Using the Space: Details of a Summer Acting Program for Japanese High School Students

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Abstract

Theatre has potential as a form of experiential learning, and language learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts could be ideal contexts for extensive language practice through such an approach given the lack of opportunity many students have to use the language meaningfully outside of class. The current study introduces a summer program designed by the author for members of a Japanese high school's English club. I discuss the schedule and details of the various parts of this program, then briefly review data from student reflection surveys about the overall experience. The program set out to give the students a novel and performative approach to English, and findings from the surveys suggest that the experience was transformative and broadened their understanding of non-verbal communication.

This paper provides a rationale, description, and participant review of a summer program designed to give a group of Japanese high school students the chance to participate in a series of acting workshops. I conceived and created the program as a blend of experiential learning and embodied learning, which I consider to be closely aligned. Used here, embodied learning follows on ideas from Barsalou (1999, 2008) whose work has allowed us to understand that we make use of our motor-sensory memory of something that we once perceived when we recall it later. By extension, this suggests the importance of corporeal and sensory input during learning. From this concept, I came to understand the importance of working on the physical aspects of performance, and my motivation for the summer program described and analyzed in this paper had its origins in work I had

previously done regarding theatre rehearsals, particularly my experimentation with a task design that has learners analyzing play scripts in pairs (Reid, 2016). Working in the performing arts on various stage management crews, I had witnessed the utility and potential in the recursive practice of rehearsals, and I became more interested in how performers went about building a living, four-dimensional performance from an inert text. This process is, after all, the lifeblood of what makes the mode of theatre unique. I wondered how many opportunities many students have had, if any, to explore this aspect of language in their learning. I wanted to find a way to give students a similar experience of exploration and reflection through performance.

Introduction

For second language (L2) learning, theatre and drama have attracted a consistent amount of attention from scholars. Theatre production as a total experience is posited as a framework for second language learning in studies such as Smith (1984) and Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo (2004). The former outlined an entire course built around theatre production. The latter staged a production of a play in Italian performed by native English-speaking students and unofficial pre- and post-tests offered some evidence of language improvement, with participants showing high motivation and appreciation of the immersive experience. Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, Belliveau and Kim (2013) provide an extensive synthesis of various studies regarding theater and drama in L2 classrooms, with their findings indicating that learners appreciate that theatre is intrinsically rewarding and engaging and that it offers a deeper exploration of language use than other activities. Park (2015) describes three different case studies of the implementation of theatre activities that echo these participant sentiments, while Gualdron and Castillo (2018) describe their ongoing English-medium theatre program for university students in Colombia and note that their program can effectively address numerous aspects of language learning, including the affective dimension and intercultural competence. One of the dominant conclusions to draw from these varied works is the positive effects theatre activities have on motivation and engagement (thus, on learner affect), as well as frequent self-reports of language development. The process of theatre itself receives a lot of attention, and certain more emergent methodologies such as process drama (e.g., Kao & O'Neill, 1998), deemphasize the production aspect of theatre in favor or student-centered role-plays that make use of activities often associated with rehearsals and actor training courses. This mirrors the sentiments of

earlier authors such as Maley and Duff (1978), who advocated for a similar emphasis of process over product.

As a practitioner-researcher of theatre in L2 learning, I tend to take an opposing view, one that would agree with the sentiments of scholars like Via (1987) who emphasizes the importance of theatre and its communication with an audience. Via discusses in detail the "senses" that demand attention when practicing theatre, and these are not the typical senses of the body but rather sense as in awareness of the self, the audience, and the relationship between the two (p. 114-115). This awareness asks learners to consider the possibility that people are already unconsciously monitoring themselves in regard to an audience in their daily lives. Indeed, a heightened awareness of how meaning is conveyed with non-verbal behaviors might elicit a response in the audience, for example, as a visual or auditory signal might trigger a connection to their own sensory experience of the world. So, in essence, considering the reception of an audience is a primary preoccupation of theatre.

Given the audience's eventual viewing of a performance as the raison d'être for the whole enterprise, my experience as a student of theatre, along with my work in the performing arts, push me to favor a focus on production. I see the various 'games' of rehearsals serving a larger purpose: they are meant to develop trust between performers and hone both mental and physical skills necessary for performance in front of an audience. In this way, I view rehearsal as a place of discovery, certainly, but the journey is very much about the destination; the impending performances necessitate exploration and thorough preparation. Theatre is an aesthetic practice like any other art, and so the matter of aesthetic appreciation, in other words the audience's reception and interpretation of a work, must be firmly in a performer's mind. One matter that may be overlooked in approaches like process drama that eschew public performance is the actual utility of different games. Rehearsal games often involve a great amount of physicality because theatre performance itself will also need clear voice as well as interpretable movement and corporeal expression. It has been my estimation that this latter non-verbal side of performance receives less attention outside of perhaps gestures and facial expressions as a superficial aspect. Other non-verbal aspects have equally clear importance in making meaning in a theatre since they convey meaning in real-life. Haptics (touch) and proxemics, to name just two examples, are interesting and seemingly underdeveloped areas of dramatic performance when one considers how such non-verbal communication can be interpreted by the audience. This discussion gave me the motivation

for my summer workshop: I wanted to give a group of English language students the chance to fully embody the language they practice.

With this goal in mind, I designed a program built around developing participants' ability with the physical side of theatre performance: vocal quality, gestures and poses, kinesics, and proxemics. The theoretical framework for this study draws from existing rationale for experience as a source of learning. Kolb (1984) notes that, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience…" (p. 38). This process, this cycle, is something Kolb identifies as consistent among the theorists, such as Lewin, Dewey and Piaget, who inform his own work and gave rise to a cycle of learning which is, to summarize and simplify to some extent: 1) concrete experience which is followed by, 2) reflection that informs, 3) conceptual analysis and, finally, leads to 4) application of the results of that cycle (Ibid., p. 21-25). In essence, the last step refers to related situations and not just the specific experience that initiated the cycle. This cycle shows that learners learn through participation and reflection. This view aligns well with theatre praxis in terms of how rehearsals prepare for performance. Scene work is recursive—performers return again and again to the text, to the situation, and work through it. New insights come from reflection that then manifests through analysis into plans for future articulation. Moreover, theatre is arguably ideal for such a cycle as the activity itself affords participants with the opportunity to use their imaginations to inhabit and explore any interactive situation that can be simulated on a stage. Theatre is, in essence, very much about *play,* about experience without real-world stakes.

Scholars working within various disciplines have frequently noticed this potential of theatre as an experiential, educational instrument, both in and of itself, and in applied contexts. For example, Sinha and D'Souza (2022) looked at the use of role-plays in corporate training and reference Kolb's learning cycle in their rationale. Among their findings they noted that '[the application of theatre] ... not only stimulates participants intellectually but also emotionally and, thus, represents a situation with logic and mindfulness. […] [They] can actually "see the problem" rather than just [discuss it].' (p. 9) *(authors' quotation marks).* From this study we can see that, as Kolb discussed, the experience itself is vital; it cannot be an abstract consideration of a subject, it must be a direct interface with it. This interface affords an immediacy of situation that also aligns well with embodied learning, discussed above, as the experience is very much about experimenting with physicality and being present and moving on a stage.

Given this ideal utility, the most pertinent question that remains is how theatre as experiential learning can be implemented in a more traditionally focused EFL context. Regarding this implementation, Knutson (2003) notes that while there has been recognition and promotion of experiential learning, a lack of consensus on methods and teacher training remains. The author also states, however, that, "The method is easily adaptable to a wide variety of educational settings, especially to classrooms where project-based and task-based learning already form the core of a curriculum." (p. 53). Indeed, I agree that theatre practice aligns well with both, albeit only if a task-based approach can be said to accommodate the complex, longitudinal nature of theatre and preparation for performance to the same extent as project-based learning.

A Summer Program: Acting in English

Setting

Japan is a challenging context for L2 learning. The nation is, for the most part, both genetically and linguistically homogenous. Secondary school students study English as a subject for both high school and university entrance examinations but lack external exposure to the language daily unless they actively seek it out via the internet or other broadcast media. Even then, there is little necessity in daily life for most people to use it outside of school.

Motivation

As a teacher working within this context and dealing with its real constraints and opportunities, I have always strived to make the most out of lessons and afford students ample time to work with the language and become comfortable and gain better command through consistent, varied practice. Theatre has always been a means for me to achieve this, and I recall observing how both theatre rehearsals of existing plays, and sessions of devising theatre as well, have performers consistently engaging with language again and again as they experiment with different interpretations and performance choices. While students studying English at a high school in Japan are not training to be actors, I felt they could benefit from seeing how *fully* embodying a communicative act could help raise their awareness of how verbal language interacts with non-verbal aspects.

Therefore, I wanted to see what would happen if students were asked to pay more mind to the physical side of performance rather than to the words they were saying. That is to say, they were free to attend to language matters as they deemed necessary, but I would keep

my focus squarely on guiding their embodiment of character. In order to allow discoveries of connections between body and language to occur naturally, I never overtly stated that my desired objective was for them to gain a better understanding of how non-verbal factors affected verbal performance and the meanings being conveyed. Instead, perhaps in the vein of a sociology experiment, I left this objective undisclosed and waited to see what students mentioned in their reflections. With this in mind, I contacted the affiliated teachers who supervised the English club at the research site and from their consultation regarding time commitments, I designed and prepared the materials for the series of sessions that together made up the workshop.

Design of the Program

The program was split into two one-week sessions with a two-week break in between for summer holidays. The first week involved three three-hour workshops centered around the students trying out various drama games. For this, I used games that I was familiar with from my time as a theatre student or as a stage manager observing rehearsals. Students would try out these games and then learn about the basic intended purpose for each game in regard to rehearsing for a performance. These workshops took place on alternating weekdays. After this first week, students were tasked with devising a basic plot and script for their performance. It was decided between the participants and their club supervisors that this performance would take place during their high school's culture festival and serve as the showcase for their English club.

During the two-week break, students worked on their own to select a story to perform as a short play for the showcase. The second week of the program commenced after the break. For this week, I met with students for four days and held rehearsals of their play. Each morning started with around 20-30 minutes of warm-ups utilizing the games introduced in the previous workshop sessions. The remaining time varied between 2-4 hours depending on student availability. This time was devoted to rehearsing various scenes of the play. I told the students to assume some directorial responsibilities and allow me to function as an advisor. After a one-week break, the workshop concluded with a performance of their devised work.

Table 1

Workshop Schedule

Week	Day	Session	Schedule
1	Monday	Day 1	Introductions, Warm-up Games, Physical Movement Work
	Wednesday	Day 2	Warm-up Games, Physical Movement Work, Tableau Work
	Friday	Day 3	Warm-up Games, Tableau Work, Scene Analysis
2-week break			
2	Monday	Day 4	Scene Work
	Tuesday	Day 5	Scene Work
	Thursday	Day 6	Scene Work; Full Run-thru
	Friday	Day 7	Technical Rehearsal + Dress rehearsal
1-week break			
3	Saturday	Day 8	Performance

Overview of Program Activities

My desire was to build participants' ability for performance in the first week through a variety of activities that put emphasis on the physical aspect of theatre, including the need for greater vocal projection and movement, gestures, and facial expressions that are 'readable' to audience members whether they sit in the front row or the balcony. This is a special demand of theatre, particularly since theatre traditionally does not employ any electronic amplification of sound nor does it make use of any video equipment for close-ups of performers' faces. Therefore, the body needs to communicate in ways that can be perceived from a distance. This communication includes the use of proxemics.

Warm-up Games

These brief group activities, such as "Zip, Zap, Zop" and "Mirror Exercise" are likely what many would refer to as drama games. They are mostly physical in that they involve the actors moving around and using their body. There is typically minimal language input our output. Participants are meant to be aware of one another and learn to read each other's body language and become comfortable with reacting quickly.

Physical Movement Work

Various short skits involving some improvisation and reaction. The idea of such work is to encourage the actors to 'inhabit the scene' to 'be present' and be willing to respond to the performance choices of their skit partners. One short skit we practiced was to manifest a secret in some way physically and perform a scene. In a short scene, one character is asked to have a basic conversation with another character, but that character has a secret they think will be discovered. So, I asked the actors to imagine that this secret was a literal object on their person or somewhere in the room and their goal was to make sure that their partner did not find it.

Tableau Work

For the version that I used in the program, a tableau is a theatre training exercise where a director or teacher calls out a theme and actors choose to pose within a 'frozen' scene together. Typically, one or two initial choices will lead others to adapt to those choices and add themselves and their ideas into the 'picture' being made. In addition to the desire for building trust, comfort, and awareness between groups members, this activity received specific and separate attention from other warmups and physical movement as it was meant to be further utilized in rehearsals as a means of making meaning *without* words.

Scene Work

This refers to the participants working with their devised text. I wanted them to be responsible for each other's language and, as with any piece of devised theatre, take on some directorial responsibility. As they were new to this experience, I naturally served as an expert observer and moved between groups to offer any insight and advice I felt was useful at that moment. All the same, I left script continuity in their hands and focused solely on, and only reacted to, what they were showing me through their performances. In this way, I tried to indirectly encourage them to refer to the script but leave it aside when performing and try to truly inhabit the moment.

Technical and Dress Rehearsals

Lacking the budget or production level that is typical of theatre (the performance had no set and used only a small amount of lighting fixtures), these two rehearsals happened in the same afternoon. The performance involved some off-stage narration delivered by

participants with hand-held microphones. So, the technical rehearsal focused on those matters, as well as the minimal lighting cues and other sound cues present in the performance. The dress rehearsal commenced after a break and allowed everyone one last chance to rehearse as an ensemble, this time in costumes and accompanied by light and sound cues.

Performance

As mentioned before, the performance itself was presented as part of the showcase of the high school's English club and their activities. Therefore, this public performance was limited to just this one occurrence.

Findings from Student Reflections

I administered open-ended reflection surveys for all participants after the conclusion of the public performance. Students were free to fill out their reflections in Japanese or English. I translated the Japanese responses into English and, for any case in which an accurate translation was unclear, I consulted a native Japanese-speaking colleague and asked them to check my translation of those cases. I used a grounded approach to qualitative analysis (c.f., Charmaz, 2006). Using this method, items are coded as they are encountered in order to let salient themes emerge from the data, rather than bringing a particular preconceived coding system to the data and focusing on those aspects exclusively. For discussion of this analysis, each participant has been given a pseudonym.

Overall, the student feedback focused on the transformative nature of this experience. Consider the post-performance reflection of one participant, Mary (translated from Japanese):

> *"I am not good at English and to be honest, I don't like it that much, so I didn't have much motivation at first. But I decided that if I was going to do it anyway, I would try my best, so I asked for advice from everyone and tried to listen to what the teachers had to say. Just by changing my mind, I became more motivated. I think it's great that I am surrounded by people who have a lot to learn from, such as people who have studied abroad, have an English test, or like Western movies and music. It made me want to get involved in English as much as I could. I thought it would be difficult and I didn't want to be in the show, but it felt good to feel a sense of achievement after the show, and most of all I was happy with the applause. I couldn't speak English perfectly, but I learnt to communicate with movements and facial expressions. I*

> *started off with negative feelings, but in the end it was fun and I'm glad I did it… [] … I hope this experience will lead to more opportunities to learn English and I hope I will come to like [them].*"

Mary's reflection on her experience highlights how important the final performance is to the process that precedes it. She was able to find satisfaction through participation and seemed to develop a more positive attitude towards English. The collaboration seemed fruitful for her as her fellow classmates each had their own individual experience with English that contributed to her change of attitude. Perhaps this type of opportunity had been lacking for her in her studies up to this point.

Skills development was another focus of student reflections. Lisa wrote the following about the summer program after the performance:

> *"Studying drama for the first time in forever. I worried that I may perhaps couldn't understand instructions in English. First, it was difficult for me to understand, but I gradually became used to English instruction. I learned communication way of expressing with our bodies. I could speak English a lot and I enjoy it. I want to [do] drama again."*

It is easy enough to interpret Lisa's sense of accomplishment with the program. She indicated the non-verbal portion in particular, and this was a topic also mentioned in the reflection of another participant, Emma, who wrote (translated from Japanese):

> *"[the authors'] drama coaching has helped me to be more expressive. I found out that theatre is not just about saying lines in a monotone way, but that you can get much more into the role and closer to the character by working on various aspects such as body language, facial expressions and the volume of the voice. I was a little anxious and nervous about performing in front of the whole school, but after many rehearsals and trusting my fellow students, I was able to achieve my goal. Everyone seemed to enjoy watching me perform and the amount of applause I received made me happy and confident."*

Once again, the overall process was capped with the satisfaction felt at the end of the performance. Emma came to appreciate the contributions that non-verbal communication makes to a performance and seemed to become more aware of how to control them and express herself better. This was an experience that was echoed by two other participants,

Carol and Anna, who also mentioned having anxiety about the performance and a feeling of accomplishment upon hearing the audience's applause.

While the sense of satisfaction from completing a performance after several rehearsals was doubtlessly transformative for everyone involved, not every participant ended up enjoying the act of performance itself. In this vein, Sarah offered a contrasting reflection of the experience, noting that she nevertheless found value in it and a motivation to apply some of what she learned. She wrote: (translated from Japanese):

> *"Summer holidays, communication at the center. I was taught to express myself through play. [The author] mainly taught me to speak loudly and express myself in a big way. I thought that even if I couldn't understand the language, I could communicate a little by expressing myself with my body. I could only understand a little English, so I struggled a bit, but I'm glad I managed. I'm not good at acting roles, so I don't think I'll be doing them in the future, but I thought I'd like to try communicating a little bit more."*

While others might consider doing a similar experience again, Sarah seemed satisfied and did not wish to pursue such an experience again. At the same time, she found a lot of value in the process, learned to appreciate aspects of non-verbal communication that are vital to performance, and seemed happy with her results in the end.

Discussion

Beyond the overall sense of achievement and satisfaction that the learners felt after their performances, they seemed to regard the rehearsals and workshops about movement, expressions, voice quality, and proxemics as useful. It could be fair to surmise that high school students, such as the participants in the current study, might not normally have such an experience at school in their own language, let alone in a foreign language. Therefore, the summer program could only go so far in training the participants in some of the skills that are necessary for theatrical performance. What is important to stress from this experience is that, while the ostensible goal of the program was to give the students some training in acting for theatre, the underlying objective was to motivate further language practice, facilitate development of language skills, and make stronger connections between language and physical experience rather than to develop the participants' acting ability. Regarding this point, the post-task reflections suggest that this aim was successful for all participants. Many

of them mentioned speaking and communication and reported feelings of improvement, but no one spoke about the experience strengthening their ability as performers of theatre, suggesting that the participants did indeed frame the experience as primarily one of language learning from the start. It could also be the consequence of the limited timeframe and scope of the program, or perhaps the consequence of the participants devising their own story rather than working with an extant English play script, thus increasing the challenge. Certainly, some of the participants seemed to value the collaborative aspect of the experience in general, but no one discussed how this aspect relates to actor training specifically.

The performance and its specific rehearsals only constituted half of the summer program, yet the post-performance participant reflections largely neglected to mention any of the workshops done in the first week. This might be the result of a recency bias given that four weeks separated the end of week-one and the day of performance. Nevertheless, my focus during rehearsals remained firmly on preparing for the performance, and I had the sense that the participants understood and appreciated the need for this preparation. As I worked with various participants in their respective scene rehearsals, I focused only on coaching them about blocking (their positioning and movement), which essentially left them to recall details from the earlier workshops and apply their own understanding of voice and body language to their performances. For example, the tableau activity from the workshop days could serve as reinforcement of spatial arrangement and posture as meaningful when considering where to situate the actors during a particular scene. However, a rehearsal note of mine from the first full rehearsal on Day 6 commented on the struggle some of the students had with considering how their proximity to one another could convey meaning. The matter was discussed after rehearsal but left unresolved and I simply trusted the participants to follow my advice for how they entered, exited, and moved around their scenes, which for the most part they did, although whether my notes about motivation for moving closer or further from someone at certain points in the dialogue were heeded was hard to discern. I attributed this to the relative inexperience they had with theater and acting and decided to lessen my emphasis on it for the final rehearsal. Nevertheless, I had expected some of the participants to mention blocking in some capacity given the focus I put on it during rehearsals, but the absence of comments suggests that the decision to introduce blocking during rehearsals was not successful and the participants likely needed some manner of introduction to blocking during the workshop days instead.

In conclusion, the current study adds to the available body of research that highlights how much of a transformative experience doing theatre in another language can be. Participants found achievement and satisfaction, and even if they did not develop any further interest in theatre or acting, they still found it useful. If these participants are any indication, many students are bereft of extended periods of meaningful engagement and experimentation with a language they are learning. Certainly, the exam-focused curriculum of Japanese high schools likely leaves some students far from satiated if they are seeking deeper opportunities for practice than what they get in their normal textbook-driven lessons. In cases like these, experiential learning through theatre production might be the ideal remedy.

Future Research Directions

As a closing to this paper, several limitations are highlighted to encourage further research. First, many contexts, particularly similar contexts to the high school in the current study, might not have the luxury to devote substantial portions of multiple days to undertake such a production. The program described in the current study required around 22 hours including the time for performance. This may represent too large of an undertaking for some, especially for learners of a similar age to the participants. Perhaps university level courses offer a better fit in terms of time, but as far as further research in concerned, future studies implementing a similar program with younger learners should be encouraged as they are often underrepresented in the research literature (which is particularly the case for high school students).

Second, it would be useful to see how native speakers perform in such a workshop to get a gauge of how much emphasis the participants put on non-verbal aspects of performance or how well they would respond to direction regarding blocking. This would help determine whether matters like blocking might be better off as secondary concerns for an introduction to theatre production. More importantly, it could help shed light on how different cultures go about the reflection process in experiential learning. Concerning this framework, participants were encouraged to talk to each other and reflect after rehearsals, but due to various constraints both internal and external, data collection could not extend to these individual reflections during and between rehearsals. Further research could follow a more ethnographic angle and accompany a participant through the process more fully and pay greater attention to when and how reflection on the experience happens and how it feeds the next cycle of the experience.

Lastly, in relation to that production, it would be good to see if rehearsals which focus on movement and the body nevertheless prompt students to discuss language and language use. Interaction between peers or between learner and teacher can be fruitful moments of incidental language focus within the larger work plan of a rehearsal, and, in a desire to make meaning, moments where learners need to understand certain choices they have to make in a performance could prompt a deeper discussion of the language that complements those choices.

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