

USING DRAMA TO IMPROVE DISCOURSE IN THE CLASSROOM

Phoebe Lyon

English Language Institute, Kanda University of International Studies

ABSTRACT

Getting students to use language that facilitates discussion is an essential element in a language learning classroom. This paper summarizes a poster presentation given at the 2015 Speech Drama and Debate conference in Okinawa, Japan. It highlights how student-developed dialogues and the resulting filmed dramatic performances in a series of classroom lessons can be utilized to have students recognize, practice, and reflect on their performance. This can help improve their use of key expressions in various situations. The focus was on the appropriate use of the target expressions and their functions. In addition to a step-by-step outline of the process that was used, an analysis of the lessons with regards to the success of the activities will be presented.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to document the rationale and organization of a series of lessons within a Freshman English (FE) course in the English Language Institute (ELI) program at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan. It also provides an analysis of the instructor's perception of the success of the activities which transpired over four ninety-minute lessons over the course of a week. The original FE course was developed and expanded between 1996 and 2010 (Johnson, Selman, & Lyddon, 2016), and as stated by Ford and Torpey (1998), its goals were to produce a socially interactive environment in order to promote discursial competence and emphasise communicative rather than analytical use of language. 2011 saw the beginning of a renewed process to review, reimagine and redesign the FE syllabus. The resulting process syllabus was designed to develop students' communicative-sociocognitive skills whilst retaining the need for learners to develop self-awareness and to promote self-directed learning (Johnson, Selman, & Lyddon, 2016). Six core processes were chosen to provide learners with a variety of learning experiences. These processes are self-reflection, audio-visual analysis, data analysis, extended interaction, communication strategies, and problem solving (Johnson, Selman, & Lyddon, 2016). The three processes focused on in this series of lessons were communication strategies, audio-visual analysis, and self-reflection.

METHOD

Rationale

Although most students entering universities in Japan, even those who will major in English language studies, may have had many years of experience studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), they often have limited conversational English skills (Osterman, 2014). With this in mind, a focus in this series of lessons was to assist students in becoming more confident in their ability to communicate orally. This complements the overall aims of the FE course, which is to facilitate a communicative environment. Although this is necessary throughout the semester, it is even more so at the beginning, when even simple classroom language is often a struggle for learners.

Furthermore, while some freshman students may have been exposed to role-plays and dialogues while taking high-school English classes, they might have had few opportunities to reflect on their language use. From student feedback, this does not seem to be a common element in Japanese high-school English classes due to the high emphasis on exam preparation. Self-reflection is important because according to Biggs (1999), reflection is necessary for deep learning, and without it, only surface learning is possible. Drama is also a way for learners to engage more fully in the process of language learning, providing a reason to use the language. While rehearsing, students are able to establish a character's persona, injecting fun into the classroom, motivating even the most shy or nervous students to participate (Miccoli, 2003).

Thus, with the goals of the ELI, and more specifically the FE course in mind, a series of lessons was developed to offer learners support as they navigated language choices to enhance their ability to look beyond form to function and also be allowed a degree of creative freedom. The lessons encouraged the use of drama to make students more aware of their language choices as a way to facilitate more effective communication. Upon completion of the lessons, the students would be asked to analyze the video and reflect on their language use. This was done to foster self-awareness and allow them discover room for improvement. The students were also asked to reflect on the video-making process, including the various activity types, as another avenue for developing self-awareness.

Organization of the Lessons

In a series of classroom lessons, students were introduced to useful classroom expressions along with their corresponding functions and given opportunities to practice them. The expressions related to the following functions:

- starting a conversation or discussion,
- asking for ideas,
- agreeing,
- disagreeing,
- asking for more information or for an explanation,

- checking a misunderstanding, and
- saying something you are unsure of.

Students were given a handout to introduce them to common expressions and their related functions, and time was spent checking understanding and practicing the production of correct intonation. Once students were familiar with the expressions, a sample dialogue was distributed for the expressions to be seen in context. In addition to practicing the dialogue as written, a substitution activity was included, whereby students replaced underlined parts of the dialogue with alternative expressions from the previous handout. Students repeatedly changed roles as they read the dialogues, allowing them to practice new expressions as they continued to substitute expressions, being mindful that new expressions were appropriate and did not change the function/intended meaning of the dialogue. Once they had exhausted all possibilities and practiced with multiple partners, through teacher observation, it was clear that they had become more confident and fluent using the target expressions.

The next step involved students brainstorming situations around campus where it might be useful for them to use these expressions. This was done to highlight that the classroom is not the only place for English use. They proposed many ideas that included:

- classroom discussions,
- project work,
- asking a teacher for information/clarification,
- asking a learning advisor for help,
- talking to a teacher or learning advisor in the ELI lounge (a space on campus where students have access to self-study materials and can talk to other students and staff in English), and
- talking to another student in the ELI lounge.

These were all situations that they expressed they had either already encountered or thought that they might encounter and in which they hoped to avoid using Japanese. After being placed in groups, students selected one situation in which they would like to feel more confident with regards to their English-speaking ability. Once a situation had been decided on, they worked together to write a dialogue which necessitated including some of the target expressions. No minimum or maximum number of expressions or functions was set. This allowed students freedom to show what they were capable of. It also assisted the teacher in determining what further teaching might be necessary.

Students were then given time to practice and finally film their skits. They were able to choose from a selection of face masks (of both teachers and learning advisors) that they might see around campus. The reasoning for this was that it might be less intimidating to take on the role of somebody other than themselves, especially if one of the characters in their designed skit happened to be a teacher or learning advisor. Furthermore, by providing a mask, there is an added element of fun and motivation. From observation, students found

this to be a fun activity and seemed to relax. There was laughter and smiling as the students interacted with each other. Some feedback from making the videos was: "I enjoyed making a movie", "I enjoyed talking in English", "I could know their real characters", and "I enjoyed talking about the contents of conversation with my friends!"

Once the students were happy with their performances, the videos were collected and shared. The students were then required to watch and critique each group's video. The video analysis task required students to note which expressions were used in each dialogue and ascertain the corresponding functions. Through this activity, the students' awareness of how many expressions their group included was raised. Furthermore, they were able to compare their own dialogues, use of language, and performances to those of others. This helped them realize the existence of further opportunities to extend and improve their own group's dialogue. This could be done by setting the scene more carefully, speaking more clearly, and adding more information, including but not limited to, more expressions. The following feedback indicates that the students enjoyed watching other groups' performances and found the self- and peer-analysis tasks to be very helpful: "I learned some functions for each conversation", "I learned how to start a conversation", "These expressions are very useful", and "I learned how to use many kinds of expressions".

Possibly due to a competitive element, students were quite vocal about wanting to make improvements to their first dramatic performances. Although not in the original plan for this set of lessons, the teacher decided to take advantage of the students' motivation to improve and allowed a second round of videos. Students were given the opportunity to edit their scripts and re-record them. They were highly motivated to do this the second time and were quite competitive. Upon completion, students were once again asked to record all instances of target language and identify the correct functions. Motivation continued to be high for this task due to the students' competitive nature.

DISCUSSION

In the second set of videos, it was rewarding to discover that every group extended their dialogue with relevant content, which included additional expressions and functions. In the follow-up videos, the dialogues displayed more examples of asking for more ideas, asking for more clarification, agreeing, and disagreeing. This resulted in the edited dialogues sounding more natural than the first attempts and showed that the students were able to make more enlightened decisions. By seeing their original works and being able to compare with others, they were ideally going beyond simply inserting expressions for the sole purpose of checking off a box to complete a task. Students watched all of the new role-play videos and appeared excited to see the improvements.

Overall, having students complete these activities to help them identify, practice, use, and reflect upon practical classroom language appeared to be a success. Having the students not

only act out the role-plays but also film them in the setting where the conversation was taking place involved more skills than the simple reading of a dialogue. In addition, having a visual to view and reflect on made them more acutely aware of how a person's whole body is involved in language use. Filming required them to think about posture, volume, and eye contact in a way that they might otherwise have not fully noticed had they just been sitting at a desk reading aloud. By doing this series of activities, students became familiar with the target expressions and more comfortable using them. The students enjoyed being writers, actors and critics during the ongoing lesson activities and gave positive feedback about their experiences.

CONCLUSION

Taking a simple dialogue and transitioning it into a creative role-play activity was a successful way of raising students' awareness of classroom language, their use of it and how they could more fully utilize its use. Adding a drama element into the classroom increased student motivation by injecting fun and imagination into the activity. Student feedback and teacher flexibility allowed for a modification of the initial plan. Taking advantage of heightened student motivation led to increased productivity, resulting in an even more positive and satisfying product. Use of two of the six core processes, notably the video analysis and reflection, which are a key component in the FE curriculum, led to a strengthened awareness of the target language. This in turn promoted communicative competence, yet another core process. Students and teacher alike were impressed by the end results, which were entertaining as well as practical.

REFERENCES

- Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Ford, K., & Torpey, M. (1998). Principles and practice of materials design for promoting interaction and interdependence in the EFL classroom. *The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies*, 10, 397-436.
- Johnson, N. H., Selman, A., & Lyddon, P. A. (2016). Redesigning the freshman English syllabus: A pedagogy of process and transformation. *The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies*, 28, 355-376.
- Miccoli, L. (2003). English through drama for oral skills development, *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 122–129.

Osterman, G. L. (2014). Experiences of Japanese university students' willingness to speak English in class: A multiple case study. *SAGE Open*, 4(3), 1–13.