easy to spot. I encouraged students to think more deeply. The groups came up with these three ideas;

1. being gay is not something special;
2. fast food in Japan is not fast!
3. asking for help in sensitive situations

Each group produced a brief outline which I checked to see if the story would work with limited props and settings. It is important to the teacher to emphasize that this exercise is a serious endeavor; students should not mess around or lose focus.

2.2. Making the scripts

At this stage, I suggested each story should be divided into two or three scenes for improvisation. Students were directed to think about the situation in detail-eg. Are there other people around? Where is it set? What is being said? Why? The element of conflict should become an integral part of the scene. In one of the skits my class produced; a student confesses that he is gay. Conflict arises as his friends do not have time to listen. Thinking about details of the conflict creates tension. The tension here must not make students feel nervous. It should help learners to think, in real life situations, how they would react and what should be said and done.

In this situation the tension causes the attention to be drawn to the use of language as well as the vocabulary. Consequently, the words and how they were used will stay in memory for a long time, the language is more likely to be acquired. After improvisation, it is important to develop a script

for the scene. This process is repeated for other scenes until the whole script is complete.

2.3. Rehearsals

Students select their own characters and begin to rehearse. Memorizing lines is not such a big problem because the context and the words were made by students themselves. Additionally because students started with improvisation their actions on stage were less forced. Hirano(2002) suggests peer evaluation at this stage between groups. The audience should consider; voice, blocking and empathy. For voice and blocking, peer evaluation is particularly useful. Rather than encouraging students to speak louder, experiencing the negative impact of a colleague speaking in a soft voice is more meaningful to them. Also, students will begin to understand why they should or should not stand in a particular spot on the stage. For creating empathy, a single rehearsal in Japanese is useful. Participants appreciate that a simple words such as "No" could be said in various ways and each way creates a feeling that is different.

2.4. Presentation

Final class presentations were video taped. Students had a chance to watch their own production and evaluate their own performance. The final presentations at the Oral Communication Festival were successful with encouraging feedback from other university students and teachers. It was particularly rewarding, to my students, as their observations drew laughs as the audience remembered similar experiences of their own. Watching other presentations on the same topic was also inspiring. Students appreciated that the same topic can be interpreted so differently from various points of view. Here are some comments from my students made after the final presentations;

- I did not feel as embarrassed as I thought. It is probably because in the presentation I am not myself, but someone else.
- I am so attached to the story because we made it.
- In drama, you have to think how you speak; speed, action, voice, etc to make your audience understand the story. Through rehearsals, I learned a lot, because I had to speak as I moved.
- Though I was very nervous, I felt good because I knew the audience was enjoying our drama.

As stated earlier, Japanese education places emphasis on presentation and communication skills but the actual chances for students are still limited. At the beginning of the course, student attitude towards presentation was negative. Through a series of improvisation activities, they came to enjoy sharing their ideas in front of the class. The biggest reward of performance is the

feeling of achievement, which motivates even more learning.

Summary

Many claims are made by advocates of drama techniques in literature. I agree with Hirano (ibid) that the key skills students can develop include;

- Presentation skill from performing in front of others
- Interpersonal communication skill through discussion with classmates and improvisational activities
- Critical observation skill by responding other people's drama

By creating their own context, learners can develop an awareness of their own learning and originality. In the communicative language classroom, there will always be some quiet students. They may seem to be uncooperative, but these shy students need more time to get ready, they look carefully at others, they do not want to do the wrong thing. Teachers need to encourage rather than pressure these individuals. I would like to conclude this article by quoting from Oriza Hirata, a stage director and script writer, (my translation)

You cannot teach children to communicate, or express themselves. Children will communicate when they need to. If you have something you really want to say, and you find it difficult to explain, then you start to look for a way to communicate and express yourself.

In other words, the job of the drama teacher is to help to create a situation where the students have something they want to say.

References

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Appendix

Actual script produced by students

Culture Clashes!

Episode 2

The Best Partner

Casts	Japanese Student 1	Yasuyuki
	Japanese Student 2	Tomohiro
	Japanese Student 3	Haruna
	Japanese Student 4	Tomoyo
	Jason	Yasuhiro

Scene 1: At a bar

Narrator : Yasuyuki is a Japanese college student studying at a university in Australia. He came with his friends from Chubu University. Tonight, he came to a bar to meet up with his Australian room mate, Jason.

Yasuyuki : Jason!

Jason : Hey.

(small talk)

Jason : So, do you like it here?

Yasuyuki : Yeah, it's great.

Jason : It's awesome. I love this place.

The slow music starts.

Jason : Oops, it's dance time.

Yasuyuki : Dance time?

Jason : Yeah. Just find a partner, and dance!

Stands up and took a guy's arm in the coner. Two men dance together.

Yasuyuki : Jason, what are you doing? You are dancing with a man!

Narator : Just then, Yasuyuki realized that people here are all MEN.

Yasuyuki : Hey, I can't stand this!

Jason : What?!

Yasuyuki : I'm going!

Jason : Why? What's up?

Yasuyuki : You took me to a gay bar!
 Jason : Yeah, you asked for it.
 Yasuyuki : I didn't!
 Jason : You asked me to take you to my favorite place!
 Yasuyuki : Yeah. But not to a gay bar! *Off stage*
 Jason : Hey, wait!

Scene 2: At a school cafeteria

Yasuyuki is at a cafeteria table, studying. His Japanese friends enter.

Friends : Hey, Yasuyuki.
 Hello.
 Yasuyuki : Hi.
 Haruna : Did you have a good time?
 Yasuyuki : What?
 Tomohiro : Last night. You had a date.
 Yasuyuki : Date?
 Tomoyo : With Jason!
 Yasuyuki : NO! We went out, but it wasn't a date.
 Haruna : It's okay. We know.
 Tomohiro : We all know.
 Yasuyuki : Know what?
 Tomoyo : He is gay.
 Yasuyuki : Yes, he is. So what?
 Tomohiro : We are just worried.
 Yasuyuki : Worried about what?
 Haruna : You know, Jason is your room mate.
 Tomoyo : And he is gay.
 Yasuyuki : So?
 Tomohiro : You have to be really careful.
 Yasuyuki : Why?
 Tomohiro : Because he is gay!
 Yasuhiro : You don't understand.
 Tomohiro : What?
 Yasuhiro : Jason is gay, yes, I know. But it doesn't matter. He is a great guy, and, maybe, he is the best friend of mine..

Haruna : That's not a friendship.
 Tomohiro : If you keep hanging out with him, someday, you'll become...
 Tomoyo : Yeah, someday, you know...
 Yasuyuki : You don't know Jason. I'll let you meet him.

Yasuyuki phones Jason on his mobile. Soon Jason enters.

Jason : Hi.
 Friends : Hi.
 Yasuyuki : Guys, this is my room mate, Jason. Jason this is Tomoyuki,.....***introduces every one***
 Jason : So, do you guys like Australia?
 Friends : Yeah, it's okay. I like it. etc.
 Jason : That's good.
 Tomoyo : Acutually, Haruna has a problem.
 Haruna : Yeah, my essay.
 Jason : Why?
 Haruna : My supervisor is very hard. I have a lot of assignments every week.
 It really is difficult for me to write an essay.
 Jason : You know, Haruna, if you don't mind, I'm happy to help you.
 Haruna : Really?
 Jason : Yeah, I'm free this weekend, so if you ring me, we can sort something out.
 Tomoyo : Wow, tht's so nice. You are so lucky.
 Haruna : Thank you. So..., can I have your number?

They exchange their mobile number.

Tomoyo : You know, I have to confess.
 All : What? What do you have to confess?
 Tomoyo : We didn't know you well, so...
 Haruna : Yeah, we weren't sure about you.
 Jason : Because I'm gay?
 Haruna, Tomoyo : Yeah.
 Jason : What do you think about me now?
 Tomoyo : You are nice!
 Haruna : Not just because you offered to help with my assignment!
 Tomoyo : So, ... Thank you, Yasuhiro.
 Haruna : For making us to meet Jason.

Jason : Okay, people, I have to go. I've got a class.
 All : Yeah, me, too. Let's go. ... etc.
 Tomohiro : Wait.
 All : What?
 Tomohiro : I have to confess.
 All : Now what? What do you have to confess? Etc.
 Tomohiro : I'm..., I'm..., I'm GAY!
 All : What!
 Don't worry. We are still friends. It's okay. ... etc.
 Tomohiro : It's okay, now. Because I'm in Australia. But you know, when we go back to
 Japan...when I am in Japan, I don't know what to do. I can't tell my parents, I
 can't tell my baseball team!!
 Jason : Hey, let's not worry about it.
 Yasuyuki : Yeah, there is no point worrying about it now.
 All : We always support you, okay?
 Haruna : We have to go.
 Tomoyo : Yeah, we are late.
They all stand up and go off stage, apart from Tomohiro and Jason.
 Jason : Tomohiro!
 Tomohiro : Yes?
 Jason : Don't worry so much. Okay? You'll be alright.
 Tomohiro : Thank you.
 Jason : If you want to have a chat, you can always call me. Just
 take it easy, okay?
 Tomohiro : Thanks, Jason. Thank you.
Tomohiro shook Jason's hand for a long time.

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