

An Appropriate English-learning Activity for Japanese University Students

— A Case Study of Shinshu University Students —

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I. Introduction

In Ihara and Kitazawa's research (1992), first, the learning styles of the students at the Faculty of Education of Shinshu University, Nagano, Japan, was evaluated using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory.

The evaluation showed that among Shinshu University students, the most prevalent type was CE (73.5%), followed by AE (40.1%). CE type students favor an experience-based approach to learning, because they rely heavily upon feeling-based judgments. They benefit most from feedback and discussion with others. AE type students are extroverts who learn best from engaging in homework, small group discussions, and so on. From another angle, the evaluation showed that 35 per cent of our students were "Divergers". They are interested in people, sympathetic and emphatic. They are strong in imaginative ability. It also showed that 35.8 per cent of students were "Accommodators" who are good at doing things.

Secondly, an approach integrating all of these factors was sought. The ideal approach would have to include simulation exercises, language interaction, expressive communication, communicative behavior, situational dialogues, learning through doing, activity methods, participatory interaction, and so on. From among a variety of approaches and methods proposed, one which meets most of these conditions was identified: the "Drama Method". This method seems to be the most suitable for our students, because it demands experience, feeling, emotion, empathy, and sometimes discussion with peers; furthermore, the students can employ specific situations in which they can become involved. It also seems desirable because it requires an intuitive approach emphasizing imagination rather than theoretical analysis, as well as adaptation to specific immediate circumstances; therefore, the students must treat each situation as a unique case.

However, by "Drama Method" we do not necessarily mean having the students actually enact dramas in the classroom. Rather, it might be more appropriate to say the

“Via-Drama Method”. Using drama techniques to learn English seems to be more useful for the students than merely presetting plays.

Lastly, from a variety of possible various Via-Drama activities, the “talk and listen” system was chosen as one of the most suitable activities for students. It was developed from a technique used by many professional actors to learn their lines and to sound natural by listening and responding to not only what is said but how it is said. By using “talk and listen” the students should develop a conversational tone, avoid rote memorization, make their dialogues come alive, and enjoy the experience all the more. And one example of “talk and listen” activities was illustrated, using “Talk and Listen Cards”.

However, it goes without saying that improving students’ communicative ability requires more than just the “talk and listen” system. We need to develop yet another via-drama activity for the next step. The purpose of this paper is, first, to discuss the importance of dramatic activities in general, and, second, to find a suitable via-drama activity to teach English to Japanese university students according to their learning style, and, third, to examine the suitability of the new activity.

II. Drama as Reality

S. J. Savignon (1983: 206), quoting a passage from Shakespeare (*As You Like It*, II, 7), states that “All the world is a stage”. On this stage we play many roles in our daily lives, roles for which we improvise scripts from the models we observe around us. Parent, child, sister, brother, teacher, student, employer, friend, and foe—all are roles that imply certain prescribed ways of behaving and speaking. Sociolinguistic rules of appropriateness have a bearing on these expected behaviors. Familiar roles may be played with little conscious attention to style. New and unfamiliar roles, on the other hand, must be played with an awareness of how our intended meanings are being interpreted by others.

If the world may be thought of as a stage, with actors and actresses who play their parts as best they can, drama, by the same token, may be seen as an opportunity to know reality, a reality that may go unnoticed by players caught up in the familiar roles of their daily lives. By providing an occasion to focus on feelings and relations, drama serves both actors and audience as an avenue to the discovery of truths. Any sense of a distinction between role and reality fades, then, if we consider life and stage as intimately entwined in human relations.

Fantasy and playacting are a natural and important part of growing up. Make-believe and the familiar “you be, I’ll be” improvisations of which children are so fond are routes to self-discovery and growth. They allow young learners to experiment,

to try things out—things like hats and wigs, moods and postures, gestures and words. As opportunities for language use, role playing and the many related activities that constitute dramatic arts are likewise a natural component of L2 learning. They allow learners to experiment with the roles they play or will play in real life.

Drama, then, is real and provides an opportunity for real language use. Role playing allows learners to explore situations that would otherwise never come up in a classroom. Fantasy, moreover, is welcomed by learners who do not want to spend all of their time in class talking about grammar, themselves, or the opinions of their classmates. The acceptance of play as a component of a curriculum has an additional virtue: it increases the possibilities for a variety of ensemble or group-building strategies that are well known in the drama and have much to contribute to the creation of community within an L2 classroom. Like a rehearsal, the language class must be open and conducive to the sharing of ideas and experiences. Participants should be comfortable with one another if they are to feel free to experiment. They should not be afraid to be wrong in front of their classmates because this exploration is what rehearsals are for.

III. Drama in the English Classroom

With the increasing emphasis on letting people be themselves and helping people to know and express themselves, the idea of using drama techniques came to the fore. As J. H. Bushman & K. P. Bushman (1986: 28) point out, it is a natural element of language-arts courses, since drama can be used most effectively in bringing about the integration of the subject areas in English. By its very nature, drama deals with the whole person and may involve at various stages all aspects of the human being. Drama in the English classroom, however, needs to be defined apart from that which is taught in a course concentrating on performance. D. Barnes (1968: 8) states:

Drama should be seen as part of this classroom talk. Like all task it may arise from a topic proposed by the teacher, from a shared experience, or from a work of literature. Drama, however, differs from other talk in three ways: movement and gesture play a larger part in the expression of meaning; a group working together upon an improvisation needs more deliberately and consciously to collaborate; the narrative framework allows for repetition and provides unity that enable the action more easily to take on symbolic status—to have meaning beyond the immediate situation in which it occurs.

An objective in the use of drama in the English class, then, is to expand the boundaries of experiences for students so that they may develop a more complete understanding of themselves, their work, and their relationships to other people. As Barnes (1968: 12) suggests:

All secondary teachers know pupils who, although able to perform written tasks in the explicit and general language required by schools, cannot join in a free discussion of the same topic [and]...they cannot think aloud in the role. Students so deprived...need urgently an education directed by dramatic methods in which they are not presented with final certainties, but are required to face the uncertainties involved in discussing and planning their work...

Drama in this sense can be used freely within any English class. It is as effective with composition and language as it is with literature. It adds a more exciting dimension to learning and it helps to bring about effective communication.

IV. Drama Activities

Drama, as S. Holden (1981 : 131) defines it, can be said to cover all activities in which students play *themselves* in an *imaginary* situation or play as *imaginary* person in an *imaginary* situation. Her definition suggests an element of imagination, and this, perhaps, is its value in education generally and in language teaching in particular. It can stimulate the imagination and motivate the student to *use* and *experiment with* the language he has already learned. With dramatic activities, we don't have to talk in pattern practices and drills. We can talk in ideas, with emotion, and with feeling.

A lot of drama activities have been proposed so far. Through the "talk and listen" method, which we advocated as one of the most suitable methods for our students, with access to the script, students acquire their parts through speaking them and listening to others. Thus, all concerned have much practice in listening carefully, as well as in expressing themselves in the language, with attention to the motivation behind the words.

Even in *classroom role playing*, students are always able to be themselves, thinking how they would act and relate in these circumstances in a different culture. As students involve themselves in their roles, gestures and intonation follow. It is desirable not to correct, but to allow students grow through what they are doing.

If plays are too ambitious for some (and such projects are usually undertaken after a basic course), there is plenty of room for *improvisations* in class. For example, one plans a situation with a conflict, which different students act out extempore, trying to solve the problem on their feet with other students coming forward with suggestions. There is again much listening and speaking by the students themselves.

A similar approach was advocated by Di Pietro, in what he termed the open *scenario*. Di Pietro's interest was in the real-life roles we play, both on a long-term basis and in episodes of interaction. He (1981 : 27-33) believes that culturally acceptable behavior in these roles can be learned through interactional games and classroom scenarios. In the open-ended scenario, new information is introduced into a fully described situation, so as

to force decisions and alter the direction of the action. Students prepare in groups for one role in the scenario; then one member of each group acts out the situation, adapting extemporaneously to the unpredicted course the other players are taking. Di Pietro's open scenario approach is much more structured than improvisations, in that students prepare their versions carefully in groups.

Scarcella's concept of the *socio-drama* also calls for student discussion of a story with a clearly definable problem and a dilemma point, from which the students are to continue the story with improvisational acting. "Socio-drama," Scarcella (1987: 208) states, "is a type of role-playing involving a series of students' enactments of solutions to a social problem. The problem takes the form of an open-ended story containing one clear, easily identifiable conflict which is of relevance to the students." As some students extemporize the solution, the others decide on the effectiveness of the solution. New solutions are proposed and acted out, until some consensus is reached. The socio-drama is usually followed by written work, a reading assignment, or an aural comprehension exercise.


Still others have advocated the techniques of *creative drama* to relax students and overcome their resistance to being other than their usual cultural selves. In this approach movement and sound, in imaginative situations and implausible roles, precede actual use of the second language, which then becomes less intimidating. In these activities, everyone participates, individuals lose themselves in the group, and all become less inhibited, thus preparing them for the experience of sounding and acting differently, while cooperatively developing new communication skills.

Maley and Duff provide many activities of a dramatic nature that can be woven into any class structure. As they (1978: pp. 3-4) point out, a statement takes its meaning from the intentions of the speakers and their relations to each other, so that even a simple statement like "It's eight o'clock." can have a number of meanings and varying forms of emotional content. The drama approach enables students to use what they are learning with pragmatic intent, something that is most difficult to learn through explanation. Forcing the teacher from center stage, it gives students space to work with language in ways that are enjoyable, memorable, and continually varying.

In all of these approaches we can see the levels of the hierarchy of needs being satisfied: physiological needs for movement and expression, security in feeling part of a caring, sharing group, esteem for oneself and for others as the contribution of each is seen to be essential to the activity of all, and finally self-realization (discovering not only who one is but also who one can be and what one can achieve in cooperation with others). We must see the breaking-up of traditional authority structures and postures in the classroom, as well as the disappearance of the traditional classroom setting of forty or forty-five desks lined up facing the teacher, who stands on the platform full of authority.

V. Skit-writing, Skit-acting and Act-finding activity

Among so many drama activities and extensions of them, how can we choose those most suitable for our students? We have developed the following activity in accordance with their learning styles as revealed by the Kolb's Learning Style Inventory :



January 1992

ENGLISH WORKSHOP

英語のworkshop（ワークショップ）という単語には、作業場、工作部屋、文学・芸術の創作方法、研究会という意味があります。英語は現代社会のコミュニケーションツールとして最も必要とされている国際語であり、これまでに私たちが蓄積してきた英語の技能が十分用いられる機会も至る所に用意されています。この時間を早速コミュニケーション創作作業に充ててみたいと思います。

CREATIVE ACTIVITY TASK

⇨ **PURPOSE OF THIS TASK**
(この課題の目的)

To express a certain word describing a human emotion or behavior through dialogues. And also to grasp the general idea of a situation by observing others interacting.

⇨ **YOUR MISSION**
(作業の課程)

Part 1. Create and act out a short skit with a partner to explain the word assigned to you.

Part 2. While a pair of students are presenting their skit, you are to guess what word they are trying to describe.

DIALOGUE

WORD ASSIGNED : _____ (_____)

Figure 1

A sample dialogue was acted out by M. Martinsen and S. Martinsen according to the following :

Sample Dialogue

The below is a conversation between a flight attendant and a passenger on board.

Flight attendant : Sir, here is a blanket.
 Passenger : Thank you. That's nice of you.

 Flight attendant : Would you like some coffee?
 Passenger : Yes, black please.

 Flight attendant : Is everything all right?
 Passenger : Yes, everything is great.

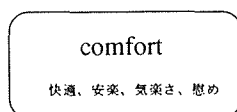


Figure 2

In this activity, the class was first divided into twosomes, and these constituted the 'working pairs' for the activity. Next, each pair was assigned a word from the list in Figure 3. There were more pairs than words, so some of the words were assigned to six different pairs.

WORD LIST

1. surprise
2. doubt
3. disappointment
4. complaint
5. appreciation
6. decision
7. apology
8. confidence
9. comparison
10. relief
11. envy
12. jealousy
13. arrogance
14. anger
15. shyness

Figure 3

Thirdly, the students were asked to create a short skit on the paper given and act

it out with a partner to explain the word assigned to each pair. Lastly, while a pair of students were presenting their skit, the other students were to guess what word they were trying to describe and write it down.

Spontaneous verbal expression is not solely the product of knowledge of and skill in using a language code. It presupposes that the student has something to communicate. This activity assigns the students a word to explain, and it follows that they have something to communicate.

The evaluation showed that our students like small group discussions and are strong in imaginative ability. Besides, they are good at the experience-based approach to learning. In the process of creating short skits, each pair of students needs to discuss it with each other, and make the most of their imaginative ability and experience.

The evaluation from another angle showed that our students are interested in people, sympathetic, emphatic, and good at doing things. Acting out a skit requires these elements, and students can treat each situation as a unique case. In order to guess what word is being presented, imaginative ability and experience would also be needed.

All the pairs of students could, within fifteen minutes, create a short skit to explain the word assigned to them. All the students vividly acted out their skits, and most of them were full of wit, although none of them was as advanced in literature and culture as we had expected. Here we will present a skit which one pair of students wrote :

WORD ASSIGNED : *DISAPPOINTMENT*

T : What did you do last Sunday, Yasuko ?

Y : I went to the movies with my boy friend.

T : With your boy friend ?

I watched television all day alone.

Y : Oh, you are a poor girl.

T : Please introduce a nice boy to me.

Y : All right.

T : Look, he is a handsome boy, isn't he ?

Do you know him ?

Y : Oh, you are unlucky. He is my boy friend.

T :

The rate of correct answers which the student audience guessed was lower than expected. Out of a possible 20 points, scores ranged from 13 to zero, and the average rate was only 5.21 points. But when we investigated the relation between the answers given about an assigned word and the skits given to illustrate it, we found that a considerable number of skits were vague or imprecise in illustrating the target word. For instance, the example skit given above could be taken not only as disappointment, but also as doubt

or jealousy. Of course, some of the unclear skits may have elicited the correct response from the audience, but others did not. Anyway, it is true that the skit draws to such a great extent upon non-verbal messages that the acting ability of a student could also affect the understanding of the meaning.

VI. Conclusion

We have developed a via-drama activity in accordance with our students' learning style. This skit-writing, skit-acting and act-finding activity would ideally help our students to acquire English. However, we have to admit that this activity leaves a problem unsolved. That is that in this activity our students are not given any reading practice except for reading what they have written down. Usually via-drama activity comprises mainly listening and speaking. But it is desirable that not only listening and speaking, but also reading and writing are involved in the learning process, since those skills also play an important role in communication. In that sense, though we may consider via-drama activity a valuable addition to our repertoire of teaching techniques, we must address the problem of how to include reading practice in the activity in order to promote integration of the four skills.

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(1992年4月27日 受理)