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Enhancing EFL learning in college through performance festivals – a holistic approach

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Abstract

A group of university teachers have worked to organize and host an annual performance festival for 20 years. About a hundred students from several universities gather and perform a variety of oral activities every year. Students engage with everything from everyday events to long-standing global issues through drama, and thus this festival is a unique educational experience. Touching on the current status of EFL (English as Foreign Language) within Japanese Universities, this paper aims to discuss the significance of the festival through briefly describing some sample performances and their process of preparation. While the festival is not in any way competitive, both students and teachers attending are expected to provide some form of feedback to every performance viewed. Expressing themselves at the festival is especially meaningful in the context of EFL, where no immediate need to use the language in their daily life exists for the typical Japanese student. Additionally, participants are likely to gain a sense of achievement and confidence through the process and encouraging response at the festival. Finally, students learn to collaborate efficiently and build leadership skills. Challenges in terms of preparation and management of the festival are also discussed in this paper.

1 Introduction: EFL in Japanese higher education

The Japanese government has implemented a series of improvements in English education[1] to keep up with globalization: introduction of English education from elementary schools, increase of ELT (English language assistant teachers), encouragement of English use in classrooms on the part of teachers in the curriculum and so on. Due to these factors, proficiency of English of junior and senior high school students has risen slightly every year. However, despite the fact that more than 90% of high school students going on to higher education, English is still considered something only necessary to pass entrance exams by the vast majority.

[1] For the detailed policy, see http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/1356541.htm.

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DIE (Drama in Education) is partially implemented in Japanese education; however, it is almost entirely absent from EFL (English as Foreign Language) teaching in Japan. Public speaking, discussion and debate are listed in educational guidelines from the government as "advanced oral activities" for high school students. Meanwhile, drama or drama-related activities are nonexistent in formal curricula, and are instead treated as extra-curricular activities.

It should come as no surprise then, to find that most Japanese university students that study English consider it nothing more than another academic obstacle to overcome, rather than a language with many practical applications. Attaining certain scores in some nation-wide proficiency tests such as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) are often referred to as goals for job hunting; yet, such scores do not necessarily guarantee an ability to effectively communicate in English. Although the test is designed to assess communicative competence, its multiple choice format limits the extent of knowledge gained on the part of the student. Their proficiency also varies a great deal in the same class. However, Donnery (2014) describes her process drama project in university EFL, which suggests DIE can work in Japan.

2 The Oral Communication Festival (OCF) and its features

For the past two decades, a group of University Teachers, including the authors of this paper, have worked to put on an annual drama festival to provide students and teachers with the opportunity to experience drama first-hand. The performances include oral interpretation of English poems, major scenes of popular movies, Shakespeare adaptations, translation of Japanese comic performances called Rakugo, and so on. Students are also encouraged to create their own plays, and this has proven to be a popular option of its own. Listed below are the major characteristics of the festival:

- No competition is involved

The performances are not ranked; therefore, students with low proficiency or little confidence can participate. The focus is not on the students winning popularity or linguistic superiority, but on attaining their own goals.

- Appreciate and evaluate (offer constructive criticism to) each other

Students performing are also encouraged to watch others perform. All participants are asked to stay in the room and write comments for the others. Immediately after each performance, the teacher of the next presenter gives comments orally and then explains the background of her students– the purpose and outline of the performance, nature of the group etc.

- Variety of performances

An average festival consists of 5 – 10 different performances, which can include creative dramas, oral interpretation of poems, novels, adaptation of plays, movies, translation of Japanese traditional comic plays, public speaking and so on. The only requirement of the performance piece is that it involves some degree of oral communication.

- Most of the performances are part of the curriculum

For some students, the performance fulfills a significant part of their academic requirements, while to others the festival is entirely extra-curricular. The majority of students however, have some sort of academic requirement fulfilled by attending the festival. All the performances are instructed or guided by the teachers involved.

- Teachers discuss the teaching methods and theories afterwards

After the festival, the teachers gather and discuss the performance, its preparation process, methods and so on. The festival is video-recorded and saved on DVD. Written comments of the participants are also duplicated and shared with them later. The teachers write down the aim, the outline of the production along with a preparation timeline and their reflection after the festival. This record is shared with the group members. They continue to study the pedagogy of oral communication and report on it at ESL-related conferences (Shiozawa et al. 2013).

The performances all take place in a large classroom with minimal lighting, sound, and staging equipment.

3 Sample productions for a festival

3.1 Shakespeare in an EFL communication class

Studying Shakespeare's plays is not very common in a communicative language classroom. This is mainly due to the fact that Shakespearean language is not suitable for learning of communicative English. Another reason is that for most university students learning English in Japan, the scenarios described are often far removed from Japan and its culture both in terms of distance and time. Consequently, students are not excited to read plays such as "Romeo and Juliet" or "Hamlet."

Despite these challenges, a group of students decided to attempt Shakespeare for the OCF, just because they wanted to do something different. After reading *Tales of Shakespeare* by Stuart Lamb they selected *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The reason they chose this text is because the play is a comedy, which they felt comfortable to work on. Also, the students found the characters personally interesting and easier to relate to than any portrayed in other Shakespearean works they had been exposed to.

The students found it challenging to fully understand the context and to get an overarching understanding of the play. In contrast, memorizing and reciting the lines on the stage was not too challenging. They quickly determined that in order to communicate effectively with their potential audience that they would need to understand the story and the characters then re-create the story using their own words and ideas.

The students began by taking a Japanese translation of the play and adapting it for a 30-minute performance. Despite being written in their native language, the students found the task of condensing a whole performance into thirty minutes to be very challenging, but felt rewarded with a better understanding of the overall plot by the end of the process. Through the shortening process the students discovered the characters and lines that appealed most to them, and later referred back to these preferences in casting the performance. Additionally, through the activity, the students' focus was drawn to the language itself. They recognized that in both Japanese and English, words are carefully chosen to express exactly what is taking place on stage, and should be considered carefully.

After successfully condensing the text into a 30-minute performance, the students had to translate it back into English. Because they had shortened the story and eliminated quite a few characters, they needed to write some parts by themselves to make sense of the story. However, translating the whole text into English was too challenging, so they used modernized and annotated editions of the original text to aid them in their task.

Once translation was done, students started to rehearse their performance. Since the students themselves wrote the script, they seemed quite confident during the rehearsals. They were in charge of their own acting – including how they delivered the lines, the intonation, the pronunciation, etc. The students realized that they had to be aware of what action conveys what meaning, and to be able to communicate to each other and the audience on stage. The script was theirs, so it was their responsibility to make the audience understand the play and respond to it.

Although Shakespeare's works may seem out of place in an EFL classroom due to their distance from present day English, the ultimate purpose of the play is communication; the communication between actors on the stage, and between the actors and audience. Such communication skills can be directly translated into real life English skills, and thus could provide valuable insights to students trying to learn how to communicate in English more effectively.

3.2 Creative drama

Students often like to perform adaptations of popular animation and movies. For instance, one of the author's students chose Snow White for OCF. Based on the original Grimm Brothers' fairy tale, they created a heart-warming comedy, incorporating the characters of the seven dwarfs of the Disney story. In their version of Snow White, the prince was originally a thief breaking into the castle.

Learning about the desire of the queen, the pseudo prince promised to kill Snow White for money. At first the queen and the "prince" collaborated to wipe out Snow White. However, the "prince" fell in love with her when he went to the dwarfs' house to check on her death. Unlike the popular Disney version, our students adopted the Grimm version, where the evil queen attempts to poison Snow White three times. The students enjoyed coming up with innovative ways to revive her. Finally, the thief a.k.a. prince lied to the queen saying that Snow White was "as dead as a doornail." The clever prince broke the mirror pretending to do so accidentally. Believing him, the queen lived a happy life thinking she was the most beautiful. As for the "prince", he got married to Snow White and they lived happily along with the dwarfs secretly in the woods with a lot of money squeezed from the queen. The scenes students created are added in the Appendix. The example is very long, but may still be confusing to a reader unfamiliar with the Grimm edition of Snow White.

3.3 Creative drama for development of cultural awareness

The notion of "putting your feet into someone else's shoes" is useful particularly for developing cultural awareness in a foreign language learning context. Cultural awareness is one of the cornerstones of EFL teaching as it creates empathy in learners toward the target languages and culture. Brown states as follows:

> [. . .] we assume certain structures of knowledge and certain emotional states in any communicative act. In order to make those assumptions correctly we need to transcend our own ego boundaries [. . .] so that we can send and receive messages clearly. (Brown 1994: 144)

By immersing themselves in a meaningful context, leaners stimulate their imagination. For a drama to be successful, the key element is conflict. Conflict provides learners with a goal. To achieve the goal, learners have to create the language in context. A group of students demonstrated the drama with conflict based on 'intercultural misunderstanding.. They took the following steps:

- Discussion of the topic
- Improvisation of the scenes
- Conversion of scenes into scripted text
- Enactment of the scene
- Revision of the text

Students were told that 'cultural difference' does not just refer to foods, lifestyles, sizes of supermarket, etc. They were asked to discuss the following prompt: "There are things that you take for granted, but actually they are very difficult for foreigners to understand. What are they?"

Students were then asked in groups of two to five to discuss common misunderstandings between cultures. At the beginning they tended to focus on their own experiences in the U.S.A. and Australia – huge shopping malls, the size of food, fashion on campus, etc. Then they were asked to think about what they felt was strange or awkward when communicating with a non-Japanese person. What would a non-Japanese person feel to be strange? Japanese people tend to be keen on explaining how to take a Japanese bath, or how to eat with chopsticks etc. but these differences are easy to spot. The students were challenged to think more deeply about where and when more unexpected cultural misunderstandings could arise. One student shared an episode when they had an exchange student from the USA to stay with the family. The excitement and too much attention was nice at first but in the end, it made the foreign student very tired. The group created a story based on the anecdote; the exchange student was offered by the grandfather of the house to have a 'first bath.' In Japanese traditional family, the most respected – normally the oldest in the family takes a bath first. The foreign student was given the privilege as an important guest, which he did not appreciate. Other differences in manners and custom in taking a bath caused a lot of problem to the family and the guest; in Japan, you wash yourself and then get in a hot bath, so the water stays clean. Therefore, a whole family can share the same water, just to get warmth in winter, or just to relax.

Students improvised a simple skit based on the topic. In order to enact the scenes, they took the form of pre-planned improvisation. "Pre-planned improvisation" is discussed in Fleming (1994), which takes place where the context and the characters are all planned in advance. It 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." Without suitable scaffolding the drama would prevent language development.

Students are directed to discuss and decide their own roles, the time, the place, the context, the outcome, etc. of the skit. In the more detailed situation that develops from this method, learners concentrate on the meaning of the language they are creating. They are more likely to take risks and consequently acquire useful language.

Students make a script and enact the scene again. They repeat this process until they are happy with their product and then they start rehearsal. The script is shown in the Appendix.

Creating their own drama allows students to get hold of a situation and personalize the problem inherent in it. This gives confidence for real world interactions and reinforces language acquisition. Focusing on awkwardness and misunderstanding in intercultural communication will develop their empathy towards people from other cultures.

4 Discussion of the significance of the performance festival

First of all, drama is similar to real communication situations in a sense that both are full of non-verbal cues and signals. Students learn real-life communication with such elements as movement, eye expressions, blocking, etc. In fact, drama engages students with the themes and reduces anxiety, be it literature or global issues, as a number of researchers including Rieg et al. (2009) and McNaughton (2014) have pointed out. Students become able to gain some insights into the issues of the drama by acting out problematic scenes.

Secondly, the students need to discuss and cooperate extensively as well as intensively in group performance. In choosing the genre, topic, editing or writing the script, they are forced to work together. In this sense, as McCaffarty (2006) states, the process toward the festival can be considered to be cooperative learning. While practicing, they give feedback each other by acting and observing and through this process, they gradually develop group communication abilities.

As seen in the process of drama production, creativity is often fostered. Students enjoy adapting and editing the original stories, adding their own ideas. For instance, some of the productions were based on Japanese folk tales, which the students transformed into a contemporary story to sensitize the audience to environmental issues. Students' IT skills are often exercised to add sound and special effects to the stage.

Additionally, from the viewpoint of language learning, practice of performance helps internalize useful expressions. The presence of other students and teachers, sometimes from other universities, helped motivate the students to work hard. Japanese students are typically self-conscious and they do not want to make fools out of themselves in such a place. During the preparation, by repetition, some students learn to memorize all the lines including other characters'.

Lastly, fostering confidence should be mentioned. During the performance, students feel pleasure to express themselves. When they successfully make themselves understood, they feel sense of achievement, leading to building confidence. Even if they make several mistakes during the performance, the festival environment is sure to offer encouragement rather than criticism, and the students are likely to be appropriately motivated to do better next time as a result.

5 Challenges in organizing the performance festival

Firstly, it is hard to incorporate such elaborate performances into a regular English class. It takes time and energy on the part of both teacher and students in order for the performance to be presentable. It is also difficult to keep students' motivation all the way from the beginning to the end. At first, they may get excited and work hard, however, some may lose interest or feel frustration

in their own ability or in lack of cooperation.

Holding a festival involving more than 100 people from several different universities also requires substantial logistic preparation. Securing a room with necessary equipment and adjusting time and needs of performances are tremendous work for teachers who are already busy with regular jobs. This could be a heavy burden for the teacher(s) in charge.

Although the teachers and the students involved in the festival are certain of its efficacy, we often receive doubt and criticism: will it really raise linguistic ability? Considering all the work to implement the festival, will the benefits justify the costs? While further data needs to be gathered to definitively prove this, the fact that we have conducted this annual festival for the past 20 years speaks volumes about the popularity and effectiveness of this approach to English learning.

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A Appendix A

A.1 Snow White

Cast: Queen, Prince, Snow White, Doc, Bashful, Grumpy, Happy, Sleepy, Sneezy, Mirror

In the castle.

Narrator: Once upon a time, there was a bad thief and he was wanted. One day he sneaked into a castle disguising into a prince. Now, a big party is being held there.

Queen: Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who in this land is the fairest of all?

Mirror: You, my queen, are beautiful. It is true. But Snow White is a thousand times more beautiful than you.

Queen: What? Snow White! I'm the most beautiful woman in the world. She should die! Guard! Come here!

Prince: *Looking at the mirror incredulously.* What's this?

Mirror: I'm a mirror. I know everything and I can answer any questions.

Prince: Really?! Who is the richest person?

Mirror: Queen is the richest person.

Prince: Queen!!! That was the queen!! Where is Queen?!

After a while.

Prince: Hi.

Queen: Who are you?

Prince: I'm a prince of another country. If you want to kill her, I'll help you. But I'll get all her money.

Queen: Ok, That's a deal. *They shake hands.* What should I do?

Prince: Use this lace. . .

At the entrance of the dwarfs' house.

When the dwarfs came home, Snow White was lying senseless.

Doc: Oh! Snow White is lying on the floor.

Grumpy: She isn't breathing! Someone must try mouth-to-mouth.

All the male dwarfs: I'll do it!

Bashful revives Snow White.

Bashful: Are you all right?

Snow White: Oh! Thank you, Bashful!

Bashful: Oh! Gosh! *Blushes.*

Male dwarfs: Shit! *Grinding their teeth.*

Doc: What happened to you?

Snow White: An old woman came to our house and tried to kill me...

Happy: She must be the queen!

Sleepy: Take care and let no one come in this house.

Snow White: OK.

In front of the dwarfs' house.

At the third trial, Queen finally succeeds in killing Snow White. Dwarfs are in deep sorrow. Prince enters.

Prince: Hello, dwarfs. What happened to you?

Doc: Our Princess died!

Prince: Oh! Princess!

Sneezy: Do you know her?

Prince: Oh.... Yes, I know. *Smiles to himself* [U+3000]However, I can't believe she died.

Sleepy: Yes.

Prince: Excuse me, can I see her face?

Bashful: Of course.

As soon as the prince saw her, he fell in love with her.

Prince: She is so beautiful. Look at her! Come here!

Prince: Please wake up! *Rocks her body.*

All dwarfs: Please wake up! *Rocks her violently*

An apple comes out from Snow White's mouth.

Bashful: Hey, look. Something came out of her mouth.

Sleepy: . . . an apple?

Snow White: Good heavens, where am I?

Doc: I can't believe it!! She came to life again!

The end

B Appendix B

B.1 First night, first bath

Cast: Grandpa, Grandma, Mum, Grandson (Masaru), Peter

In a living room of a Japanese house.

Narrator: Hello, everyone. Let me introduce the Tanaka Family and their guest, Peter. First of all, this is Masaru. He is 5 years old. He has just started learning English. This is Grandpa Tanaka, Masaru's grandfather. He used to run a Tofu shop but now, he is retired and has handed the shop to his-son-in-law. This is Mrs. Tanaka, the daughter of Mr. Tanaka. She loves to speak English. This is Masaru's grandmother, Mrs. Tanaka. She is very proud of her grandson. This is Peter. He has just graduated from University in America. He decided to come to Japan on an exchange program, because he wanted to learn about Japanese culture. The Tanaka Family is excited about having Peter. They agreed on speaking English all the time so that Peter wouldn't feel isolated. Tonight is the first night for the Tanakas with Peter.

Mum: The Bath is ready!!

Grandpa: Okay. I'll go. *To Masaru* Oi, Masaru, it's bath time!

Grandma: How about Peter-San has the first bath tonight?

Grandpa: What?

Mum: That's a good idea.

Grandma: Tonight is the first night for Peter-San.

Mum: Yes. Tonight is special!

Grandpa: So what?

Grandma: We give Peter-San the first bath.

Mum: As a present.

Grandpa: Okay. I'll speak to Peter.

Mum, Grandma: Good, good. Go on.

Grandpa: Peter!

Peter: Yes?

Grandpa: I'll give you a present.

Peter: Oh, yeah? That's nice. What is it?

Grandpa: The first bath!

Peter: The first bath?

Grandpa: Yes. Because tonight is special.

Mum: Normally Grandpa takes a bath first in the family. . .

Peter: Yeah, because he is the big man in the family.

Grandpa: *Proudly*. Yes, the big man in the family.

Mum: But Grandpa lets you have a bath first, tonight.

Peter: Ah, right, sure. . . . Thank you. I don't know how to take a Japanese bath. Could you show me how?

Mum: Sure, sure. Come here.

Grandpa: Oh, I'll show you how! Man to man!

Masaru: I want to go, too.

Mum: Oh, yeah, Masaru-Kun, you learn English, so maybe you can help Peter-San.

Grandpa, Masaru, and Peter walk to stage left where the "Bathroom" is. Grandpa and Masaru start to take off their clothes.

Peter: Wow, wow, wow. . . , stop! Wait a minute.

Grandpa: What? It's okay. Man to man.

Masaru: Man to man.

Masaru, Grandpa start again to take off their shirts.

Peter: STOP! PLEASE!

Everybody freezes.

Mum: *Coming from the stage right. To Peter* Are you okay?

Peter: It's just. . . I'm not used to it.

Grandma, Grandpa, Masaru: That's why we're going to show you. . . I'll show you. . . . etc.

Mum: Sh! Listen. Peter?

Peter: I'd like to know how to take a bath. But I'd rather have one by myself.

Grandpa: By myself?

Peter: By MYSELF.

Masaru: By yourself.

Peter: Yeah.

Mum: Everyone, come here. *Takes everyone to the corner of the room.*

I think, Peter-San is very tired. Do you understand? *In a very bad English accent.* Wakaru? Peter-San wa tsukarete iruno (Peter is tired.)

Grandpa: *In a bad accent as if he is a foreigner.* Tsu ka re te iru? (Tired?)

Mum: Yes. *To Peter.* Peter-San, sorry. *Walking towards the bathroom.* Can you come here?

Peter: Okay.

Mum: *Pointing to the things on the shelf.* This is the shampoo, and this is the towel. They are all free!

Peter: *Confused.* Free?

Mum: Free to use!

In the living room.

Grandpa: *Sitting in the couch.* Peter doesn't like me.

Grandma: No, that's not true.

Masaru: Grandpa, let's play cards.

Grandma: Sure. Good boy!

Peter comes out of the bathroom.

Mum: Are you done?

Grandpa: *Enthusiastically.* How was it?

Peter: It was really nice. Thank you.

Mum: Did you get in the bath?

Peter: Yeah.

Masaru: Wasn't it too hot?

Peter: Yeah, a little bit. But it was nice. Very refreshing.

Grandpa: Good! Now, We'll have the bath. Masaru, come on! *Off stage.*

Masaru: Okay! *Off stage.*

Granma: Masaru, Masaru, take your towel.

A big scream from the bathroom

Granma: What's up? Masaru! Masaru!

Mum: Are you okay?

Masaru: *Coming out of the bathroom.* I'm cold!

Mum: *Coming out of the stage right.* Why?

Grandpa: There is no water!

Mum: No water? In the bathtub? Why?

Grandma: *Walks towards Peter.* Peter?

Peter: I. . . I. . . let the water away.

Everyone: What?

Mum: Did you pull the plug out?

Peter: Yes.

Grandma: Why?

Peter: Why? Because I finished the bath. That's why.

Mum: But we haven't had the bath yet.

Peter: Yeah, I know! So I put the dirty water away for everyone!

Everyone goes silent.

Masaru: I'm hungry.

Mum: *Looing very tired.* Of course. It's dinner time, isn't it?

Masaru: What's the dinner?

Mum: *Walks towards stage right.* Some Japanese food.

Masaru: Japanese food? What's that?

Grandpa: Masaru! You don't know Japanese food? Japanese foods are sushi, tempura...

Mum: There's no sushi tonight.

Grandpa: Oh, okay. Tempura...

Mum: There is no tempura.

Grandpa: Oh,.... How about sukiyaki?

Peter: What's sukiyaki?

Grandpa: You don't know sukiyaki? Sukiyaki is..., with this kind of meat...

Masaru: Cow.

Grandpa: Yeah, cow, cow. Cow in soy sauce.

Narrator: As I mentioned, tonight was the first night. They haven't even got to dinner, which is supposed to be the big event for everyone.

The end