

THE MASK

&

GAVEL



Published by the
Performance **I**n **E**ducation SIG

*Mask & Gavel is the official peer-reviewed publication of
the Performance In Education Special Interest Group
of the Japan Association for Language Teaching*

Volume 11, February 2024

ISSN 2435-6603 <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.PIE11.1>

Contents

Messages

Philip Head (Publications Chair) p. 4

Feature Articles

Miori Shimada **Creating English Songs with Familiar Music for EFL Classrooms in Japanese Elementary Schools** p. 6

Robin Reid **Using the Space: Details of a Summer Acting Program for Japanese High School Students** p. 23

David Gray **Why Teach Improv? Teaching Improvisation in University EFL Communication Classes** p. 36

Kim Rockell **Sharing Ainu Wisdom Through Music: Intercultural Encounters in Performance in Education (PIE)** p. 44

Gordon Rees **A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills through Performance-Assisted Learning** p. 56

Yair Yebra **Improvazilla's Intercultural Improv Dojo: A Pedagogical Case Study of Expressive**

Contents

Development and Belonging in Tokyo	p. 77
---	--------------

Messages from the Editors

Welcome to Volume 11 of *The Mask & Gavel*. *The Mask & Gavel* is published by the Performance in Education (PIE) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). We publish academic papers concerning the use of performance, especially in regards to language learning. Examples of performance can include such activities as drama, speech contests, debates, oral interpretation, and the use of music. Starting with this volume, we are publishing articles online as soon as they are finalized. All articles are double-blind peer-reviewed before publication.

Philip Head

JALT PIE SIG Publications Chair

Editors

Philip Head

Zach Strickland

Robin Reid

Review Board

Kevin Bergman

Dawn Kobayashi

Vivian Bussinguer-Khavari

Chelsea Lauren

Matthew Cotter

Nichelle Mitchell

Eucharia Donnery

Daniel Ribble

Joe Kelley

Kim Rockell

David Kluge

Copyediting and Proofreading

Philip Head

Robin Reid

David Kluge

Zach Strickland



All materials in this publication are copyright © of the JALT Performance in Education SIG.

Creating English Songs with Familiar Music for EFL Classrooms in Japanese Elementary Schools

Miori Shimada

Toyo University

mioshima1@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper introduces a compilation of simple and easy English songs designed for children learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). While belonging to various language schools, the author encountered numerous songs that captured children's interest in English vocabulary and phrases. While some of these songs had original melodies, many were adaptations of traditional songs in Japan, USA, and UK. Consequently, the author undertook the task of developing English songs using familiar tunes and shared them with a group of Japanese and Filipino English teachers who taught Japanese children. The article presents the feedback received from these teachers regarding the preference for utilizing traditional tunes and the focus of these songs. Additionally, the list of the tunes used for *Wee Sing* CD series that have been very popular among children throughout Japan and North America will be presented for further discussion.

One can reasonably assume that songs that have remained popular for many decades probably consist of elements that contribute to their accessibility and familiarity. These elements include a distinct and repetitive rhythm, as well as a melodic range that is well-suited for inexperienced singers. This paper introduces some simple and easy songs for children's EFL classrooms based on the familiar music such as melodies or tunes of English and Japanese traditional songs or nursery rhymes free from copyright. While belonging to three private language schools and two preschools in Saitama prefecture between 1997 and 2000, the author encountered many songs that stimulated children's interests in English words and phrases. Several of these songs had original music. However, many used the melodies of traditional children's songs. Thus, the author developed some English songs based on familiar music focused on vocabulary, grammar, themes, and events, following the steps for song-creation (see Steps for Song-Creation of this article).

The paper also presents simple songs that incorporate the texts from picture books, allowing students to actively engage by singing along rather than participating in conventional storytelling. In addition, the comments on song-creation from English teachers for children in Japan as well as the tunes the university students chose for their song-creation activity will be explained. Moreover, the paper introduces a list of tunes used for the world-popular *Wee Sing* CD series. These aspects will be further explored and discussed.

Literature Review

Foreign Language Education in Japanese Elementary Schools

During the 2020 academic year, the Japanese government launched their new English education curriculum for public elementary schools. Based on the new guidelines released by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), English has become a compulsory subject for the upper grades (fifth- and sixth- grades), and English activities have been incorporated into “The Period for Integrated Study” class for the middle grades (third- and fourth-grades). In addition, reading and writing have officially been introduced to the upper grades. (MEXT, 2018)

Although the Japanese government aims to increase the number of “specialist teachers” of English, the number of these educators remains low. Moreover, the budget to hire such English professionals has been cut down in most public elementary schools. As a result, it is anticipated that English classes will be conducted mainly by homeroom teachers who have less experience in teaching a foreign language.

Applications of Songs in English Language Education

Children enjoy singing and find pleasure in learning new songs. Many of them are delighted to show what they learned in class in front of their parents later in the day (Paul, 2003). According to one Uzbekistan teacher, “Teachers can contextualize instruction by taking the content and turning it into songs that relate to young learners’ lives” (Shin & Crandall, 2014, p. 101). Curtain and Dahlberg (2016) also insist, “Songs learned in the target language have the double benefit of giving students experience with an important dimension of the target culture and helping them to internalize the sounds, vocabulary, rhythms, and structures of the new languages” (p. 370). Other advantages and benefits of song use for language classrooms are the joy of lessons (Millington, 2011; Slattery & Willis, 2003), more cultural input (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2016; Degrave, 2019; Millington, 2011; Rockell, 2016), more variety in class (Slattery & Willis, 2003), and higher motivation (Binns, 2016; Degrave, 2019). Furthermore, vocabulary and grammar lessons (Kanel,

1997; Millington, 2011; Slattery & Willis, 2003), pronunciation and speaking practice (Millington, 2011), automaticity and memorization (Paul, 2003; Rockell, 2016; York, 2011), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Binns, 2016) are the privileges students can acquire through songs.

Suggestions for Song Creation

Traditional Songs in Japan

As western music was deliberately taught since the Meiji period, most Japanese are very familiar with western melodies. In addition, Japanese people might be surprised to discover that some of our well-known traditional songs such as *Chochō* (the *butterfly* song) and *Hotaru no Hikari* (the light of fireflies) were born in western countries. Moreover, those songs have long been believed to be Japanese original songs although they were the ‘modified’ version of the western traditional songs (Yanagawa, 2021).

Adaptation of Songs

Paul (2003) states that there are many great children’s songs teachers want to use for their classes. Thus, he encourages language teachers to modify original verses to help learners acquire more words, phrases, and expressions through songs. Abe-Ford (2001) also believes that English songs are effective for acquiring ‘natural’ English. According to her, teachers should modify verses relevant to the students’ levels, interests, and environment. *Come Come Everybody*, the popular TV morning drama series aired on the Japanese national broadcasting network NHK in 2021, began with the opening song of their actual radio English course featured between 1946 and 1951. This popular opening song was derived from the melody of a well-known Japanese children’s song called *Shojoji no Tanukibayashi* [Raccoon Dogs Dancing at Shojoji Temple]. In the drama, this “English” song captivated children and elderly individuals across Japan, becoming a source of encouragement and enthusiasm toward learning English during the transformative times (*Come Come Everybody*, 2023). In contrast to Abe-Ford (2001) and Paul (2003), some scholars, such as Kanel (1997), disagree with the ideas of adapting songs for English education. He points out that authentic songs have some mistakes, non-standard structures and vocabulary, and irregular stress and intonation patterns. Therefore, teachers should develop new *language learning* songs by themselves. Takahashi, Kawai, Sawada, and Yanagi (2021) acknowledge the importance of choosing familiar music or simple melodies for the adaptation of songs for elementary school English. Teachers should also be aware that these songs are not always easy to sing for the learners. Takahashi et al. (2021) also advocate that strong attention must be paid to the selection of songs when teaching unique sounds and rhythms that are not found in the Japanese language to

teach English. According to Takahashi et al. (2021), singing with some very popular tunes would be a significant challenge for young learners to acquire *English-like* pronunciation/intonation. Therefore, those melodies would not be suitable as a teaching resource for experiencing the authentic English language. Takahashi et al. (2021) also state that it is crucial to educate learners about the distinctions in singing method, language characteristics, and pronunciation and rhythm when adapting Japanese songs or English songs in class. Consequently, it is desirable to offer instructions that can generate a sense of accomplishment among students (Millington, 2011), such as “I understood the meaning of the English lyrics!” or “I sang like an English speaker!”

Steps for Song-Creation

Songs are introduced to English classes with different purposes. For example, as background music, chanting for vocabulary exercise, using actions/gestures for review, or for code-switching. The following are the modified steps for song-creation (Shimada, 2014, p. 29) based on the ideas from Kanel (1997) and Paul (2003):

1. Consider your students levels and interests, the environment, and the lesson schedule
2. Decide your target words, phrases and grammar points
3. Brainstorm a list of simple, popular melodies
4. Create verses (with your target words or phrases) and sing along with a familiar melody
5. Revise those verses if they do not match the melody (rewording, rephrasing or using contractions effectively)

The extra step 6 such as “Create gestures to the lyrics” would also work effectively to reinforce the meaning of the song.

Difficulties of Song-Creation for Inexperienced Teacher-Singers

Based on the author’s experience of song-creation, the most significant feature of word substitution seems to be that it results in new or complex syllable groupings based on the melodies.

Types of Songs to Introduce in English Classrooms

Total Physical Response (TPR)

Asher’s TPR (1969) is a popular method for young language learners. TPR works effectively in beginners’ classrooms when checking students’ comprehension. In this theory, teachers give

instructions to students, and they show their understanding with actions without saying a word. It is also possible to make the following TPR song more student-centered if the students sing in turn (instead of a teacher), swapping *color* words.

Color song

Tune: *London Bridge* (*ENG)

Who is wearing something **blue? Something blue? Something blue?

Who is wearing something blue? Please stand up!/Please sit down!

Note. *ENG means English traditional songs, and JPN means Japanese traditional songs for children. **The words can be replaced with other words in the same vocabulary group.

Simple Questions and Answers

Simple Q & A songs can easily be created based on the tunes of popular children's songs using the 'repetitive' phrases in some picture books. The story texts in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Carle, 1970) and *Panda Bear, Panda Bear, What Do You See?* (Carle, 2006) can be sung along with the two popular melodies: *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, and the *Teddy Bear* song. Teachers can also create an easy and fun Q & A song based on the simple story of the picture book. Below the author presents two songs focusing on the story content *Pancakes* and *Acrobats*. Learning songs in the target language through picture books will give students triple benefits--- song, language, and story.

Pancakes song (based on the storybook *Pancakes, pancakes!* by Eric Carle)

Tune: *Are You Sleeping?* (ENG)

[Verse I]

Are you hungry? Are you hungry? How about you? How about you?

Have some pancakes Have some pancakes Now I'm full Now I'm full

[Verse II]

Pan, pan, pancakes Pan, pan, pancakes Nice and hot Nice and hot

Add a little butter Add a little butter

Now it's done Now it's done

Can You Do This? (based on the storybook *Cornelius* by Leo Lionni)

Tune: *London Bridge (ENG)*

Can you do this difficult trick? Difficult trick? Difficult trick? Can you do this difficult trick?

“Students in turn show the trick (instead of acrobats) here!”

Yes, I can. / No, I can't. (Yes, we can. / No, we can't.) Answer version 1

I can do it. / I can't do it. (We can do it. / We can't do it.) Answer version 2

Topic-Based Songs

When creating songs, it is important to think about how to relate songs to students' everyday lives (Shin & Crandall, 2014) as well as to find connections with new or familiar topics (Slattery & Willis, 2003). Based on the *Influenza* song (see Appendix) which was created in 2009 when the flu viruses rapidly spread across Japan, the author modified that song to develop the COVID-19 pandemic version in 2020.

Virus Protection Measures

Tune: *Row, Row, Row Your Boat (ENG)*

- | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. | Wear, wear, wear your mask | To keep the germs away! | (Repeat verse 1) |
| 2. | Wash, wash, wash your hands | To keep you clean and safe! | (Repeat verse 2) |
| 3. | Play, play, play all day | But keep your mask on tight! | (Repeat verse 3) |
| 4. | Eat, eat, eat your lunch | But keep the chatter out! | (Repeat verse 4) |

Grammar Rules

A study of college students by Kanel (1997) found positive results when conducting song-based activities. The study concluded that songs would work as effectively as other conventional activities in language education. Many students the author taught had difficulty acquiring grammar

rules. For example, young students were often confused with verbs used for sports. The song verses, therefore, were arranged in accordance with the verbs such as *play, do, skate, ski, surf*, etc. As Millington (2011) states, “By adapting the song in this way, the teacher has the advantage of being able to select a particular language feature and incorporate it into the song. This feature could be an item of vocabulary, syntax, phonology, or a simple conversational expression. This allows the teacher to incorporate more songs into a curriculum and save time searching for and learning new songs” (p. 140).

Sports song

Tune: *Are You Sleeping?* (ENG)

[Verse 1]

Let's play together

Let's play together

Let's play **baseball

Let's play baseball

Let's play basketball

Let's play basketball

Let's play soccer

Let's play soccer

[Verse 2]

Let's play together

Let's play together

Let's play tennis

Let's play tennis

Let's play ping-pong

Let's play pingpong

Let's play golf

Let's play golf

[Verse 3]

Let's do together

Let's do together

Let's do yoga

Let's do yoga

Let's do Kendo

Let's do Kendo

Let's do Karate

Let's do Karate

[Verse 4]

Let's ski and skate

Let's ski and skate

Let's snowboard

Let's snowboard

Let's surf and swim

Let's surf and swim

Let's roller skate

Let's roller skate

Seasonal Events/Cultural Input

One of the benefits of learning a foreign language is exposure to different cultures and viewpoints. In that respect, it is estimated that combining language and culture into songs can nurture children's cultural awareness and interest. Chen (2009) defines one of the merits of song use as “a kaleidoscope of culture” and states, “Language and music are interwoven in songs to communicate cultural reality in a very unique way” (p. 88). While singing the ‘World food’ song, the students will naturally encounter food from another country that they have never known before. It could be a song that arouses their curiosity about food, countries, and people. While singing the second 'Halloween & Christmas' song, children can experience and enjoy traditional games, and acquire seasonal greetings as well as vocabulary.

World Food song

Tune: *London Bridge* (ENG)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Have you ever eaten ** <u>Sinigang</u> (Filipino food)? | <u>Sinigang?</u> | <u>Sinigang?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Sinigang</u> ? | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |
| 2. Have you ever eaten <u>Zoni</u> (Japanese food)? | <u>Zoni?</u> | <u>Zoni?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Zoni</u> ? | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |
| 3. Have you ever eaten <u>Black pudding</u> (British food)? | <u>Black pudding?</u> | <u>Black pudding?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Black pudding</u> ? | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |
| 4. Have you ever eaten <u>Vegemite</u> (Australian food)? | <u>Vegemite?</u> | <u>Vegemite?</u> |
| Have you ever eaten <u>Vegemite</u> ? | Yes, I have. / No, I haven't. | |

Note. **The words can be replaced with other words in the same vocabulary group.

Halloween & Christmas

Tune: *Ring-a-Ring-o' Roses* (ENG)

[Verse I]

[Verse I]

Ring-a-Ring-a Lantern	Ring-a-Ring-a Christmas tree
A pocket full of candy corn	A pocket full of candy cane
Trick or treat! Trick or treat!	Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!
We all get the treats	We all decorate the tree
[Verse II]	[Verse II]
Black cats on the roof	Santa with many presents (Christmas gifts)
Vampires in the coffins	Reindeers pull the sleigh
We all scream! We all scream!	We're all in bed. We're all in bed.
With a loud, loud voice	With sweet, sweet dreams

Language Teachers' Preference of Music Based on the Mini-Survey and Feedback

Teachers' Preferences

The results of the mini-survey (Table 1) conducted by Shimada (2014) with 28 English teachers based in Japan show that many of them prefer to use familiar melodies of 'English' songs in their English classes such as *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, *London Bridge*, and *Bingo*. According to the respondents, tunes of English songs are already familiar to Japanese children and easier for them to learn; therefore, it does not matter if the tunes come from English traditional songs. A few teachers responded that the students are able to relax and enjoy songs more with English melodies perhaps with a faster tempo in comparison with Japanese songs. Another reason is that because Japanese songs are unfamiliar to some non-Japanese teachers, they feel comfortable using English songs instead. There are a few teachers who do not care about the types of melody as long as the tunes fit their students' levels and include appropriate tempo and rhythm. Below is the song list the teachers preferred to apply the melody to their English classrooms. The number in brackets after the song title means the number of respondents in the survey who use that song:

Table 1

Survey of 28 English teachers' melody preferences (adapted from Shimada, 2014, p. 30)

English song name	Number of teacher's preference	Japanese song name	Number of teacher's preference
<i>Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star</i>	20	<i>Ai, Ai</i> [Monkey]	6
<i>10 Little Indians/Monkeys</i>	17	<i>Chocho</i> [Butterfly]	5
<i>London Bridge</i>	17	<i>Churippu</i> [Tulip]	2
<i>Bingo</i>	14	<i>Mori no Kuma-san</i> [The other day I met a bear]	2
<i>If You're Happy</i>	11		
<i>Are You Sleeping?</i>	11		
<i>Row, Row, Row Your Boat</i>	10		

Japanese Students' Preferences

In the 90-minute teacher education class in November 2021 and another class in November 2022, the author assigned her university students to create songs using any familiar melodies of traditional songs. The tunes they (10 pairs and 15 individuals) used for their song creation in the author's teacher education classes are as follows (Table 2).

Table 2

Tunes chosen for song creation in a teacher education class

Tune title	Number of times chosen	Tune title	Number of times chosen
<i>Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star</i>	9	<i>It's a Small World</i>	1
<i>London Bridge</i>	4	<i>Mary Had a Little Lamb</i>	1
<i>Jingle Bells</i>	2	<i>Mickey Mouse Club March</i>	1
<i>Are You Sleeping?</i>	1	<i>*The Other Day, I Met a Bear</i>	1
<i>Edelweiss</i>	1	<i>*Tulip</i>	1

<i>Happy Birthday</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>If You're Happy</i>	<i>1</i>		

Note. *Japanese traditional song

Table 2 shows the students' first choice was *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, and the second was *London Bridge*. It should be noted that there was only one Japanese traditional song, *Tulip* included in the list. Although there were more varieties in their music selection compared to the list of veteran teachers, some students were struggling to fit their original lyrics with the melodies they chose. As a result, some of their English songs were like "Japanese-English" songs. The following song is the example of this.

Christmas song

Tune: *Mickey Mouse Club March* (ENG)

December 24th is Christmas [*ku-ri-su-ma-su*]

Santa Clause gives [*giiives*] me a present [*pu-re-ze-n-tou*]

There are many [*maaany*] of Christmas food

Turkey and cakes and roast [*roooast*] beef

Types of Music Used for the *Wee Sing* Series

The Selection of *Wee Sing* CDs

The *Wee Sing* series have long been quite popular among children and their parents, and teachers in the United States. Many parents and teachers in Japan are also familiar with the cover illustrations of those CDs or songbooks. Table 3 below is the list of tunes used for five *Wee Sing* CDs: *Children's Songs and Fingerplays*, *And Play*, *In the Car*, *Dinosaurs*, and *For Halloween*. Some CDs including *Christmas Songs*, *Bible Songs*, *25th Anniversary Celebration*, and the *Mother Goose* are excluded as their music is basically original and due to the possibility of overlapping of the music in the selected CDs.

Table 3

List of most common tunes in the Wee Sing series and how many times they are featured per CD

Wee Sing series CDs						
Rank	Tune name (total times a tune is used)	<i>Children's Songs and Fingerplays</i> (~55 songs)	<i>And Play</i> (~30 songs)	<i>In the Car</i> (~45 songs)	<i>Dinosaurs</i> (~40 songs)	<i>For Halloween</i> (~30 songs)
1	Ten Little Indians (6)	2	2			2
1	Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star (6)	3		2		1
2	Mulberry Bush (5)	3	1			1
2	The Farmer in the Dell (5)		3	1		1
3	Are you Sleeping? (4)	3				1
3	Battle Hymn (4)	1		1	2	
3	If You're Happy (4)	1		2		1
4	Christmas Day (3)				2	1
4	Rain, Rain, Go Away (3)	3				

The Tunes Used for Wee Sing CDs

As shown in Table 1, the most popular tunes are *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* and *Ten Little Indians*, and both melodies are used for six songs on three CDs. In the previous research with English teachers in Japan, these songs were also ranked No. 1 and No. 2. The second most popular tunes are *Mulberry Bush* and *The Farmer in the Dell*. They are used for three CDs. The third most popular tunes are *Are You Sleeping?* and *If You're Happy* (both were also popular among English teachers in Japan), and *Battle Hymn* (this melody appears twice in the *Dinosaurs* CD songs). There are 5 scale songs that are mostly used for the *Children's Songs and Fingerplays* CD songs; however, they are arranged in different ways in terms of rhythms, etc. Thus, they are excluded from this list.

Discussion

The previous research of Shimada (2014) revealed that the majority of teachers teaching

English to young EFL learners in Japan preferred tunes from English songs to ones from Japanese songs. Those teachers confessed that non-Japanese instructors were unfamiliar with traditional Japanese melodies.

Similar results emerged from the song selection by Japanese university students in the author's teacher education classes in this study. Additionally, the top 3 tunes selected for the songs of *Wee Sing* series include the same traditional English songs that appeared in the two studies such as: *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, *Are You Sleeping?*, and *If You're Happy*. Millington (2014) states that many teachers are unaware of the effectiveness or potential of song use. Therefore, more teachers should use “songs as pedagogical tools” (p. 134) as he defines.

Children are fond of songs, and homeroom teachers tend to use CDs and other audio materials to teach English more frequently. Songs bring joy to the classroom and create a relaxing atmosphere. They also add variety to the everyday routine. However, there are some issues and limitations when adapting songs to class. For example, unless the teacher chooses the suitable music and appropriate tempo, the lyrics of the English song might cause students' mispronunciation and the wrong stress of English words. As presented in Japanese Students' Preferences, the *Christmas* song created by the Japanese student shows some words with extremely long stress and voiced sound instead of voiceless sound. This might put language learners in danger of acquiring *Japanese-English* instead of natural English.

These findings suggest that more teachers should learn English songs and attend workshops to acquire skills in song adaptation.

Conclusion

As songs draw naturally on the affective dimension and emotions, it is reasonable to anticipate their potential to be adapted for presenting standard syllable stress in spoken language. “Musical elements trigger positive emotions, motivation, verbal memory, social bonding or even self-regulation, all of which are needed for the development of good language skills” (Fonseca-Mora, 2016, p. 6).

Binns (2016) emphasizes the importance of the physiological effects that music can have on individuals, suggesting that educators should carefully contemplate the music they choose to incorporate into the classroom in the future. She also states “music cannot teach students unless it is combined with suitable preparation, justification, and tasks. Music, just like any supplemental tool, can be used constructively and effectively or not: its effectiveness depends totally on the teacher” (p. 17).

The research on song use has not been examined adequately. More in-depth research and detailed surveys on song creation for young learners' English classrooms should be conducted with larger samples. Lectures and workshops on the adaptation of songs specifically for public elementary school teachers are desperately needed. Song creation and adaptation should also be incorporated into the curriculum for university teacher candidates. Furthermore, teachers of young learners of English should make more efforts to actively introduce songs to their EFL classrooms.

References

- Abe-Ford, K. (2001). Uta・chantsu wo riyo shita kyozaï to sono shidoho [Materials using songs/chants and their teaching methods]. In K. Nakayama (Ed.), *Jido eigo kyoiku wo manabu hito no tameni* [For people studying English education for young learners]. (pp. 191-206). Sekaishissha.
- Asher, J. J. (1969). The total physical response approach to second language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 53, 3-17.
- Binns, H. (2016). Why it affects us, how society uses it, and how this knowledge may benefit educators. In M. Fonseca-Mora and M. Gant (Eds.), *Melodies, rhythm and cognition in foreign language learning*. (pp. 7-22). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Come Come Everybody. (2023, August 11). In *Wikipedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come_Come_Everybody
- Curtain, H. & Dahlberg, C. A. (2014). *Languages and learners: Making the match: World language instruction in k-8 classrooms and beyond* (5th edition). Pearson.
- Degrave, P. (2019). Music in the foreign language classroom: How and why?. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 10(3), 412-420.
- Fonseca-Mora, M. (2016). Music and language learning: An introduction. In M. Fonseca-Mora and M. Gant (Eds.), *Melodies, rhythm and cognition in foreign language learning*. (pp. 2-6). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Kanel, K. (1997). Teaching with music: A comparison of conventional listening exercises with pop song gap-fill exercises. *JALT Journal*, 19, 217-234.
- Millington, N. (2011). Using songs effectively to teach English to young learners. *Language Education in Asia*, 2(1), 134-141.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (2018). *Shogakko gakushu shido yoryo: gaikokugo・gaikokugokatsudo*. [The national curriculum standards at elementary school: foreign language・foreign language activities]. Kairyudo.
- Negishi, T. (2010). *Tanoshiku eigoryoku wo takameru anote konote: Kyokasho no atsukai・uta・kyodo gakushu*. [How to improve English skills in fun ways, Ways to use textbooks, songs, group learning]. Sanyusha Shuppan.
- Paul, D. (2003). *Teaching English to children in Asia*. Longman Asia ELT.

- Rockell, K. (2016). Incorporating music in CALL: An exploratory study establishing a protocol for computer assisted language learning incorporating music (CALLiM). *AsiaCALL Online Journal*, 11, 18-42.
- Slattery, M. & Willis, J. (2002). *English for primary teachers*. Oxford.
- Shen, C. (2009). Using English songs: An enjoyable and effective approach to ELT. *English Language Teaching*, 2(1), 88-94.
- Shimada, M. (2014). Introducing simple and easy English songs with familiar tunes to young EFL learners. *Bulletin of Jumonji College*, 44, 27-36
- Shin, J. & Crandall, J. (2014). *Teaching young learners English*. National Geographic Learning.
- Takahashi, M., Kawai, N., Sawada, I., & Yanagi, Y. (2021). *Gaikokugo kyoiku •ongaku kyoiku ni okeru Teigo no uta Jno shido: kyoukakan no renkei to Tonin kozo Jni shoten wo atete*. [Teaching “English songs” in Foreign Language Activities/Foreign Language Education and Music Education: Focusing on cross-curricular instruction and “phonological structure”]. *Studies in Subject Development*, 9, 33-43
- Yanagawa, M. (2021, July 9). *Igai to shiranai?! Kaigai hassho no nihon no doyo •shoka 12sen matome*. [Not very well-known?! The summary of 12 Japanese traditional songs born in foreign countries]. Ongaku ryōhō-shi ritomikku kōshi Konsaru Yanagawa en no burogu [Music Therapist, Eurhythmic Lecturer, Consultant En Yanagawa's Blog]. <https://yanagawamadoka.com/originated-overseas/>.
- York, J. (2011). Music and MEXT: How songs can help primary school English teachers teach and their students learn. *The language teacher*, 35(4), 62-67.

Miori Shimada has been teaching English in Japanese universities for 17 years both as a part-timer and a lecturer. Her research interests include English for young learners (application of picture books and songs), the effects of anxiety on EFL students, teacher education, and online EFL classrooms. She is a doctoral candidate at Anaheim University and is currently working for Toyo University.



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

Robin Reid

Fukui University of Technology

reid@fukui-ut.ac.jp

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 of 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 or 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 is 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.

References

- Barsalou, L. W. (2008). Grounded cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 59, 617–645.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.59.103006.093639>
- Barsalou, L. W. (1999). Perceptions of perceptual symbols. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 22, 637–660.
- Belliveau, G., & Kim, W. (2013). Drama in L2 learning: A research synthesis. *Scenario Journal for Drama and Theatre in Foreign and Second Language Education*, 7 (2), 6-26. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.7.2.2>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage Publications.
- Gualdron, E. & Castillo, E. (2018). Theatre for language teaching and learning: The e-theater, a holistic methodology. *Profile: Issues in Teaching and Professional Development*, 20 (2), 211-227.
- Kao, S., & O'Neill, C. (1998). *Words into worlds: Learning a second language through process drama*. Bloomsbury Academic, 1998.
- Knutson, S. (2003). Experiential learning in second language classrooms. *TESL Canada Journal* 20 (2), pp 52-64.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Maley, A., & Duff, A. (1978). *Drama techniques in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Park, H. (2015). Student perceptions of the benefits of drama projects in university EFL: Three case studies in Korea. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique* 14 (3), 314-334.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-06-2015-0047>

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

- Reid, R. (2016). Performative script analysis for additional language classrooms. *Scenario Journal for Drama and Theatre in Foreign and Second Language Education*, 10 (1), 47-60. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.10.1.4>
- Ryan-Scheutz, C., & Colangelo, L. M. (2008). Full-Scale Theater Production and Foreign Language Learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 37 (3), 374-385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2004.tb02696.x>
- Sinha, E., & D'Souza, K. (2022). Experiential learning through applied theatre in corporate training: a qualitative approach. *Journal of Management Development*, 41 (7/8), 431-449. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JMD-05-2022-0102>
- Smith, S.M. (1984). *The Theater Arts and the Teaching of Second Languages*. Addison-Wesley Publishing.
- Via, R. A. (1987). "The magic if" of theater: Enhancing language learning through drama. In W. M. Rivers (Ed.), *Interactive Language Teaching* (pp. 110-123). Cambridge University Press.

Robin Reid studied theatre as an undergraduate in Boulder, Colorado. After graduation, he worked as a technician and stage manager with various regional ballet, opera, and musical theatre productions for a number of years before moving to Japan to start a teaching career that has now spanned almost two decades. He holds a MA in Linguistics from the University of Colorado and a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Victoria University of Wellington. His doctoral thesis investigated collaborative playwriting within a task-based learning framework. His research interests include language acquisition, language teaching methodology, and intercultural communication.



Why Teach Improv? Teaching Improvisation in University EFL Communication Classes

David Gray

Shinshu University

davidandemi@gmail.com

Abstract

Improv, or improvisation, is not just for teaching performers and students. It is also taught in workshops to help people with social anxiety, ADHD, and autism (Amador, 2018), business leaders (Kulhan & Crisafulli, 2017), seniors, therapists, military and more. This paper focuses on the application of improv skills and techniques to EFL teaching. First, this paper describes what improv is, and what it is not, and compares and contrasts it to other similar performance teaching methods readers may be familiar with. The paper then examines the principles and skills taught in improv and argues why they are ideal for EFL communication teaching. It then outlines the typical components of the author's improv university lessons. Finally, it explains the ways by which activities were made increasingly challenging throughout the first semester leading to students performing short improv scenes in front of a small audience of classmates.

The image of modern-day improv is mostly from the TV show “*Whose Line Is It Anyway?*” In this high-paced, intense show professional comedians compete against each other by not only saying funny lines quickly, but also singing and dancing. So, it makes sense that most teachers would never think that improv would be ideal for teaching EFL communication. Trying to be fast, funny, and win points with jokes, all in a second language, is much too difficult for a second language learner.

However, while improv is often funny, it is not actually about telling jokes or trying hard to be funny. In fact, improv performances do not need to be funny and telling jokes will often ruin a scene (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). Even so, improv often is funny as participants are typically placed in a situation that is a strange combination of two or more elements that do not

usually go together. In this kind of context, if the actor plays the situation straight, the result is often quite funny. If, for example, the scene is: “A guide takes tourists around, but clearly has no idea what he is talking about”, all performers have to do is act out the situation in a straightforward way and often humor will be a by-product.

Improv Is a Craft

Several years ago I was reading a book on Improv called *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994) for enjoyment. I had performed stand-up comedy and was interested in learning more about other forms of comedy. As I read, I realized that improv is not just performing without preparation, it is a craft with many principles and rules that help improvisers perform well. Improvisers actually come prepared to speak spontaneously, because they have learned the craft. The principles of this craft are communication skills that are taught in improv workshops and classes through games, activities, and practice.

Improv vs. Other Similar Teaching Methods

Improv is similar to other methods of EFL communication education. Let us compare improv versus other forms of acting or theatre such as roleplay, readers theatre, drama theatre, screenplays, and drama techniques.

To start off, let us look at what these methods have in common. As Walker (2022) suggests, the major challenge for a teacher wanting to use any of these creative methods in an academic setting, “is in ensuring specific language-based learning objectives are being met, whilst also encouraging creative freedom amongst the students” (p.112). Thankfully that challenge makes for a better curriculum. Whether using screenplay, drama, or improv, there is more to these approaches than just memorizing lines or speaking spontaneously. These teaching methods offer “considerably more learning opportunities when approached not as a traditional listening and speaking activity, but as a foundation for creative exploration in which language acquisition is organically embedded through context” and “provide students with a clear context to the learning objectives set out by the teacher” (p.114).

So how do these methods differ? Textbook dialogues and roleplays are often based on achievement goals relating to grammar points or vocabulary. A typical textbook dialogue focuses on prescribed vocabulary or grammar that may sound awkward when put together. The language used, while often useful, may not always be natural or have a realistic context. However, roleplays

and readers theatre scripts can vary—they may have these textbook qualities or may be more context-based depending on the goals of the teacher.

Drama theatre and screenplays focus more on message and context, much like real life. Modern screenplays and drama theatre offer scripts written with more authentic English that a student might encounter in real life, where the context of each scene is important in getting across the overall message.

Improv takes this focus on context even further. Rather than providing scripts, improv provides prompts or situation cues that students must use as their context for communicating. Without a script to rely on, students must listen closely to what their group members say. Because listening is so important, students have to stay in the moment and not think ahead. Students are encouraged to speak “truthfully”—that is, to speak authentically based on the situation and according to the character they chose for the scene. The ESL student’s words may not be grammatically correct at times—they are, after all, second language learners—but they will speak with the English language ability that they have at that time, much as they would have to if they traveled abroad.

So, the emphasis in improv is even more on the message than on speaking correctly. The major challenge and opportunity is that students must figure out how to communicate with the English ability that they have, making communication skills essential. “What do I say when I do not have the right vocabulary or sentence structure to convey my message?” “What is the workaround to say what I need to say?”

Improv and drama techniques often use the same exercises or games to practice acting skills. This is because they both come from the work of Viola Spolin in her foundational book called *Improvisation for the Theater*, (Spolin, 1999). Kobayashi (2012) describes drama techniques as using “spontaneous ‘games’ to promote group synthesis, build confidence and encourage creative thought. They require no rehearsals, costumes or scripts; nor do they have to be perfect.” (p.30). The same is true for improv. The difference is that while improv falls under the umbrella of drama techniques, improvisation is not only about games but also a form of theatre that can be acted out in front of an audience both in short and long form. In my classroom, I have used improv games to practice communication skills that have helped my students spontaneously perform improv scenes in front of a small audience by the end of the first semester. Let us look at the communication skills taught in improv that help students get their message across.

Why Improv Is Perfect for Teaching EFL

Before we go over a few of the principles, and skills, of improv, let us define the word “offer” in improv. An offer is any feeling, word, or action given by one performer to another.

The most famous principle in improv is that performers should say “Yes, and” to all offers. Improvisers need not use the exact words “Yes, and”, but they must be accepting (“Yes”) and adding to or building on what another improviser says (“and”). For example, if the first student says “I’m hungry. I’d like to go out and eat.”, the second student would not say, “No thanks, I’m not hungry.” That rejects the offer. Instead, they might say “Sure (*yes*), how about the Chinese restaurant downtown? (*and*). Then the first actor might say, “OK! (*yes*) Let’s go in my car.” (*and*).

Each improviser accepts what the previous person says or does, and adds to it, and the conversation continues. Experience shows that if someone says “no,” that is, in some way rejects the offer, the conversation in an improv performance often hits a dead end. Actually, even if the response is only “yes”, it is still difficult to keep the conversation going. However, “Yes, and” keeps the scene moving.

The “Yes, and” skill of accepting and building on what someone else says or does is a great skill for keeping a conversation going in real life, including conversations in a student’s second language. In improv, knowing that your partner or group will always accept what you say or do can be a real relief for second language learners who are often anxious about making mistakes or being rejected when speaking.

Next is the principle: “There are no mistakes, only opportunities.” I tell my students that this goes further than simply saying, “mistakes are OK.” The principle “There are no mistakes” means that whatever you say or do in an improv scene will not only be accepted by the other group members, but also used in the scene. What looks like a mistake that should be rejected, becomes an opportunity. Again, this takes away the stress that many learners experience around making a mistake in a second language in their regular studies. Acceptance like this leads to the next skill.

This skill of working with a supposed mistake is called “justifying” in improv. For example, if someone mimes a steering wheel but then says, “We’re flying!” To justify this “mistake” another performer might say, “This new car can transform into a plane.” Improv actors practice the skill of justifying with various games or activities so that they will be ready to work with whatever is thrown at them in a scene. One such activity is called “Strange Gift.” Here one player gives another a bizarre gift (e.g., “a broken traffic light” or “a bag of teeth”). The receiver must thank them and justify why it is exactly what they wanted. “Justifying” and “no mistakes” teaches the performers to support each other and creates trust. They learn that they will not be laughed at or rejected even if they say something that might normally be considered wrong.

Justifying, which is really a form of adapting, is a skill that will be useful for a second language learner when facing real life situations where they will need to adapt.

Another principle of improv is “make your group look good,” which connects to the principle that “no one should stand out.” One actor should not take over a scene, instead the mindset is “How can I support my group?” This is a team approach. The emphasis on group work in improv works well with the strengths and values of Asian societies, that emphasize the group over the individual. Asian students can use their strengths in group work to overcome their tendency to hesitate. Another benefit of focusing on the group is that students think less about themselves, and thereby feel less pressure. To apply these principles and make them communication skills, students play many games or activities that focus on one or more of the skills.

Why Improvisation? Why Should I Use Improv as an EFL Teacher?

Many educators see the value of the communication skills students learn from improv. As White (2018) states, in “Top Ten Improv Games for EFL Classrooms,” “Many teachers have found that improvisation is valuable for a multitude of reasons, including increasing student motivation and lowering foreign language anxiety, creating a positive learning environment, and generally increasing the level of enjoyment for foreign language students” (p. 50).

How I Teach Improv

I work in a medium-sized public university in the Chubu region of Japan. My improv lessons are taught in the General Education Department to students of a variety of majors, including education and medicine. Classes typically consist of 30 to 35 first year students.

Typical Lesson

Journal writing is important in my improv classes. At the end of each lesson, students write short notes about the improv activities we did that day. For homework, students are asked to reflect on what we did in class. They refer to their notes, and typically write from 80 to 125 words, sharing their reflections and insights about what they did. They typically focus on the improv activities just done in class and, in terms of the improv principles and skills learned so far, write about such topics as: What did I learn from the activity or others? What did I notice? How have I improved? What could I do better?

Gray: Why Teach Improv? Teaching Improvisation in University EFL Communication Classes

During a typical lesson, I put students into random groups of 3 or 4 and start with a speaking warm-up. I do this so that over the semester they will get to know everyone in the class and build comfort and trust in the classroom. I give the students a simple relatable question such as, “What is your favorite music group or singer?”

Next, it is time to share their journal writing homework. Students take a moment to silently reread their journal reflections. After that, students either read that journal entry or share it from memory. As the class gets closer to the end of the first semester, I encourage students to share their entries from memory, or only glance at the journal as they share.

Often, I give a short lecture on a principle or concept of improv that relates to what we are doing that day. I teach principles like “justifying” or “honesty” and students write notes from the whiteboard for homework. At midterm, I give a test on the major improv concepts and principles taught in class.

Next come the warm-up improv activities that we learned earlier in the semester. Students then learn new activities to practice the skill we are learning or reviewing. Each time, I explain what skills this activity practices. Otherwise, students might think the games are just silly games and not understand the point of the activity. Students then practice the new activity. Early in the semester these might be gesture and counting activities such as “What is it?” and “Counting on you” and then gradually they might be activities that require quick thinking and speaking like “Fortunately, Unfortunately.” Finally as we approach the end of the semester the activities, such as the “Martha Game” (see end of the next section for explanation) look more and more like a regular improv scene. At the end of the lesson, students reflect in their journals in bullet-point form.

Progressing Through the Semester

I progress step-by-step through the semester so that students can gradually get to where they can perform improv with some confidence and trust in their classmates. Here are some steps that I use to make it as gradual and gentle as possible.

First, students need to get to know each other. The first activities should be simple and allow for lots of laughs. I also emphasize from the start that there are no mistakes in improv and that the goal is not to “do it right” but to enjoy the process and the activity. The games are not competitive.

Each class, students are in new groups of three or four so that they get to know as many classmates as possible. Sometimes, later in the lesson, groups combine and repeat an activity in a larger group which increases the challenge and their confidence.

Gradually, games become more challenging and closer to resembling performing an improv scene. Toward the end of the semester students will perform improv in front of another group of three or four students and then later in front of two groups. It is only during the middle to the end of the second semester that they perform in front of the whole class. However, to save time and keep a comfortable atmosphere, evaluations of performances are done in front of two groups.

What does improv look like? Due to limited space, groups perform simultaneously in different corners of the classroom, with one group performing while another provides the scene prompt, such as, “A restaurant where the waitress keeps getting the order wrong”. The performing group does not plan anything, not even roles, but just starts performing immediately. Typically, one or two members of the group move toward the center of that part of the room (the stage) and begin. They need to move and use the “stage” area, otherwise they will stand in a small circle and talk and be less likely to act out the scene with lots of movement. They perform for two or three minutes. Afterward, the watching groups clap, and then the groups switch roles.

An example of an easier activity that is similar to performing an improv scene is called “The Martha Game”. Just like an improv scene, performers go near the corner of the room and also get a scene prompt, such as “The Beach”. Instead of having conversations, they only need to go out and say what they are. The first student might say “I’m a parasol” (*and gesture with their whole body being a parasol*). The next one might say “I’m a wave” (*and act out being a wave*), the third person might be a beach chair. Finally, the fourth person is an actual human and walks out to the beach and interacts or comments on the parasol, beach chair, and wave. That person might say something like “Oh the waves are so nice”, (*putting their feet near the waves*) and “It’s hot, I think I’ll stand here” (*under the parasol*) and so on. These activities build toward two to three-minute improv scenes.

It is really rewarding when students can spontaneously perform their improv scenes. After everyone is done, I congratulate them on their scenes and remind them of the first class of the semester when many felt that they could not do a scene without any preparation. I can see in their reactions that they realize they have come a long way. Second semester students review previous activities and skills and learn new ones.

Conclusion

Improvisation exercises teach communication skills such as “Yes, and” and “No mistakes” effectively in a fun, relaxed environment that helps students improve at listening, speaking spontaneously, and continuing a conversation. This happens gradually over a semester as trust is built up between classmates and as activities become increasingly challenging. Improv skills of

Gray: Why Teach Improv? Teaching Improvisation in University EFL Communication Classes

listening, adaptability, and collaboration carry over to real-world communication. Future research could explore whether students' feelings toward English and their confidence in speaking spontaneously improve significantly by the end of a one or two semester course.

References

- Amador, S. (2018). Teaching social skills through sketch comedy and improv games. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Halpern, C., Close, D., & Johnson, K. (1994). Truth in comedy: The manual of improvisation. Meriwether Publishing.
- Kobayashi, D. (2012). Drama techniques in the EFL classroom. *Mask & Gavel*, 1, 30–32.
<https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.PIE1.1>
- Kulhan, B., & Crisafulli, C. (2017). Getting to “Yes And”: The art of business improv. Stanford University Press.
- Napier, M. (2015). *Improvise: Scene from the inside out*. Meriwether Publishing.
- Spolin, V. (1999). *Improvisation for the theater: A handbook of teaching and directing techniques*. Northwestern University Press.
- Walker, M. (2022). Using screenplays to integrate filmwork in the ESL classroom. *Mask & Gavel*, 10, 112–129. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.PIE10.1>
- White, J. (2018). Top ten games for EFL classrooms. *Mask & Gavel*, 7, 50–63.
<https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.PIE1.1>

David Gray is a lecturer at Shinshu University in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, Japan. He is the father of three children and grandfather of two. His research interests include teaching improvisation and critical thinking skills in EFL classes. He hopes to further explore approaches to teaching critical thinking and to better understand Japanese student attitudes toward immigration. In his free time, David enjoys Bible study, pickleball, podcasting, and performing stand-up comedy.



Sharing Ainu Wisdom Through Music: Intercultural Encounters in Performance in Education (PIE)

Kim F. Rockell

Komazawa University

kimusiknz@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper reports on Ainu artist and musician Motoi Ogawa's performance lectures given in two English-medium liberal arts elective courses, *Culture (Ethnomusicology)* and *Performance in English* at Komazawa University in Tokyo, during June 2025. The flow of classroom activity surrounding the performance, including pre-teaching and post-lecture reporting is detailed, and important themes from student responses in the form of "messages to the artist" are presented. The paper discusses the potential benefits to both cultural and linguistic learning of inviting visiting artists into a Performance in Education (PIE) classroom. In this case, the inclusion of an essentially Japanese language-based activity within an English medium class illustrates how diverse linguistic resources can be positively juxtaposed and integrated for meaningful English language learning. In addition, based on in-class teacher observation and written feedback from students, direct contact with an Ainu culture bearer resulted in considerably greater levels of student engagement and interest when compared with the mere provision of information about Ainu culture and prerecorded digital examples of performance.

Performance in Education (PIE) encompasses a vast range of performance styles and genres, while the educational contexts, processes, and problems to which these could be potentially applied are almost limitless. At the same time, efforts to improve and strengthen theoretical models, research practice in PIE, and gain helpful insights on effective approaches to evaluation and testing that can be positively applied to PIE are also underway (Kluge, 2018). Such work speaks to the ways music, drama, and the performing arts benefit the development of vocabulary (Meiliana et al., 2024; Milord, 2007), pronunciation (Kartal,

2023; Misa, 2024), motivation and engagement (Brown & Novak, 2007; Vallejo & Pérez Ortega, 2024), and cultural understanding (Crooke et al., 2024). It also suggests that live performance can have a positive impact on the cultivation of empathy and social skills (Rathje et al., 2021) and attaining stronger emotional and physiological engagement in learning (Karkou et al., 2022).

Within this stream of activity, beyond the fundamentally intercultural nature of EFL classes taught by instructors with backgrounds outside Japan, the inclusion of “world music” or ethnomusicological resources provide broad opportunities for cultural learning in the classroom (Menezes, 2025). Recent examples of such work include the use of traditional performances such as the Māori *Haka* to teach Japanese students about culture (Cotter, 2020), and the author’s own work exploring the ways Filipino and Japanese students perceive traditional Japanese *Noh* (Rockell, 2024).

As reported on in this paper, intercultural PIE teaching and research takes the form of research-led teaching in the English-medium elective classes *Performance in Education* and *Liberal Arts – Culture (Ethnomusicology)* taught at Japanese universities in Tohoku and Tokyo over the last decade. Both of these courses culminate in the performance of an English Language Noh-style play co-created with students. *Performance in Education* offers ample opportunity to promote physically mediated musicality, while in *Culture (Ethnomusicology)*, pre-recorded performances provide the impetus for reflection, discussion, and further independent exploration. Here, students are encouraged to view performances focussing in turn on aural, visual, kinesthetic, and linguistic elements of performance, which in combination can be thought of as semiotic clusters (SC) (Rockell, 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when live performance activity and face-to-face teaching were particularly limited or restricted, turning to digital performance resources (DPR) such as pre-recorded performances was invaluable in helping PIE activity to continue. The benefits of DPR notwithstanding, including tireless repetition, the ability to stop and start a digital recording at any point, and the ability to engage with the performance asynchronously, it may be the case that the attractive features of *live* performance, whether as a participant or as an audience member, act more effectively to draw many people to PIE.

My personal experience of a performance by a visiting ballet dancer and violinist to an agricultural community hall near my rural primary school in West Melton, New Zealand, during the 1970’s made a strong and lasting impression. This performance, which included excerpts from the ballet *Swan Lake* and Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, helped to stimulate an ongoing interest in PIE. Indeed, school visits by performers from national arts organizations such as the Royal NZ Ballet and NZ Symphony Orchestra continue to this day. The situation is similar in neighboring Australia,

where the programs of major companies such as Musica Viva (music) and Bangarra Dance Theatre give students valuable opportunities to encounter the performing arts firsthand. In Japan too, schools regularly host visiting performers through government programs such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs and NPOs such as MUSIC SHARING. At the same time, while scholars have been interested in this phenomenon for some time (e.g., Boyer, 2025; Holdus & Espeland, 2013), the area does not appear to have been strongly researched. With this situation in mind, post-COVID, I have begun initial, exploratory investigations and taken first steps by inviting guests to Tokyo to perform or offer live mini performances/lectures to my students.

In the current paper, I report on the visit of Motoi “ToyToy” Ogawa, an Ainu artist, culture bearer, and performer from Hokkaido in June 2025. This visit helped draw students’ attention to the sensitive issues that Ainu musicians have faced, such as forced cultural assimilation (Ruiz, 2024; Uyeda, 2021), loss of language (Tساهelnik, 2025), and breakdown of intergenerational cultural transmission (Nummelin, 2025). When cultural and linguistic transmission is interrupted in this way, issues such as reliance on historical recordings rather than live performance, commodification and touristic-oriented representations of questionable authenticity, and an underlying lack of resources and support for traditional performance also arise (Uyeda, 2021). Ogawa’s direct contact with students during his lecture performance allowed him to touch upon such problems as he shared his personal story.



Figure 1

Motoi Ogawa, “ToyToy” plays the tonkori during a performance/lecture for students at Komazawa University, 2025

Educational cooperation with Ogawa was made possible thanks to the area studies-related Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research for research on fish skin and sustainability in the fashion industry. As part of a research team led by anthropologist Yuko Nishimura, I was invited to expand the idea of sustainability beyond material culture and artifacts to encompass the preservation and transmission of cultural practices, including the performing arts. My primary area of interest was the *tonkori*, a plucked, 5-string zither associated with the Ainu people of Hokkaido, pictured in Figure 1 above, played by Motoi Ogawa. Initial investigations, including an exploratory visit to Hokkaido in 2024, prior to the 2025 performance lecture visit, prompted me to report how Ogawa, the son of prominent Ainu activist Ryūkichi Ogawa, learned to play the *tonkori* independently. Deliberate work supporting the transmission of the art of the *tonkori* is also being carried out in Hokkaido by ethnomusicologist Rie Hochi, based at the Hokkaido Museum, and in Tokyo, where *tonkori* expert Nobuhiko Chiba offers lessons online and through the Tokyo College of Music. (Nishimura et al., 2025).

After making these observations, I interviewed Ogawa in Ebetsu on a subsequent research trip to Hokkaido in early 2025, primarily examining the compositional process and background to his 2016 album *ramu* (Ogawa, 2016). On this occasion, I invited him to perform for my students in Tokyo, and we began to make preparations for his visit.

Visiting Artist: Flow of Classroom Activity

Ogawa's visit to Komazawa took place in session ten of the fifteen-session spring semester 2025. This section describes the main flow of activity before, during, and after his performance lectures.

Before Visit: Pre-teaching & Preparation

Pre-teaching involved a mini-lecture, multimedia activities, discussion/presentation, artist greeting, question preparation, and deciding which facilitator roles student volunteers would carry out during the visit. In session three, I gave a mini-lecture (15 minutes) in English on Ainu history, culture, and musical instruments, including the *tonkori* and *mukkuri*. Next, students were asked to watch a publicly available video clip touching on recent Ainu socio-political issues and to complete a cloze or “gap-fill” based on the video text. This was provided to students via Moodlecloud. Following this, in the same class session, students were divided into small groups of three to five students for discussion/presentation activities. Topic choices included a detailed

Rockell: Sharing Ainu Wisdom Through Music

investigation of a specific Ainu musical instrument, possible avenues for the preservation and transmission of Ainu music and musical instruments, and discovering more about a chosen location in Hokkaido.

To maintain a sense of expectation prior to Ogawa's visit, I called his private cellphone number during class session seven and encouraged the students to greet him heartily in English, saying "Welcome to Tokyo, ToyToy!"

In session eight, at Ogawa's suggestion, students were shown part of his talk *Tradition for the future –Coexistence without dependence* (TEDx Talks, 2015). They were asked to view the entire video for homework and were requested to prepare at least two questions they would like to ask Ogawa directly if the opportunity arose during his visit.

In session nine, just prior to Ogawa's visit, volunteer facilitator roles were assigned, which included meeting the artist at the main campus gate, guiding him to the classroom, presenting him with a bouquet of flowers, giving a thank you speech, and helping with classroom set-up (moving chairs and tables, insuring there was a suitable performance space for the performer and electronic socket access for his amplifier, etc.). These preparations were facilitated using English as a directive language from the teacher to students, and the language used when students asked the teacher for clarification. Discussion between students took place mainly in Japanese. They also had recourse to the popular Japanese game, *janken* (rock, scissors, paper) when deciding facilitator roles.

During the In-Class Lecture Performance(s)

The lecture performances were held on two subsequent days, on Tuesday after lunch in the Performance in English elective class, and on Wednesday morning in the English medium culture (ethnomusicology) class. These were separate classes, and made up of a varied cross-section of students, since the elective classes are not restricted by student year or major subject of study. A similar format was followed on both days, beginning with brief greetings in the Ainu language, followed by the sharing of Ogawa's personal story and the difficulties he experienced as an Ainu during his childhood in Sapporo. He also talked about the personal realizations he made during his time studying at college in Okinawa, and the journey towards his current positive stance of "coexistence without dependence" living as an Ainu in contemporary Hokkaido.

When Ogawa introduced the tonkori, he invited students to come forward individually and experience the tonkori's vibrations directly, while he held the instrument against their bodies as it was plucked. He also performed an extended tonkori solo utilizing all of the instrument's timbral

Rockell: Sharing Ainu Wisdom Through Music

resources. A particularly poignant moment occurred during his second lecture performance when a pause after a staccato chord was followed what appeared to be spontaneous block chord harmonics (a harmonic is a high pitch produced by lightly touching an instrument's string at certain node points rather than pressing it down when it is plucked).

The performance culminated in a vocal performance with tonkori accompaniment in which Ogawa encouraged students to sing along during refrain sections made up of Ainu-language non-lexical vocables, vocal sounds with no clear semantic meaning but which function musically, providing rhythm, timbre, mood, and emotion.

During the performance in English class Ogawa also encouraged students to use these sounds in a round (a musical piece where several voices repeat the same melody but start at different times). The kind of round he encouraged, however, was one in which singers could join in at any random point, unfettered by the idea of standard, fixed entry points and *kata* [form, pattern, or model].

On each of the two days, the session finished with question time, a thank you message, and the presentation of gifts from student volunteers. The only significant problem that arose in relation to these performances was the need for ample time—at least ninety minutes—to tune the tonkori, and for the performer to warm up (taking into consideration acoustics, temperature, humidity, etc.). Since these are problems specific to musicians working with sensitive, wooden instruments, and may not be immediately understood by educational administrators, careful planning to ensure that classrooms are available in the previous period and can be reserved for two consecutive class periods would benefit those intending to invite visiting artists such as Ogawa.

Post-performance

Ogawa's lecture-performance had been conducted mainly in Japanese, with some Ainu language-based content appearing in his songs and in his initial greetings. Post-performance, however, the focus returned to English when students were asked to complete a reflection paper. This task was presented to students using the essay quiz option of the author's Moodlecloud course, and was to be completed in English within one week after the performance-lecture. The quiz included a section in which students were able to write messages to the artist. These were sent in their original English versions by email to Ogawa and his partner in Hokkaido the following month, who were encouraged to take a copy of the student messages to the manager of Heights Center English School, a personal friend of Ogawa, for a more personal translation or interpretation and discussion of the contents. Students' messages to the artist were sometimes quite personal in tone, and for privacy reasons, only prominent themes from the messages appear below.

Prominent themes from students' "Messages to the Artist."

- The tonkori's impressive timbre and the impact of hearing its 'unique, mysterious, and wonderful sound' for the first time live.
- The emotional impact of Ogawa's narrative that included sharing difficult childhood experiences of discrimination as an Ainu.
- The desire to share what was learned in the performance-lecture with others.
- The idea that, despite having learned something about the Ainu previously second-hand through formal education, only by hearing stories directly from Ogawa could one come to understand.
- Gratitude and empathy with Ogawa's position on the part of students with mixed cultural backgrounds and the desire to eliminate all discrimination from Japanese society.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this initial exploratory study was mainly to report one of the author's PIE activities. At the same time, although purely anecdotal, it was interesting to note that based on in-class teacher observation and written feedback from students, direct contact with Ogawa during his visit appeared to have stimulated considerably greater levels of student engagement and interest when compared with their reaction to the lecture about Ainu culture given by the author earlier in the semester or having students watch digital examples of Ainu performance. Indeed, students were impressed by the live tonkori in a way they had not been after merely viewing the multimedia, and Ogawa's performance lecture seemed to touch certain students deeply and completely turn around their attitude in class.

The kind of deep transmission and embodied knowledge that Ogawa brought to students is what the intended meaning of "wisdom" in the title of this paper refers to. Evocative, though perhaps imprecise, the term captures the kind of lived-experience so vividly brought to life in the classroom through Ogawa's narrative and musicality, and while it might be foolish to speak of a "turn towards wisdom" in the current age, its importance has not escaped the scholarly gaze (Kallio & Tynjälä, 2025; Lähteenkorva et al., 2025, Ryan, 1999).

This exploratory study also revealed other areas that invite ongoing future investigation with a more rigorous, pinpointed research design. For example, the combination of English, Japanese, and Ainu languages highlighted the need to explore useful ways of working with multiple languages in the classroom. The classroom visit reported on here involved Japanese and

Rockell: Sharing Ainu Wisdom Through Music

Ainu (Ogawa to students) embedded within English (English medium class) embedded within Japanese (the main language of the broader environment in which the English language class takes place). The functional flow between languages, and possible deliberate implementation of languages other than English in projects like this one for meaningful English language learning warrants further investigation.

In addition, the differences between digital performance resources and live performance could be examined more carefully in future work, not as an attempt to argue for one over the other but rather to discover better ways to engage with them individually and in combination for the benefit of students (Kim & Kim, 2024; Swarbrick et al., 2019).

Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, the timing, frequency, content, and manner of delivery of the pre-teaching prior to a visiting artist's performance, as well as the nature of post-performance reporting, could be carefully examined in future research in an attempt to maximize the educational benefits of visiting artists in PIE. At the time of writing, Ogawa has agreed to offer annual performance-lectures to students in Tokyo beginning in 2027. With his help, and that of other visiting artists, it is hoped that an increasing number of fruitful intercultural performance encounters can take place, and he can continue to promote the sharing of wisdom through PIE.

Acknowledgement

The author is very grateful to Motoi Ogawa for agreeing to share his artistry, expertise, and personal stories during this project. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP [24K15466].

References

- Bora, S. F. (2021). Curtain up! Enhancing L2 spontaneous and authentic speaking opportunities through play scripts and drama-based approaches. *RELC Journal*, 52(3), 458-473.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688219887>
- Boyer, N. (2025). *The Impact of Visiting Artists on Education*. (Honors Research Project, Williams Honors College, The University of Akron).
https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/1922

- Brown, A. S., & Novak, J. L. (2007). *Assessing the intrinsic impacts of a live performance* (pp. 2008-12). San Francisco, CA: WolfBrown. <https://wolfbrown.com/wp-content/uploads/Report-Assessing-The-Intrinsic-Impacts-of-a-Live-Performance.pdf>
- Cotter, M. The Māori Haka: Understanding culture through traditional performance. In D. Kluge (Ed.), *Performance in Education Review 2020* (pp. 39-48). JALT Performance in Education SIG. <https://jaltpiesig.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Performance-in-Education-Review-2020-FINAL-.pdf>
- Crooke, A. H. D., Thompson, W. F., Fraser, T., & Davidson, J. (2024). Music, social cohesion, and intercultural understanding: A conceptual framework for intercultural music engagement. *Musicae Scientiae*, 28(1), 18-38. DOI:10.1177/10298649231157099
- Eccles, R., Van der Linde, J., le Roux, M., Holloway, J., MacCutcheon, D., Ljung, R., & Swanepoel, D. W. (2021). Effect of music instruction on phonological awareness and early literacy skills of five-to seven-year-old children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 191(12), 1896-1910. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1803852>
- Holdhus, K., & Espeland, M. (2013). The Visiting artist in schools: Arts based or school based practices?. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(1), 1-20, <http://www.ijea.org/v14si1/v14si1-10.pdf>
- Kallio, E. K., & Tynjälä, P. (2025). *What is wisdom and can it be taught?: Philosophical, Psychological, and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003602149>
- Karkou, V., Sajjani, N., Orkibi, H., Groarke, J. M., Czamanski-Cohen, J., Panero, M. E., ... & Baker, F. A. (2022). The psychological and physiological benefits of the arts. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 840089. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.840089>
- Kartal, T. S. G. (2023). The use of drama on developing pronunciation of young learners. *Edutech Research*, 1(1), 98-112. <https://app.edutechres.com/uploads/makale-pdf/the-use-of-drama-on-developing-pronunciation-of-young-learners-961s9i.pdf>
- Kelly, M., Nixon, L., Broadfoot, K., Hofmeister, M., & Dornan, T. (2018). Drama to promote non-verbal communication skills. *The clinical teacher*, 16(2), 108-113. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.12791>
- Kim, E. J., & Kim, M. J. (2024). Students' Evaluation of Live Online Lectures Versus Pre-Recorded Video Lectures During COVID-19: Focusing on Students' Study Behaviors. *SAGE Open*, 14(4), 21582440241305325.

- Kluge, D. (2018). Conducting research on performance-assisted learning. *The Mask & Gavel*, 7(1), 6-25. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.PIE7.1-1>
- Lähteenkorva, M., Tynjälä, P., & Kallio, E. K. (2025). From knowledge to wisdom in sustainable management education - Insights from a B Corp course. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 23(2), 101148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2025.101148>
- Meiliana, D., Satria, I., & Martina, F. (2024). The influence of memory strategy used with classical music on students' capability in memorizing vocabulary. *Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan (JKIP)*, 5(2), 229-234. <https://doi.org/10.55583/jkip.v5i2.996>
- Menezes, P. (2025). The Discourse of Diversity and World Music: Tensions Between Stimulating and Controlling the Difference. In: Leontiy, H., Schulz, M. (eds) *Ethnography and Diversity*. Springer, Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-47168-2_5
- Milord, M. (2007). *The Effects of Using Storytelling on Reading Comprehension through Drama and Theater* (Doctoral dissertation, SUNY College at Brockport). <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12648/5622>
- Misa, M. (2024). Language learning: Enhancing students' pronunciation through English songs. *Sintaksis: Publikasi Para ahli Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris*, 2(6), 151-159. <https://doi.org/10.61132/sintaksis.v4i1>
- Nishimura, Y., Arana, C., Rockell, K., Kokita, M. (2025). Fish skin, community branding, and the Ainu of Hokkaido. *The semiannual periodical of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Department of English and Department of Foreign Languages*, 19, 1-32.
- Nummelin, G. L. (2025). *Contemporary Expressions of Ainu Living Culture: Worlds (re) created and (re) claimed through music and language* (Doctoral dissertation, SOAS University of London). <https://doi.org/10.25501/soas.00722408>
- Ogawa, M. (2016). *Ramu*. [Album]. FIST/sambafree.inc.
- Rathje, S., Hackel, L., & Zaki, J. (2021). Attending live theatre improves empathy, changes attitudes, and leads to pro-social behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 95, 104138.
- Rockell, K. (2022). Integrated Online Voice & Percussion Ensemble. In P. Head and D. Kluge (Eds.), *Classroom Resources: Practical ideas for teachers Vol. 2*. JALT Performance in Education (PIE) SIG. <https://jaltpiesig.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Classroom-Resources-vol-2-FINAL.pdf>

- Rockell, K. (2024). An intercultural lens on the Japanese noh theater play Takasago. *CMU Journal of Science*, 28(2), 52-62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104138>
- Román-Caballero, R., Vadillo, M. A., Trainor, L., & Lupiáñez, J. (2022). Please don't stop the music: A meta-analysis of the benefits of learning to play an instrument on cognitive and academic skills. *Educational Research Review*, 35, 100436
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100436>
- Ruiz, E. B. (2024). Assimilation and Dispossession: Cultural Genocide of the Ainu. In *A Modern History of Forgotten Genocides and Mass Atrocities* (pp. 29-53). Routledge.
- Ryan, S. (1999). What is wisdom? *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 93(2), 119-139. 10.1023/a:1004257728638
- Shinohara-Tangiku, C., & Tangiku, I. (2017). Tonkori and Shichepchim. *Studia Instrumentarium Musical Popularis (New Series)*, 5, 405.
- Swarbrick, D., Bosnyak, D., Livingstone, S. R., Bansal, J., Marsh-Rollo, S., Woolhouse, M. H., & Trainor, L. J. (2019). How live music moves us: head movement differences in audiences to live versus recorded music. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, 2682.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02682>
- TEDx Talks. (2015, November 7). *Tradition for the future - Coexistence without dependence | ToyToy (Motoi Ogawa) | TEDxSapporo* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXwLkxYZnew>
- Tomita, T. (2017). The world of tonkori. *Hokkaido University, Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies. Booklet*, 7.
- Tsahelnik, T. (2025). The Power of Ancestral Language: Exploring Language, Trauma and Empowerment in the Ainu Context (Doctoral dissertation, Hokkaido University).
<https://hdl.handle.net/2115/95444>
- Uyeda, K. (2015). *The Journey of the Tonkori: A Multicultural Transmission*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz).
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1600x55b>
- Uyeda, K. (2021). Three Ainu musicians: A legacy of resistance and synergy. *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 105, 249-266. <https://doi.org/10.15021/00009774>

Rockell: Sharing Ainu Wisdom Through Music

Vallejo, J., & Pérez Ortega, M. I. (2024). The impact of song-based English lessons in the motivation of EFL students. *Religación: Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades*, 9(42). <http://doi.org/10.46652/rgn.v9i42.1244>

Watson, J. W. (2023). *Examining the Dynamics of the Dramatic Arts on Self-Esteem of College Students* (Doctoral dissertation, Trident University International). <https://www.proquest.com/openview/1d830a909b19a2735470f4bdf261b459/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

Kim Rockell, originally from New Zealand, is an ethnomusicologist and classical guitarist active throughout the Asia-Pacific region. In Japan he had the opportunity to experience traditional *Noh* theatre, inspiring him to experiment with original English language Noh-style plays as a member of PIE. He draws on a range of musical strategies when teaching Performance in English and World Music and Culture courses at Komazawa University in Tokyo. Kim also supervises Music Liberal Arts Graduation theses at the Tokyo College of Music.



A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through Performance-Assisted Learning

Gordon Rees

Yokkaichi University

reesgordon@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper discusses a university course designed to develop students' expressive communication skills through Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL), culminating in a collaborative filmmaking project. The course, *Performance*, targeted students who are often less engaged in traditional lecture-based classes, particularly student athletes, and was designed to create a student-centered, active learning environment. Building on prior experience using PAL in required English communication courses, I introduced filmmaking as a performance project to examine its impact on student engagement and expressive communication. Students completed activities such as scripted conversations and reader's theater in English, and produced a short film in Japanese based on Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers." Classroom observations and student feedback indicated increased student motivation, participation, and confidence. The findings suggest that integrating PAL activities, including collaborative filmmaking, into university courses can promote expressive communication skills, confidence, and motivation among less engaged students.

本研究は、Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL) を活用し、学生の表現的コミュニケーション能力の向上を目的とした大学授業について考察するものであり、その集大成として協働的な映像制作プロジェクトを実施したものである。本授業「Performance」は、従来の講義中心型授業では参加意欲が低くなりがちな学生、特に学生アスリートを主な対象とし、学生主体のアクティブ・ラーニング環境の構築を目指して設計された。本研究では、必修の英語コミュニケーション科目における PAL の実践経験を基盤として、パフォーマンス活動の一環として映像制作を導入し、それが学生の参加度および表現的コミュニケーションに与える影響を検討した。学生は英語によるスクリプト会話や

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

リーダーズ・シアターといった活動に取り組むとともに、アーネスト・ヘミングウェイの『The Killers』を基にした短編映画を日本語で制作した。授業観察および学生アンケートの結果から、学習意欲、授業参加度、自信の向上が確認された。これらの結果は、協働的な映像制作を含む PAL 活動を大学授業に取り入れることで、従来型授業では関与が低くなりがちな学生に対しても、表現的コミュニケーション能力、自信、学習意欲の向上を促進できる可能性を示唆している。

In many university courses, students are expected to communicate with their peers and instructors, participate in whole-class and small-group discussions, and present their ideas effectively in front of others. However, many students struggle with expressive communication, particularly when required to speak or perform in front of their peers. Students may lack confidence, have little experience speaking in front of an audience, or feel anxious about making mistakes in front of others. As a result, some students become reluctant to participate in class activities that require speaking or presenting.

Despite these expectations, many Japanese university classes are still conducted in a teacher-centered format in which the instructor delivers content while students listen, take notes, and work individually. While this format may be effective for transmitting information, it often provides limited opportunities for students to actively participate or develop expressive communication skills. In lecture-based classes, some students may choose to remain passive and avoid participation, while others may be reluctant to speak due to lack of confidence or anxiety about speaking in front of their peers. In both cases, students may have few opportunities to practice communication or develop presentation abilities. Therefore, there is a need for more learner-centered teaching approaches that encourage active engagement and provide students with opportunities to develop expressive communication in a supportive classroom environment (King, 2014).

One approach that may address these issues is Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL). PAL is an approach in which performance activities are used to teach, practice, reinforce, and evaluate course content (Head et al., 2018). Through performance activities such as role-plays, skits, presentations, debates, radio drama, reader's theater, storytelling, and film projects, students use not only words, but also voice, gesture, facial expression, and movement to communicate meaning. Because these activities are interactive, collaborative, and require active participation, PAL can help create a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment that encourages students to participate more actively in the learning process. I have been researching and implementing PAL in university courses for several years, particularly in required English communication courses

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

where many students are initially reluctant to participate in speaking activities. I am also a member of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Performance in Education (PIE) Special Interest Group (SIG), which promotes the use of performance activities in education. Based on this experience, this study explores how PAL can be used to develop expressive communication skills in a university performance course.

This paper describes the design and implementation of a university course titled *Performance* (文化表現論), which I was asked to take over from a previous instructor and was given the opportunity to redesign the syllabus. The course was intended for students who are often reluctant to participate in traditional lecture-based classes, particularly student athletes, and was therefore structured to create a student-centered, active-learning environment. The course included performance activities conducted in both English and Japanese, including scripted conversations, reader's theater, and a collaborative filmmaking project based on "The Killers" (Hemingway, 1927). This paper describes the course structure and implementation, examines student feedback, and argues that integrating PAL activities, such as collaborative filmmaking, provides a student-centered, active-learning approach that fosters the development of expressive communication skills, confidence, and motivation among less engaged students.

Literature Review

Performance-Assisted Learning

Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL) is an instructional approach that uses performance activities to assist in the learning, consolidation, and assessment of course content (Head et al., 2018; Kluge, 2018). PAL includes activities such as role-plays, presentations, debates, reader's theater, storytelling, radio drama, and film production, in which students use voice, gesture, facial expression, and movement in addition to spoken language to communicate meaning. Because these activities require students to actively participate and communicate with others, PAL emphasizes expressive communication and active learning.

PAL is distinct from Performance-Based Learning (PBL) in which performance, such as rehearsing and performing a full play, is the central component of a drama course. In contrast, PAL incorporates performance as a task within a broader curriculum or syllabus (Kluge, 2018). In this sense, PAL can be understood as a form of Task-Based Learning (TBL), as students complete performance tasks that focus on communicating meaning and producing a clear outcome. TBL teaching emphasizes meaning-focused communication and the completion of purposeful tasks that reflect real-world language use (Ellis, 2003).

Another important aspect of PAL is that performance tasks can be used not only for practice but also for assessment. Through rehearsal and performance, students have multiple opportunities to practice and refine their communication skills while allowing instructors to observe and evaluate their performance. A growing body of research suggests that performance-based activities can enhance student motivation, participation, and confidence, particularly among learners who may be less actively involved in traditional classroom settings (Boudreault, 2010; Charles & Kusanagi, 2007; Head et al., 2018; Kluge, 2018). Consequently, PAL has been applied in a variety of educational contexts to promote active learning and develop communication skills.

Student-Centered Learning and Active Learning

Student-centered learning is an approach in which students take an active role in the learning process rather than passively receiving information from the instructor. In learner-centered classrooms, students are expected to participate in discussions, collaborate with their peers, and take responsibility for their own learning. This approach contrasts with traditional teacher-centered instruction, in which the instructor delivers content while students listen, take notes, and complete assignments individually. In many lecture-based classes, students may have limited opportunities to actively participate or communicate, which can lead to passive learning and low levels of engagement.

Active learning is closely related to student-centered learning and refers to instructional methods that require students to actively engage in the learning process through discussion, collaboration, problem-solving, and creative tasks. Research suggests that students learn more effectively when they are actively involved in the learning process rather than passively listening to lectures (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001; Prince, 2004; Savignon, 2002). Fleming (2006) notes that drama activities are inherently learner-centered because they require active cooperation and social interaction among students, making learning a shared and participatory experience rather than an individual one.

Furthermore, performance activities such as drama and reader's theater can be considered active learning experiences because students do not simply study language or communication skills, but instead practice and apply them in meaningful contexts. As students work together to prepare and perform, they become active participants in the learning process rather than passive learners (Rees, 2018). For these reasons, student-centered and active learning approaches are closely connected to PAL, which emphasizes learning through participation, collaboration, and performance.

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

Another theoretical perspective that supports student-centered and active learning is constructivism, which suggests that students gain knowledge by actively constructing it through experience and interaction rather than through memorization alone (Fosnot & Perry, 2005, as cited in Head et al., 2018). PAL aligns with this perspective because students do not simply study content, but instead interpret, practice, and present what they have learned through performance activities. Newmann and Wehlage (1995, as cited in Head et al., 2018) argue that academic achievement should involve students expressing what they have learned through performances, presentations, or other forms of meaningful communication. As an instructional approach that requires students to create and perform for an audience, PAL can be considered a form of authentic pedagogy that promotes deep engagement and active learning (Head et al., 2018).

Performance and the Non-Threatening Environment

Performance and drama-based activities have long been used in education to encourage student participation and develop communication skills. One reason these activities are effective is that they help create a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment. In traditional classrooms, many students feel anxious about speaking in front of others and may fear making mistakes or being judged by their peers. However, performing as a character or as part of a group can shift the focus away from the individual, helping to reduce anxiety and make participation easier. This effect has also been observed in more recent studies of PBL, which highlight how supportive, low-stress environments can increase student confidence and participation (see Rees, 2025 for these citations). Similar findings have been reported in research on drama-based instruction, which suggests that non-threatening classroom environments can positively influence student attitudes, motivation, and self-confidence (Charles & Kusanagi, 2007).

Performance-based tasks are also inherently collaborative and require students to work together toward a shared goal. Fleming (2006) notes that drama is learner-centered because it depends on active cooperation and social interaction. Similarly, activities such as reader's theater and radio drama promote teamwork and help build a sense of group cohesion (Maiullo, 2018). This collaborative dimension is particularly important in contexts where students may be hesitant to participate individually, as working within a group can increase confidence and willingness to contribute. Social learning theory further suggests that students learn more effectively through interaction and shared experiences, as collaboration enhances engagement and supports the development of communication skills (Rees, 2025).

In addition to fostering collaboration, performance activities provide students with opportunities to practice expressive communication skills such as voice projection, intonation,

gesture, and facial expression, all of which are essential for effective presentations and public speaking (Rees, 2018). Through rehearsal and performance, students refine these skills in meaningful contexts rather than practicing them in isolation. Moreover, engaging in creative and interactive tasks has been shown to increase motivation and enjoyment, while also supporting confidence development and reducing anxiety (Rees, 2025). As a result, performance-based approaches are often described as both motivating and confidence-building, particularly for students who are less engaged or hesitant to participate in traditional lecture-based classes.

Filmmaking, Project-Based Learning, and Collaborative Performance

Collaborative performance projects such as radio drama and filmmaking can be viewed as extensions of PAL, which incorporate elements of project-based and experiential learning. These activities require students to work together over an extended period of time to create a final product, combining multiple communication skills in a meaningful and authentic context. Unlike shorter performance tasks, project-based activities involve planning, rehearsal, revision, and production, which can deepen student engagement and promote a greater sense of ownership over the learning process.

In radio drama, students collaborate to produce scripted audio performances, focusing primarily on vocal expression, timing, and coordination. While this format supports the development of expressive speaking skills, it may still require a relatively high level of comprehension of the source material. In contrast, filmmaking allows students to physically enact scenes through movement, gesture, and spatial interaction, which can support a deeper understanding of narrative, character relationships, and emotional context. By acting out scenes, students must interpret meaning and make decisions about how to represent it, thereby engaging more fully with the content.

The embodied and multimodal nature of performance has been shown in my previous work to support both comprehension and expressive communication. In a study involving the re-creation of a film scene, students were asked to act out and perform a selected scene in order to deepen their understanding of course content while developing skills such as voice inflection, gesture, and facial expression (Rees, 2017). Students initially showed hesitation, but gradually became more engaged and collaborative as they worked together to perform the short scene. The activity also reduced cognitive burden by using a manageable script, allowing students to focus on expression and meaning. In the performance, students recreated a scene from the film *42* (Helgeland, 2013), depicting racial discrimination experienced by Jackie Robinson in a major league baseball game. Through physically enacting the scene, students were able to engage more deeply with the

emotional and social context, suggesting that performance can support not only linguistic development but also a deeper understanding of cultural and historical content.

A similar effect can be observed in filmmaking projects based on literary texts. In the present study, students produced a short film adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers", which is set in 1920s America during the Prohibition era, a period in which the sale and production of alcohol were legally banned in the United States (1920–1933). The ban led to the rise of illegal alcohol production and distribution, as well as increased organized crime and gang-related violence associated with the black-market alcohol trade. While students were first provided with background information to support their understanding of the historical context, acting out the scenes required them to interpret and embody the social dynamics, character motivations, and cultural setting of the story. Through this process, students were able to develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the text, as well as its historical and cultural context, than would likely have been achieved through reading alone.

In addition to supporting comprehension, filmmaking projects promote collaboration and teamwork, as students take on different roles such as actors, directors, and editors. This shared responsibility can increase motivation and encourage active engagement, particularly among students who are less engaged in traditional classroom settings. Because filmmaking involves creating a product for an audience, it also provides a sense of purpose and authenticity that can further enhance engagement.

For the reasons described above, collaborative filmmaking can be understood as a natural extension of PAL, combining elements of performance, project-based learning, and collaborative learning. As such, it offers a promising approach for creating student-centered, active learning environments that support the development of expressive communication skills, confidence, and motivation.

A PAL Research Project

Introducing the Research

This study was conducted at a private university in Japan within the Faculty of Policy Management. The course, titled *Performance* (文化表現論), was a semester-long elective designed to develop students' expressive communication skills through performance-based activities. The class met once a week for 90 minutes over a 15-week semester. I was asked to take over the course from a previous instructor and was given the opportunity to redesign the curriculum. Drawing on my prior experience using PAL in required English communication

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

courses, the course was restructured to emphasize active participation and student-centered learning.

The participants were non-English major university students, the majority of whom were members of university athletic teams. As indicated in the course overview, the class consisted predominantly of male students (17 male, 1 female) with generally low motivation for studying English and relatively basic English proficiency. For many students, the course was selected as an alternative to other available classes rather than out of a strong academic interest in English or communication studies. These characteristics made the group representative of learners who are often less engaged in traditional lecture-based classroom environments.

Course Structure and Objectives

In response to these learner characteristics, the course was designed to provide frequent opportunities for active engagement through collaborative performance tasks. The primary goals of the course included helping students speak more smoothly and naturally, build confidence when speaking in front of others, and develop teamwork and self-expression skills such as voice projection, intonation, and gesture. While much of the course incorporated English-language activities, the final filmmaking project was conducted in Japanese, allowing students to focus more fully on expressive and collaborative aspects of performance.

The course included a range of PAL activities such as scripted conversations, reader's theatre, and a collaborative filmmaking project based on Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers." These activities were designed to progressively build students' expressive communication skills and confidence, culminating in the production of a short film. Through this structure, the course aimed to create a supportive, student-centered environment in which learners could actively engage with both language and performance.

Implementation of Performance-Assisted Learning

Scripted Conversation Activity

The scripted conversation activity used in this course was adapted from a unit in the textbook *Performance* (Harrington & LeBeau, 2013) although the textbook itself was not formally adopted for the course. The selected unit focused on the theme of giving instructions and explaining procedures, and included a short skit in which a husband and wife communicate from different locations within a house. This scenario provided a useful framework for encouraging

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

students to practice voice projection and clarity, as they were required to speak across a distance. In addition, the inclusion of contrasting character roles (a husband and wife) created opportunities for humor and increased student engagement, particularly in a class composed primarily of male students, as students were required to take on gender roles that differed from their own. The use of simple props, such as a bathrobe and a coffee maker, further enhanced the realism of the scene and encouraged students to embody their roles more fully. Students were asked to enter the scene as if they had just woken up, which added a performative and humorous dimension to the activity and helped reduce anxiety by creating a more relaxed and playful atmosphere.

The spatial arrangement of the performance further contributed to the effectiveness of the activity. Performers were positioned at opposite ends of the classroom, with the audience seated between them, requiring student actors to project their voices clearly across the room. This setup also created a dynamic viewing experience, as audience members needed to shift their attention between speakers. As a result, the activity took on a more theatrical quality, reinforcing the importance of vocal clarity while increasing audience engagement.

In addition to the main dialogue, the unit included preparatory activities such as listening exercises and guided script work, which supported comprehension and familiarized students with the language and context of the skit. While these materials informed the design of the activity, the classroom implementation was adapted to emphasize performance elements such as vocal projection, gesture, and physical positioning. By modifying the original activity in this way, the task was aligned more closely with the goals of PAL, particularly the development of expressive communication skills and active student participation.

While students generally responded positively to the activity, many initially had difficulty remembering their lines. Because the skit was structured as a demonstration task in which students explained the process of making coffee, each line corresponded to a specific step in the procedure. To support both comprehension and recall, students were required to incorporate at least one gesture for each line of dialogue, physically representing each step in the process. This requirement encouraged students to connect language with action, and appeared to support memorization and recall by linking verbal output with embodied movement. As students repeated the activity, their performances became more fluid and coordinated, suggesting that the integration of gesture not only enhanced expressiveness but also facilitated understanding and retention of the content.

The use of gestures also contributed to a humorous and engaging classroom atmosphere. Because each line was paired with a physical action, the audience could observe performers enacting each step while occasionally struggling to recall the corresponding English expressions. This type of visible, low-stakes struggle appeared to reduce performance pressure and create a

more supportive environment, as mistakes were framed as part of the performance rather than as failures. In this way, the activity not only supported language production and recall, but also encouraged risk-taking and increased student willingness to participate. The activity was implemented through a series of structured steps designed to gradually develop students' expressive communication skills and confidence, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Steps for the “Making the Morning Coffee” Scripted Conversation Activity

Step	Activity	Description
1	Class reading	Students read the script as a class to develop general understanding.
2	Pair reading	Students work in pairs and determine roles for the performance.
3	Voice projection practice	Students practice reading from a distance (e.g., opposite sides of the classroom) to develop voice projection.
4	Gesture integration	Students act out the script, incorporating at least one gesture per line.
5	Padlet recording (homework)	Students record and upload their performance to a dedicated Padlet board for review and reflection.
6	Final performance with props	Students perform the scene using props (e.g., coffee maker, filter, box, cups, bathrobe).
7	Performance conditions	Students stand on opposite sides of the classroom and project their voices over the audience.

Reader's Theater

The reader's theater activity was based on the play “Slow Food” from the Oxford graded reader *Five Short Plays* (Ford, 2008). This script was selected for both thematic and pedagogical reasons. The play encourages reflection on the fast pace of modern life and promotes the idea of slowing down and appreciating everyday experiences, extending the concept of “slow food” to a broader notion of a “slow life.” In addition, the setting of a fast-food restaurant provided a familiar and relatable context for university students, helping to increase engagement and comprehension.

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

From a pedagogical perspective, the play also includes multiple choral lines in which customers speak in unison, requiring students to coordinate timing and delivery. This feature was particularly valuable in promoting collaboration and teamwork, as students needed to listen carefully to one another and rehearse together to achieve a cohesive performance. As a result, the activity supported not only the development of expressive communication skills, but also group cohesion and cooperative learning. This aligns with the principles of PAL, in which meaning is constructed through collaborative and expressive performance.

The play also provided opportunities for cultural reflection and discussion. Set in an American fast-food restaurant, the story portrays customers becoming increasingly frustrated after waiting an unusually long time for their orders, eventually confronting the cashier, who reveals that no food is being prepared. While the situation is exaggerated for dramatic effect, it highlights differences in customer behavior and service expectations across cultural contexts. This contrast allowed the instructor to guide discussion on how service interactions and expectations may differ between Japan and the United States. For example, students were encouraged to consider differences in communication style, customer reactions, and perceptions of service quality. In this way, the activity extended beyond language practice, serving as a means of developing cultural awareness alongside expressive communication skills, which further increased student engagement by connecting the performance to real-world experiences and cross-cultural understanding. The reader's theatre activity was implemented through a structured sequence of steps designed to support the development of fluency, expressive reading, and collaborative performance, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Steps for the "Slow Food" Reader's Theater Activity

Step	Activity	Description
1	Script introduction	Students are introduced to the script and its context.
2	Class reading	The script is read aloud as a class to ensure comprehension.
3	Role assignment	Students are assigned or choose roles within the script.
4	Group rehearsal	Students practice reading their parts in groups, focusing on pronunciation and fluency.

Step	Activity	Description
5	Expressive reading practice	Students work on intonation, pacing, and emotional expression.
6	Coordination and timing	Groups rehearse together to synchronize delivery, particularly for chorus lines.
7	Performance conditions	Students perform the script as a group, focusing on clear delivery, expressive reading, and synchronized timing, particularly during chorus lines.

Collaborative Filmmaking Project

The final project of the course was a collaborative filmmaking assignment based on Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers." Set in 1920s Prohibition-era America, a period marked by organized crime and gang violence, the story follows two hitmen who arrive at a small-town restaurant in search of a former boxer who has double-crossed an associate. Much of the narrative unfolds through tense, dialogue-driven interactions, with minimal narration and an emphasis on atmosphere and character dynamics. This structure made the story particularly well-suited for adaptation into a performance-based format, as students could focus on interpreting meaning through dialogue, movement, and interaction. In addition, the predominantly male cast of characters aligned well with the composition of the class, and the limited number of settings, Henry's restaurant and Ole Anderson's room, made it feasible to recreate the story using available classroom spaces.

The decision to implement filmmaking, rather than radio drama, was informed by the characteristics of the student group. While radio drama had been used successfully in previous courses with higher-proficiency learners, it was considered too demanding for this group, as it requires a strong command of both linguistic and cultural content. In contrast, filmmaking was selected because its visual and embodied elements were expected to support comprehension by allowing students to interpret and represent meaning through action as well as language. To further support comprehension, students were shown a short film adaptation of *The Killers* produced by Soviet film students (Beiku et al., 1956), which provided students a visual model of the narrative prior to beginning their own productions.

The filmmaking project was designed to be carried out within the constraints of regular class time and available campus facilities. Filming took place in a learning commons space

adjacent to the library, while the regular classroom was used for preparation and rehearsal. Consideration of location and available space was an important factor in the design of the project, as the limited number of settings in the story allowed it to be adapted effectively within the classroom environment.

Students first read an adapted version of Hemingway's "The Killers" before using a radio drama adaptation by Marguerite (2015) as the script for their film projects. The radio drama script was then modified to suit the needs of the class and adapted for a visual performance format, culminating in the production of student-created film adaptations of *The Killers*. The script included six main characters as well as several minor roles. In order to ensure that all students had meaningful participation, the class was divided into three casts, and each scene was filmed three times with different groups of performers. Some students took on multiple roles across different scenes. During filming sessions, two casts were typically present in the learning commons of the university which served as the filming space: one group performed the scene there while the other assisted with filming, set adjustments, and support tasks. After completing a scene, groups rotated back to the regular classroom to rehearse subsequent scenes, while another cast took their place in the filming space. Although this rotational system presented logistical challenges, it allowed for continuous engagement and ensured that all students were actively involved in both performance and production processes. This structure also encouraged collaboration beyond performance, as students engaged in both creative and technical aspects of the filmmaking process.

To ensure that the filmmaking project provided meaningful opportunities for language development, a number of structured preparatory activities were incorporated. One key activity involved having students create detailed character profiles in English for the roles they would portray. Using a guided worksheet written in English, students developed their characters by specifying attributes such as name, age, gender, nationality, marital status, profession, educational background, personality traits, physical appearance, manner of speaking, fashion, hobbies, and special skills. Students then interviewed each other asking questions about each of these traits. This activity encouraged the use of descriptive language and required students to think carefully about how their characters would communicate and behave.

Building on this, students were asked to deliver self-introductions in English, in character, in front of the class. To support this task, a structured template was provided in English, guiding students in organizing and expressing key aspects of their character's identity. This activity required students to present their character's background while beginning to embody the role through voice, tone, and physical expression. Although the final film was produced in Japanese, these preparatory activities ensured that students engaged in sustained and scaffolded language use as part of the creative process. In this way, the filmmaking project supported both language

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

development and expressive performance, while also helping students build confidence in using English in a meaningful and contextualized manner.

The production phase required a number of practical adaptations due to time, budget, and environmental constraints. In the original story, the hitmen are described as wearing long coats, hats, and scarves, concealing weapons and appearing out of place in the setting. However, because filming took place during the summer and resources were limited, these elements were adapted for practicality. Instead of heavy clothing, students used simple items such as baseball caps to suggest character identity. In addition, because the original story involves concealed weapons, the hitmen carried baseball bats as a visible substitute, allowing the scene to retain a sense of tension while remaining feasible within the classroom environment.

The set design was similarly improvised using available classroom resources. Desks and chairs were arranged to represent the restaurant space, and whiteboards were used to suggest divisions between areas such as the dining space and kitchen. Although minimal, this constructed environment provided a sufficient visual framework to support students' understanding of the narrative setting and character interactions.

Students also faced challenges in memorizing their lines within the limited production schedule. To address this, scripts were incorporated into the performance in a naturalistic way, such as being concealed within menus or placed on tables, allowing students to refer to them as needed. While this approach deviated from traditional expectations of memorized performance, it enabled students to focus more on delivery, interaction, and overall scene development. Despite the absence of a formal production budget, these adaptations allowed students to create a coherent and meaningful representation of the story, while also supporting comprehension through active, embodied engagement with the text.

Because of time limitations, the editing phase was completed by the instructor using iMovie after the final class session, and the finished film was uploaded to Padlet for student viewing. In a more extended implementation, students could be involved in the editing process using classroom computers, further enhancing their engagement with the production. The collaborative filmmaking project was implemented through a multi-stage process designed to support comprehension, character development, expressive performance, and production, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Steps for “The Killers” Collaborative Filmmaking Project

Step	Activity	Description
1	Text introduction and background	Students read an adapted version of Hemingway’s “The Killers” as a class for comprehension and are introduced to the historical context of the Prohibition era.
2	Comprehension checks	Students complete quizzes on key scenes (Scenes 1 and 2) to confirm understanding of the story.
3	Model viewing	Students watch a short example of a student-produced film adaptation to observe performance and filming techniques.
4	Group formation and role assignment	Students form groups and take on roles such as actors, directors, and production support.
5	Script marking (voice)	Students annotate the radio drama adaptation script (Marguerite, 2015) for voice inflection, stress, and pacing in preparation for performance.
6	Padlet audio recording (homework)	Students record individual lines with attention to voice inflection and upload them for review.
7	Script marking (emotion)	Students annotate scripts to reflect emotional tone and character intention, followed by additional recordings.
8	Character development	Students create character profiles, including background and personality traits.
9	Character interview	Students interview each other in character to deepen understanding of roles.
10	Character self-introduction	Students introduce themselves as their characters, reinforcing role embodiment.
11	Filming and reflection	Students film scenes over approximately 2–3 weeks, with ongoing recordings and weekly reflection activities.

Step	Activity	Description
12	Film editing and distribution	The instructor edits the film using iMovie. The completed film is then uploaded to Padlet for viewing.

Overall, the course was structured as a progression of PAL activities that moved from controlled, low-risk tasks to more complex and creative forms of performance. Beginning with scripted conversations, students developed foundational skills such as voice projection, clarity, and the use of gesture to convey meaning. Reader's theater activities then extended these skills by emphasizing intonation, timing, and expressive delivery within a collaborative group setting. These activities prepared students for the collaborative filmmaking project in which they were required to integrate voice, gesture, movement, and emotional expression in a more open-ended and learner-centered context. Through this sequence, the course emphasized learning through active participation and performance, providing students with meaningful opportunities to develop expressive communication skills, confidence, and collaboration. The following section examines the student evaluations of this approach, focusing on student engagement, motivation, and the development of expressive communication skills.

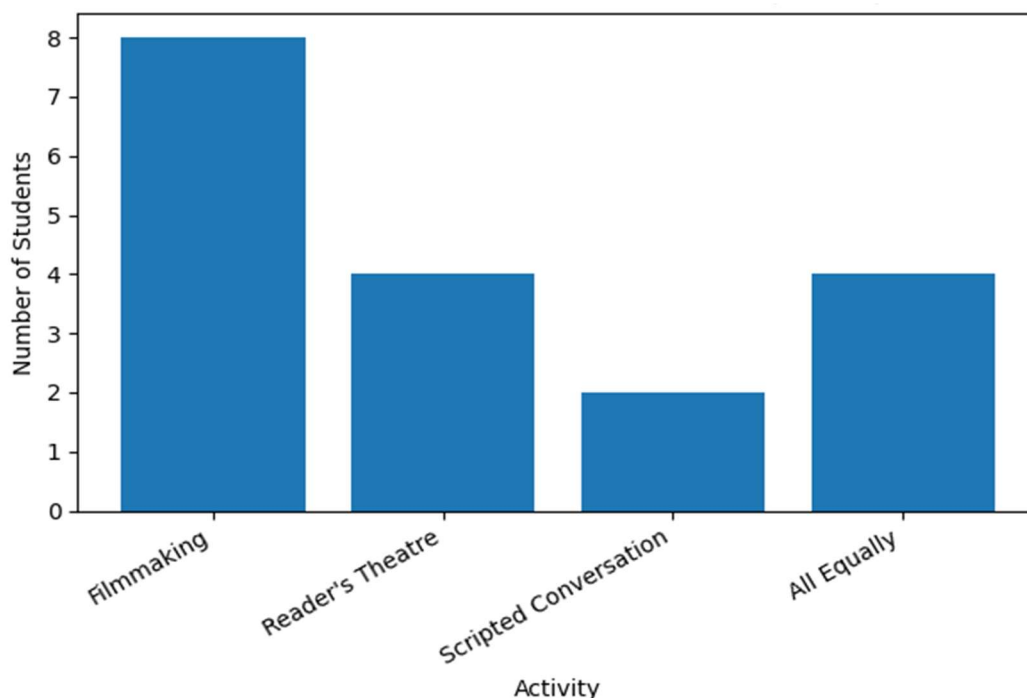
Student Feedback and Observations

Student Engagement and Motivation

A ten-question survey was administered to students during the final class of the semester to gather feedback on their experiences with the performance activities, including their perceived effects on motivation, confidence, and learning. The survey included a combination of Likert-style items and open-ended questions, allowing for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Student survey results indicate a generally positive response to the PAL activities, with a particular preference for the filmmaking project. Of the 18 students surveyed, eight identified the filmmaking project as their most enjoyable activity, while four selected reader's theater, two selected scripted conversations, and four reported enjoying all activities equally. These results suggest that while all PAL activities were well received, the filmmaking project was especially engaging for the majority of students. This may be attributed to its collaborative, creative, and multimodal nature, which allowed students to actively participate in both performance and production processes. All students indicated that they would be willing to take a similar course again, suggesting a high level of motivation and overall satisfaction with the course. As shown in Figure 1, the filmmaking project was the most preferred activity among students.

Figure 1

Student Preferences for PAL Activities (N = 18)



In addition to these quantitative results, qualitative feedback gathered from students' responses to the open-ended questions further supports the value of the activities in promoting engagement. Students reported that the activities were enjoyable, interactive, and different from traditional lecture-based classes, contributing to a more motivating and student-centered learning environment.

Expressive Communication

Student responses suggest that the activities were effective in developing expressive communication skills. Eleven students (61%) noted the importance of non-verbal elements such as gesture, facial expression, and vocal variation. For example, students reported that “gesture is necessary,” “facial expression is important,” and that they learned to use voice strength and variation when speaking. Others commented that “you need to move more than you think to communicate,” highlighting an increased awareness of the role of physical expression in communication. At the same time, some students noted that combining language and expression was challenging, suggesting that the activities pushed them beyond their usual communication practices. These responses indicate that students were not only practicing language, but also developing a deeper understanding of how meaning is conveyed through multiple modes of

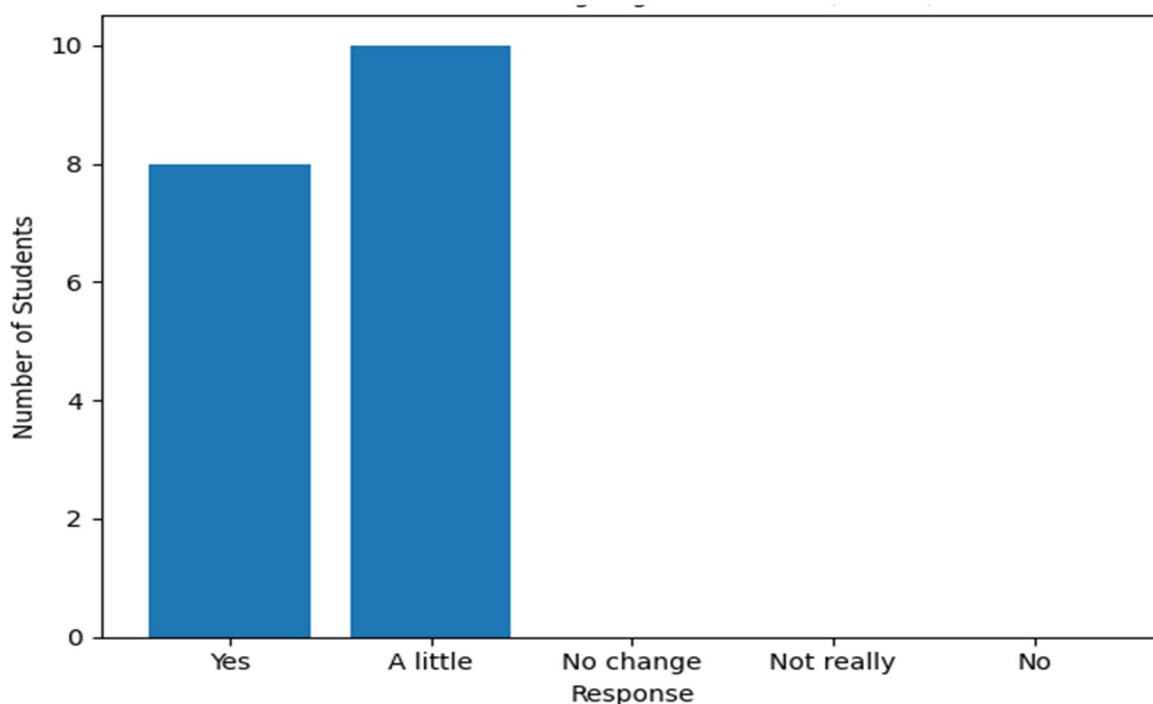
expression. These findings are consistent with previous research on performance-based learning, which highlights the importance of gesture, vocal variation, and embodied communication in developing expressive language skills (Fleming, 2006; Rees, 2018).

Collaboration

Student feedback also highlights the importance of collaboration in the learning process. Twelve students (67%) reported that working in groups helped them learn more effectively and develop communication skills. Responses such as “I learned the importance of cooperation,” “my communication skills improved,” and “it became easier to understand” suggest that collaborative performance activities created a supportive learning environment. In addition, students noted that they were able to learn from their peers and work together more smoothly over time. These findings support the idea that PAL activities promote social learning and help build a sense of group cohesion in the classroom. As shown in Figure 2, all students reported that performance activities contributed to increased confidence in using English, with no students selecting neutral or negative response options.

Figure 2

Student Responses to “Did Performance Activities Help Build Confidence in Using English?” (N = 18)



Filmmaking

The filmmaking project, in particular, appeared to play a significant role in deepening students' understanding of the course content. Thirteen students (72%) reported that making a film helped them understand the story and its characters better, while the remaining five students (28%) indicated that it improved their understanding "a little." These findings suggest that acting out scenes and physically embodying characters encouraged students to interpret the narrative and represent meaning through both verbal and non-verbal communication. The combination of performance, collaboration, and visual representation enabled students to move beyond surface-level comprehension and develop a more meaningful understanding of the text and its cultural and historical context. Supplementary language activities designed to support character development also provided all students, including those with minor roles, with meaningful opportunities to engage in expressive speech.

Conclusion

Student feedback and classroom observations indicated that this performance-based approach was particularly effective for learners who are typically less responsive to teacher-centered instruction. The collaborative nature of the activities fostered a sense of shared responsibility and peer support, which in turn contributed to increased motivation and confidence. In addition, the filmmaking project allowed students to engage more deeply with both the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the source material, further enhancing their overall understanding.

While this study was limited to a single course context, the findings suggest that incorporating PAL into language instruction can provide a valuable alternative to more conventional methods, particularly for reluctant learners who may benefit from active, experiential approaches to learning. Future research could explore how similar approaches might be adapted across different proficiency levels and institutional settings.

In this sense, the *Performance* class and filmmaking project based on "The Killers" proved to be a "killer" course in more ways than one, demonstrating high levels of student engagement while effectively enhancing students' expressive communication skills and confidence.

References

- Beiku, M., Gordon, A., & Tarkovsky, A. (Directors). (1956). *The killers* [Film]. VGIK.
- Boudreault, C. (2010). The benefits of using drama in the ESL/EFL classroom. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 16(1). <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Boudreault-Drama.html>
- Charles, D., & Kusanagi, Y. (2007). Using drama to motivate EFL students: Building classroom communities and student identities. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 606–613). JALT.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Ford, M. (2008). *Five short plays* (Oxford Bookworms Library Stage 1). Oxford University Press.
- Fleming, M. (2006). Drama and language teaching: The relevance of Wittgenstein's concept of language games. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 8(4). <https://old.hltmag.co.uk/jul06/mart01.htm>
- Harrington, D., & LeBeau, C. (2013). *Performance: Conversation scenes from everyday life*. Language Solutions.
- Head, P., Kluge, D., Lyons, C., Rees, G., White, J., & Bussinguer-Khavari, V. (2018). Performance-assisted learning: Enabling students to thrive and jive. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & P. Bennett (Eds.), *Language teaching in a global age: Shaping the classroom, shaping the world* (pp. 233–241). JALT.
- Helgeland, B. (Director). (2013). *42* [Film]. Legendary Pictures.
- Hemingway, E. (1927, March). The killers. *Scribner's Magazine*, 81(3), 227–233.
- Jacobs, G. M., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2001). Paradigm shift: Understanding and implementing change in second language education. *TESL-EJ*, 5(1). <https://www.tesl-ej.org/ej17/a1.html>
- King, J. (2014). Fear of the true self: Social anxiety and the silent behaviour of Japanese learners of English. In K. Csizér & M. Magid (Eds.), *The impact of self-concept on language learning* (pp. 232–249). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783092383-014>
- Kluge, D. (2018). Conducting research on performance-assisted learning. *Mask & Gavel*, 7, 6–26. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.PIE7.1-1>
- Maiullo, J. (2018). Radio drama for speaking practice. *English Teaching Forum*, 56(2), 16–25. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1181088.pdf>

Rees: A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through PAL

- Marguerite, T. (2015, June 11). Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers": A radio drama. *Text Mapping as Modelling*. <https://textmappingasmodelling.wordpress.com/2015/06/11/ernest-hemingways-the-killers-a-radio-drama/>
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223–231. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x>
- Rees, G. (2017). Using reader's theater and movie scene re-creation to develop presentation skills. *Journal of the Faculty of Policy Management, Yokkaichi University*, 16(2), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.24584/jpmyu.16.2_13
- Rees, G. (2018). What is reader's theatre and can it be used effectively in large EFL classes? *Mask & Gavel*, 6(1), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.PIE6.1-3>
- Rees, G. (2025). Radio drama: A PAL you can count on. *MindBrainEd Think Tanks: Public Speaking in the Language Classroom*, 11(8), 13–21. <https://www.mindbrained.org/2025/08/radio-drama-a-pal-you-can-count-on/>
- Savignon, S. J. (2002). Communicative language teaching: Linguistic theory and classroom practice. In S. J. Savignon (Ed.), *Interpreting communicative language teaching: Contexts and concerns in teacher education* (pp. 1–28). Yale University Press.

Gordon Rees is an associate professor at Yokkaichi University and an adjunct lecturer at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS). He holds an MA in Asian Studies from Cornell University. His research interests include performance-assisted learning (PAL), Japanese cinema, and modern Japanese literature. Other interests include running, yoga, and hiking.



Improvazilla's Intercultural Improv Dojo: A Pedagogical Case Study of Expressive Development and Belonging in Tokyo

Yair A. Yebra Lara

Takushoku University

improyair@gmail.com

Abstract

This study presents a pedagogical case study of a long-standing, English-language improv (improvisational theatre) workshop in Tokyo, which functions as a "Third Place" for a diverse cohort of native and second-language (L2) speakers of English. While the benefits of improvisation are widely documented, the specific teaching methodologies that facilitate participant development in adult community settings remain under-examined. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of an in-depth interview with the instructor triangulated with participant data, the paper explores three aspects of this pedagogy: accessibility, syncretism, and contextual response and outcomes. These findings offer practical insights for arts and language educators on fostering expressive agency, and draw attention to resilient yet under-researched foreign-language theatre communities in Japan.

本研究は、母語話者および第二言語（L2）話者からなる多様な参加者層にとっての「サードプレイス（第3の居場所）」として機能している、東京で長年続く英語によるインプロ（即興演劇）ワークショップに関する教育的事例研究である。インプロの有効性は広く報告されているものの、成人のコミュニティ環境において参加者の成長を促す具体的な教授法については、依然として十分に解明されてい

い。本稿では、指導者への深層インタビューに対するリフレクシブ・テーマ分析 (RTA) を実施し、参加者データを用いた多角的検証を交えながら、本教育実践の 3 つの側面 (アクセシビリティ、シンクレティズム、文脈への対応とその成果) を探究する。これらの知見は、表現におけるエージェンシーの育成を目指す芸術および語学の教育者に実践的な示唆を提供するだけでなく、日本において持続的に活動しながらも、これまで学術的な焦点が当てられることの少なかった外国語による演劇コミュニティに光を当てるものである。

This study examines Improvazilla's Improv Dojo in Tokyo, an intercultural workshop led by facilitator Chris Wells. In a city where linguistic barriers and cultural rigidity often lead to isolation, the dojo functions as a “Third Place” (Oldenburg, 1999)—a neutral ground distinct from home and work—where mistakes can be normalized and function as “gifts¹”, and vulnerability is protected. For many international residents, this environment transforms the workshop from a recreational activity into an intercultural Community of Practice (CoP)² (Wenger, 1998) and a social refuge.

As a foreign actor in Tokyo, finding this specific improv workshop became a turning point for my own expressive development in English as an L2, as well as my Performative Expressive Freedom (PEF)³ (Yebra Lara, 2026). While the connection between improv and L2 communication has been documented in Japanese educational contexts (e.g., Gray, 2024; Okada, 2018), witnessing my own development and that of my peers compelled me to investigate the specific pedagogical mechanisms that facilitate these outcomes in a non-formal, community-based setting.

In this research, I am an “insider,” with over three years of participation in the workshop under study. While this perspective offers valuable access, I recognize the potential biases. Therefore, I combine reflexive strategies with methodological triangulation to ask:

¹ "Mistakes as gifts" — An improv principle that reframes errors as creative opportunities. (Katzman & O'Connor, 2018).

² CoP — A social process of learning where members negotiate new ways of being and a shared identity through active, sustained participation.

³ PEF — a felt sense of expressive "lightness" in performance, facilitated by an adaptive navigational agency.

"How is improvisational theatre pedagogy adapted within the Improvazilla Improv Dojo to shape an accessible yet rigorous learning environment for intercultural adult learners?"

Pedagogical Approach in Scholarly Literature

While psychological and social benefits of improv are well documented—such as reduced anxiety (Krueger et al., 2019), increased confidence (Zondag et al., 2020), and improved communication skills (Keates & Beadle-Brown, 2022)—the specific pedagogical dynamics that produce these outcomes in intercultural and L2 contexts remain under-examined.

Foundational texts from pioneers like Viola Spolin (1999), Keith Johnstone (1999), and Del Close (Halpern et al., 1994) provide direction on *how to teach* improv, and Sawyer (2004) extends these principles into education with his notion of “*disciplined improvisation*.” However, despite important precedents existing, such as Lobman’s (2005) foundational study of teacher practice and Ito and Sako’s (2024) recent case study of a Japanese improv instructor, in-depth analyses of community-based improv workshops, especially in intercultural, adult settings, remain limited.

While historical overviews of improv in Japan exist (Sonobe & Fukuda, 2016), along with studies on rural intercultural theatre projects in the country (Head, 2022, 2023), pedagogical analyses of how independent, urban, intercultural community-based performing arts spaces utilizing English as a lingua franca operate remain scarce.

This paper addresses these gaps by analyzing Improvazilla Dojo workshops in Tokyo. This case study offers an opportunity to observe a practical application of the collaborative principles that constitute an “improvisational ethos” (Tanner, 2019)—a learning environment where the work is in service to the collective, power is shared, and participants interact without the pressure of evaluation. Tanner and McCloskey (2023) found these very principles lacking in much of their systematic literature review.

Methodology

I selected the Improvazilla workshop through purposeful sampling as an information-rich case (Patton, 2015), given the instructor's over 30 years of experience, its long history (originating in 1994; Sonobe & Fukuda, 2016), and its unique intercultural environment (a mix of native and L2 English speakers in Tokyo). Data collection primarily consisted of an 2-hour semi-structured interview with the instructor, Chris Wells (who consented to be named). To triangulate these insights, I drew on over eight months of participant observation (mid-January to mid-September 2025), audio recordings, and archival documents.

The analysis applied Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), following *the six phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report*. Informed by my long-term immersion as an insider-researcher, I utilized a hybrid approach to analysis: it was fundamentally inductive but experientially grounded. The inquiry was initially organized around three main areas of interest derived from my prior observation: (1) Accessibility, (2) Content, and (3) Context. During the coding phase, the process remained open and data-driven, facilitating the active generation of codes and themes from the instructor's narrative. Simultaneously, the analysis was theoretically informed by concepts such as Tanner's (2019) improv ethos and Rodenburg's (2008) "Second Circle"—a state of active presence and connection. These concepts served as flexible lenses rather than rigid categories.

Throughout the review phase, I actively sought tensions and contradictions within the data. Some quotations were lightly adjusted for readability without altering meaning.

Informed consent was obtained for data collection and the use of participant photographs and quotations. For images where individual consent from every person pictured was unavailable, all faces were masked to ensure privacy.

Research Setting: The Improvazilla Improv Dojo

The Improvazilla workshop origins trace back to the Tokyo Comedy Store (TCS) in 1994, which Sonobe and Fukuda (2016) identify as one of the two primary streams through which improv was established in Japan. Wells—a founding member whose pioneering role is documented in local publications (Chase, 2019; Narigon, 1995; 2019)—is the central figure in the workshop's subsequent evolution; the company's website offers contemporary context and self-description (Wells, n.d.). His pedagogical approach is informed by a diverse background: a degree in psychology, experience counseling adults with co-occurring mental illness and drug addiction, and a long career in Japan as a professional narrator and voice actor.

Wells describes his pedagogy as “syncretic,” blending philosophies from multiple schools (see Theme 2). During the formal observation period, the curriculum operated on a flexible, pay-per-class model, structured around three weekly workshops:

- **Beginner+:** Focused on short-form⁴ improv and performance fundamentals. While centered on beginner needs, it remains a valuable practice space for experienced players. Held on Wednesdays.
- **Intermediate+:** Focused on long-form⁵ improv structures. Designed for students with an existing foundation in improvisation. Held on Tuesdays.
- **All Levels:** Focused on Genre Long-form improv. Framed as “All Levels,” to welcome participants regardless of their prior improv experience, its weekend schedule further broadens accessibility. Held on Saturdays.

Workshop Attendance and Demographics

Annual class records for 2025 indicated high traffic (over 1,200 attendances across *more than 200* distinct participants). The cohort represents a multicultural attendance where approximately 30 – 40% of participants are non-native (L2) English speakers. Within this diversity, Japanese participants constitute 12.2% (n=26).

⁴ Short-form— Short, self-contained games or scenes, usually unrelated.

⁵ Long-form— Multi-scene formats that emphasize story or theme development over disconnected games or scenes.

Figure 1

Instructor Chris Wells Facilitates a Student Showcase.



Note. Photo provided by Burak Ayaz. (2025).

Findings: The Anatomy of an Intercultural Pedagogy

The analysis generated three interrelated themes that address the research question: (1) Scaffold for Safety and Accessibility, (2) The Syncretic Dojo, and (3) Response to Context & Outcomes. Together, they view the workshop's pedagogy holistically.

Theme 1: Scaffold for Safety and Accessibility

This theme addresses the learning environment that appears to minimize anxiety, build trust, and make improv accessible to a diverse, multicultural, and often transient population.

Engineering Early Success Through Accessibility

The first layer addresses the anxiety that often arises even before a participant enters the workshop. This apprehension is often heightened for foreigners navigating unfamiliar cultural expectations.

With years of experience, Wells recognizes the doubts that often precede participation, as he explains: "*Sometimes literally, someone has thought about taking my*

workshop for a year or a year and a half before they work up the courage to walk through that door... So, I'm not going to squash that person." (Wells, interview)

This understanding informs a pedagogical design aimed at lowering the barrier to entry: accessibility is built into the workshop itself. The flexible drop-in model moves away from the rigid, sequential curricula common in many improv schools. Wells explains that even the All Levels class—though sometimes more demanding—remains open to beginners *"because some people can't come on the weekdays,"* adding, *"I don't want [my] pedagogy to get in the way of people learning improv."*

In this way, the structure directly responds to the realities of Tokyo's international community, allowing participants to join when they can, without the pressure of a long-term commitment. While the Intermediate+ and All Levels classes tend to attract more stable groups of experienced players—allowing content and genres to rotate flexibly with the group's progression—the Beginner+ class sees a more fluid attendance, with many newcomers cycling in and out. To provide continuity in this shifting environment, Wells designed a year-long curriculum organized around twelve monthly themes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Annual Curriculum for the Improvazilla Impro Dojo's Short-form



 The Improvazilla Impro Dojo Short-form Impro Program					
JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE
					
Scene Initiations	Relationships	Status & Archetypes	Space-objects & Environments	Story and Plot	Characters
JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
					
Games & Game-like Scenes	Formats and Edits	Themes and Open Scenes	Justification	Genres	Stagecraft and Performance

Note. Image provided by Chris Wells.

This framework intends to give students a clear sense of what to expect and provides the instructor with a structure for selecting exercises and shaping feedback. Core principles such as the practice of “Yes-And”⁶ remain constant while the monthly themes allow all students to practice and revisit those foundational skills. At the same time, the plan remains flexible, adapting each session to the particular mix of students present, maintaining accessibility while still providing consistency. In practice, Wells tailors his exercise choices to the group, selecting “failure-proof” activities when many less experienced participants are present. He explains:

Nothing we did in the [Beginner+] class could result in abject failure, because with “Freeze tag”⁷ we do the “thank you,” and with “Emotional call,”⁸ whatever you do is okay. And then we also did “New Choice,”⁹ which you can’t really fail at that either[...] I want to make it easy for people to succeed, especially when there are many new people. (Wells, interview)

In addition to the careful selection of games, anxiety is further addressed through reframing failure as part of the learning process. As Wells tells students during class: “Embrace “the suck” (being bad at something). “The suck” is part of learning[...] be okay with sucking at something; it’s perfectly all right.” (Beginner+, 25.03.12) This “permission to fail” creates the necessary conditions for early, low-stakes success. Humor and playfulness help to reinforce the joyful, low-stakes environment where trying is more important than the result—an approach that seems to align with Tanner’s (2019) ethos of “participating without evaluation.”

At the same time, this pedagogy exists within a broader artistic boundary: while the “dojo” is designed as an inclusive learning space where “anybody can do improv,” Wells also distinguishes it from performance for a paying audience. As he explains, “Some say it takes seven years to become a good improviser.” (Beginner+, 25.03.12).

⁶ Yes-and — Principle of accepting and building on a partner’s offer.

⁷ Freeze Tag — A two-player game where a scene freezes and a new player enters, taking one performer’s exact position and initiating a different scene. A convention in this workshop allows players to say “thank you” if they feel stuck, signaling their partner to lead instead.

⁸ Emotional Call — An exercise in which directors call out emotions mid-scene, prompting players to shift tone. The instructor frequently reminds students that any level or form of expression is valid.

⁹ New choice — A game where a bell or cue prompts a player to replace their last word or phrase with whatever comes to mind, continuing until the cue stops.

Cultivating Safety and Trust

The data show that participants experienced the environment as supportive, with a “safety net” where mistakes are actively encouraged. This softens the gatekeeping typical of many performance spaces—where there is often a “right way” to do things—allowing experienced performers and beginners to collaborate. Such a structure fosters the non-judgmental space needed for learning through vulnerability.

This safety net is built on consistent practices that reduce perceived risk and reinforce the instructor’s role as a supportive guide rather than an authoritarian judge. Wells consistently presents corrections as subjective, employing phrases such as “*for my money*” or “*this is my opinion*.” This reduces the power distance in the room, enacting what Tanner (2019) terms the principle of “*sharing power*.” He avoids setting himself up as the “*final arbiter*,” recognizing that he offers just “*one perspective on improv, and there are lots of different ways to do it*.” Wells also describes the importance of “lowering his own status”—an approach he explicitly connects to Johnstone (1999). Using statements such as “*I may have explained this poorly*,” he presents himself as fallible, assuming responsibility when an exercise goes wrong and sustaining the low-stakes atmosphere in which mistakes feel permissible.

Regarding exposure, Wells often splits the class into smaller groups, and exercises or scene work performed in front of the entire group is kept explicitly voluntary—especially when many are new or less experienced. At the same time, student showcases are framed as class sessions: participants pay for the class, while family and friends can attend for free. By keeping the showcase within this supportive circle, Wells mitigates the performance anxiety a public-paid show might induce. These strategies are meant to help students feel less exposed and reduce the pressure of being watched.

Trust is also fostered through shared language and embodied modes of presence. The concept of Rodenburg’s (2008) “*Second Circle*”—a state of active presence and connection—plays a central role in this shared vocabulary. Wells constantly connects this concept with foundational improv exercises, providing a shared language to build the trust necessary for vulnerable work.

This [repeat and reply]¹⁰ was an exercise [...] none of you were in 'First Circle,' trying to think of what to say next, right? You couldn't be in 'First Circle'¹¹ because I gave you a task, and the task was listen and repeat. (Beginner+, 25.01.15)

Task-based exercises like this are used to bypass intellectual anxiety and guide participants into a shared state of connection, reinforcing the “safety net.” Another important element of support is side-coaching—brief, in-the-moment adjustments offered during in-class performance. (see Theme 2, “Tools, Not Rules”)

While these practices emphasize openness and decentralization, Wells also establishes clear structural boundaries that centralize his instruction when needed. This apparent contradiction reflects a broader ethos: protecting the collective learning space. *“The only time I’m sharp with someone is when they’re doing something that interferes with other people’s enjoyment [...] I don’t let students correct other students.” (Wells, interview).*

By centralizing feedback, the instructor breaks from ‘sharing power’ to preserve foundational tenets like ‘serving the collective’ and ensuring participants can engage “without evaluation” from their peers (Tanner, 2019).

This boundary-setting also includes a classroom norm: students are expected to accept corrections without arguing or justifying in the moment—a pedagogical strategy rooted in acting instruction. Wells notes that prolonged discussion can disrupt the rhythm and embodied focus of practice, though he invites questions and dialogue during the closing circle (see Theme 2).

Theme 2: The Syncretic Dojo

I conceptualize the workshop’s core pedagogy using Wells’s own language, terming it the “Syncretic Dojo.” This combines his “syncretic” philosophy—*“they all have part of the answer, but nobody has the whole answer” (Wells, interview)*—with his emphasis on a “dojo” model of practice.

The “Dojo” Philosophy: Repetitions Over Analysis

*“It’s improv jazz, baby. We’re not going to analyze this s**t too much. You’re just going to do it.” (Intermediate+, 25.09.23)* The core principle of the “dojo” is to shift students

¹⁰ Repeat and Reply — An exercise where each response must begin with the partner’s last sentence.

¹¹ “First Circle” — Refers to a withdrawn, inward-focused energy that limits connection, while “Third Circle” describes outward projection that lacks receptivity.

from thinking to doing. As Wells puts it, *“thinking about and discussing improv can only get you so far”* (personal communication, 25.09.27). This belief drives his emphasis on repetition—“getting the reps in”—to prevent the over-analysis that often hinders beginners. *“I want to get to the reps as quickly as possible [...] by the end of it, you should feel like that was a workout.”* (Wells, interview)

This is reinforced by splitting the class into smaller sub-groups, allowing more students to practice simultaneously and increasing the number of individual repetitions. (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Participants Practicing in Small Groups



Note. Photo provided by Chris Wells (Beginner+ workshop, 2025).

Some participants experience this highly practice-based approach as a kind of demanding mental workout. As an L2 speaker myself, I found that this focus on doing rather than overanalyzing is particularly effective in lowering the "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982)—the emotional and psychological block that inhibits language production. Wells encourages students to prioritize communication over grammatical perfection: *“Non-native speakers, don’t get in your head about grammar[...] just plow through. Just make it happen.”* (Beginner+, 25.05.28)

This stance also addresses linguistic gaps: instead of the common theatre practice of pretending a mistake did not happen, Wells advises students to acknowledge the gap: *“If*

somebody tells you about [something] that you have no idea what it is... Hide in plain sight. Do not pretend to know what it is. Just ask" (*All Levels*, 25.01.18). This approach values connection and helps partners to stay "on the same page" despite linguistic obstacles.

An objective of this repetition-based practice is to move students beyond conscious, analytical thought and toward an instinctual, embodied engagement, building "muscle memory" so students can eventually internalize the different "instincts" of improv. Within the workshop, the instructor frequently associates this non-analytical stance with experiencing "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As he advises students, "*You shouldn't be thinking when you're doing improv [...] you should be feeling and responding and reacting. All the thinking stuff should become subconscious.*" (*Beginner+*, 25.01.15)

The dojo metaphor extends beyond repetition to the workshop's "ritualized" structure. Sessions begin with "*What's on your mind?*," an exercise to air external concerns as a group, and conclude with a circle for collective sharing and review. In addition to the brief pauses for reflection between exercises, this closing circle opens the door for dialogue, making a space for questions, reflections, or points participants wish to raise—often invited by Wells's familiar prompt for "*questions, comments, doubts, demands, criticisms, or denials.*" (*Beginner+*, 25.09.17)

A Syncretic and Intercultural Foundation

The "dojo" content is explicitly syncretic, blending diverse improvisational philosophies. From Keith Johnstone, Wells incorporates status work—exercises exploring high and low status—and the pedagogical value of repetition:

"We asked [Keith Johnstone]: 'What do you do when people don't get a concept?' And he just said, 'You just repeat it; you just repeat it again and again.' And I took that as: okay, if Keith Johnstone says you repeat it all the freaking time [...] the epiphany comes at totally different times for people." (Wells, interview)

Johnstone also influenced Wells's teaching stance of lowering his classroom status to diffuse pressure. (see Theme 1) Similarly, he adapts the "Game of the Scene"¹² from the improv training center Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) (Besser et al., 2013), broadening it into what he calls the "That's it" moment—the interesting thing about the scene—framing it

¹² Game of the Scene—the central pattern or premise that drives a scene, typically used or developed for comic effect.

as not necessarily comic and opening it to relational or emotional possibilities. Influences from the Chicago-based Annoyance Theatre and its co-founder, veteran improviser Joe Bill, are also explicit, with the instructor often citing Bill on externalization¹³ and the use of silence. Although flexible, a personal preference for narrative strongly shapes its structure. As the instructor states in class, *"We are hardwired to like stories [...]. In this 'improv house,' even when we're doing silly fun games, we try to have a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end."* (Beginner+, 25.05.14)

This narrative focus is supported by frameworks he adopts from the Los Angeles-based school Impro Theatre; he incorporates their model for genre-based workshops, their structures for long-form improvised plays, and the concept of Second Circle, which he first encountered there. Wells makes these influences explicit:

I want to go back a little bit to the fundamentals of POV, which leads to character, which leads to relationship, which leads to story. This is from Impro Theatre in Los Angeles; they do these genre-based plays, and they're very strict about being in Second Circle. (All Levels, 25.04.05)

Regardless of content, the pedagogical goal is to provide a wide foundational understanding of improv. *If you study here for a year, you will have a good foundation [...] enough of a little bit of each of these different schools [...] that you can [...] get involved.* (Wells, interview)

By bringing these concepts together, the workshop helps participants develop a flexible set of skills for navigating diverse improv settings across cultures.

"Tools, Not Rules": A Pedagogy for Performer Autonomy

"Rob Adler says, 'Tools, not rules.' [...] everything we're doing can be broken eventually, but you guys need the training rules at the beginning." (Intermediate+, 25.02.11). Following this "tools, not rules" philosophy (Adler, 2017) the workshop provides performers with a toolkit of improv principles. These are foundational techniques, not inflexible laws to be followed dogmatically. This seeks to guide performers toward a point where the techniques become instinctual, freeing them to apply, adapt, or break the 'rules' in service of creative freedom.

¹³ Referring to Bill's quote: "If it's in your head, it's just your opinion," which highlights the importance of expressing ideas in a way that makes them legible to others during performance.

Instructor interventions aim to guide the learning process while fostering creative autonomy. These take multiple forms: indirect feedback, such as the “*bank shot*” (Wells, 2018)—described by a student as “giving feedback to one person when he secretly means it for another person”; and direct, in-the-moment actions like side-coaching or restarting scenes. As in this example: “*Go back to the beginning, and really, first of all, why is he here? Who the hell is he? What are his symptoms? How long have they been going on? How does he feel about this?*” (Intermediate+, 25.01.24)

Feedback is calibrated to the student's experience: foundational for beginners and more specific for advanced improvisers. The objective of this feedback is not to provide the “correct line” or “what the teacher would have done” but to cultivate perceptive improvisers able to identify issues in a scene. As Wells explains: “*What I want people to understand is fundamentally, ‘what is the issue here?’ ‘what’s the disconnect?’ ‘what wasn’t working?’ [...] I try to extract a fundamental concept.*” (Wells, interview) In practice, feedback also takes the form of guided questioning—such as “*What would you love to see happen in act three?*” or “*What can we learn from this?*”—which returns interpretive agency to the group.

Beyond feedback, Wells facilitates practice using what he describes as “training wheels”—structural constraints designed to simplify the complexity of different tasks. For instance, he frames the long-form structure of “The Harold”¹⁴ in a simplified version in practice: “*This is The Harold with training wheels. It’s very strict because we’re just learning how to do it right [...] three simple beats in the First Act.*” (Intermediate+, 25.04.29).

¹⁴ The Harold—A foundational long-form improv structure combining group games with successive rounds of scenes. It is designed to develop initially separate narrative or thematic threads that gradually converge through recurring patterns and callbacks, resulting in a cohesive performance.

Figure 4

Participants Perform *The Harold*, a Long-form Improv Format.



Note. Photo provided by Chris Wells. (Intermediate+, 2025).

We can identify practices that could also be categorized as ‘training wheels’ throughout his pedagogy, with exercises like “*repeat and reply*” in Beginner + Class or in All Levels with preset narrative structures. Even the class design—splitting into smaller groups to maximize repetitions and reduce anxiety—functions as a kind of training wheels. In every case, these supports are designed to be internalized and eventually removed, releasing performers into greater freedom and autonomy.

Theme 3: Response to Context & Outcomes

This theme examines how this pedagogy supports connection, growth, and belonging—serving as an intercultural “lifesaver,” a space for personal development, and a “third place.”

A “Lifesaver”: A Response to the Intercultural Context

The workshop’s design responds to the isolation many foreigners experience in Japan by creating a supportive community. Wells reflects on this purpose, framing the workshop as a social anchor: *“I could see what a lifesaver the workshops were, especially at the beginning. (Wells, interview)”*

Beyond an improv class, the workshop is a considered response to an observed social need. For some participants, the workshop indeed functions as this refuge, becoming a space where the often salient identity of “foreigner” can feel temporarily softened. This normalization allows the workshop to serve as a space free from the social pressures of navigating a different culture, including the need to “code-switch” in professional or daily life. Wells notes that for students working in Japanese environments, the workshop is a place where they can *“just be themselves.”* Diverse participants echo this, describing the workshop as a separate space where they can simply “be human,” leaving their daily fears, anxieties, and the constant awareness of being a foreigner outside.

Acknowledging the challenges faced by many foreigners in Japan, Wells highlights the need for a space that actively fosters connection, noting: *“I saw people developing friendships [...] and just how important that is when you’re a foreigner in Japan, which can feel very much, like, exclusionary, right?” (Wells, interview)* The pedagogy, therefore, cannot be separated from its social function; its accessible structure and safe atmosphere are deliberate adaptations to serve a community in need of an anchor.

Recognizing this demographic reality and challenges, Wells aligns the objectives of the workshop: *“Most of the people that come [...] aren't going to become performers [...] So part of the objective was basically helping people with their lives through improv” (Wells, interview).* The pedagogy, therefore, cannot be separated from its social function and context; its accessible structure and safe atmosphere are intentional adaptations to the international community in Japan.

“Coming Out of Their Shell”

Reflecting on the benefits of the workshop after decades of teaching, Wells notes several shifts in his students, such as becoming more creative, open, and more effective communicators and listeners—skills perceived as directly transferring into their professional and personal relationships. Following instructor and student reflections, it appears that the workshop functions as a catalyst for personal development, a place where people, in the instructor’s words, can “come out of their shells.” As he describes:

I’ve definitely had multiple students that have ‘come out of their shells.’ I see someone who starts off painfully shy and gradually just starts to open up like a flower, and I respect those people so much because they’re putting themselves in a situation that’s very difficult for them; that is their nightmare. (Wells, interview)

Several participants’ accounts mirror this, detailing how they moved from a fear of public speaking to willingly taking risks on stage. They also note that this growing comfort with making mistakes fosters a greater acceptance of others and that the communication skills practiced in the workshop frequently transfer into real-world scenarios, such as job interviews. Wells also observes behavioral shifts, such as overcoming negativity and developing confidence, communication skills, and adaptability—changes that often extend beyond the workshop.

The Workshop as a “Third Place”

The workshop has become a community hub—a “Third Place” outside home and work (Oldenburg, 1999)—showing how theatre can foster belonging within Tokyo’s international community. *“It’s a safe space where you can be around foreigners. It’s not a bar. People aren’t drinking... We need these places, you know?” (Wells, interview)*

One participant describes this environment as “a place of genuine presence, where nobody is sitting and watching or using smartphones, and everyone is joining.” Furthermore, it functions as a refuge from the social and hierarchical pressures that many participants face. For those operating in Japanese professional environments, the workshop offers a respite from “code-switching.” Wells explains, *“I’ve had students that have come here after being*

isolated in a Japanese company [...] and you're code-switching the entire time [...] and then they come to the workshop, and they can just be themselves." (Wells, interview)

This non-hierarchical structure is relevant in the local context. One Japanese participant notes that the workshop feels like gathering with "old friends," contrasting with the strict *senpai-kohai* (senior-junior) hierarchies common in Japanese society. By offering a space where participants can temporarily let go of cultural and social pressures—such as hierarchy, fear of making mistakes, or the need to fit in—the workshop seems to support not only improv practice and soft skills development but also, for many, a sense of meaningful community.

Figure 5

A performance in progress at the Film-Noir Student Showcase.



Note. Photo provided by Ross Kirsling. (All Levels, 2025).

Discussion

From Safety to Expressive Agency in Community

This case study of the Improvazilla Improv Dojo illuminates how an intercultural workshop seems to construct an environment of “psychological safety” (Edmondson, 1999)—a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. The instructor’s strategies, such as using “failure-proof” exercises, reducing the pressure towards performance, and maintaining an anti-authoritarian feedback stance, appear to build an environment that seems to facilitate the conditions for vulnerable creative work and risk-taking.

This foundation of safety seems to be what allows for the emergence of a more holistic “improvisational ethos” (Tanner, 2019). From this perspective, even apparent contradictions, like the instructor centralizing feedback while avoiding open discussions during exercises, can be understood as pedagogical choices that uphold tenets like “*Work in service to the collective.*”

Despite the positive results this workshop seems to generate, every model has its natural tensions and boundaries. The open drop-in model brings new people constantly, especially in the Beginner+ sessions, making the repetition of basic concepts and exercises constant. While these explanations are necessary for newcomers, for students who have taken the classes several times, they can feel repetitive. Another tension arises when the class is separated into smaller groups to practice simultaneously. Although the instructor actively monitors the room during these exercises, the simultaneous format means that certain interactions inevitably slip by uncorrected—such as participants preventing the scene from advancing. Due to the pedagogical restriction against peer-correction, this situation may occasionally frustrate some more experienced students, who must learn to be patient with peers' learning processes.

While the workshop design prioritizes accessibility, this has its natural limits. Regardless of language, because improv inherently embraces imperfection, the workshop clearly functions as a useful space for practicing English, and occasional corrections do occur. Many non-native speakers continuously participate in the workshop without the expectation of having flawless English skills. However, to maintain the focus on the collective improv practice—the main objective of this space—participants require sufficient functional communicative agency to comprehend instructions and engage with other students.

Despite these pedagogical limits, I argue that this case is a positive example of an improvisational ethos in action—something that, as Tanner and McCloskey (2023) note, many improv studies struggle to maintain. The nuance of this case suggests that these core principles work as a dynamic framework that is continuously negotiated to remain effective within its specific context.

Although the Dojo is not a formal English education setting, it provides something that most traditional language classes do not: a lack of judgment and a focus on free, flowing communication over strict linguistic accuracy. For the community's many second-language speakers (myself included), this pedagogical design appears to lower the “affective filter” (Krashen, 1982) through improv practice and a sense of belonging. By embracing mistakes over 'correct' answers, this environment fosters the necessary linguistic risk-taking to move beyond strict self-monitoring and toward embodied communicative agency. Such improvisational practices can be adapted for formal language classrooms or early-stage language acquisition settings, helping to bridge the gap between accumulated linguistic knowledge and actual expressive freedom.

Of course, I must acknowledge the limitations of a single-case, insider study. Moving forward, I want to conclude with an invitation for future research to explore the bridges—or the lack of them—among Japan's diverse performing arts ecosystems. Japanese participants represent only 12.2% of this long-standing community, which highlights a persisting distance between intercultural and Japanese-only artistic spheres. By bringing this dynamic to light, I hope to encourage a more inclusive academic discourse. Recognizing these resident-led groups as an integral part of the Japanese theatre scene will hopefully foster future dialogue and study across these often-separated creative landscapes.

References

- Adler, R. (2017). *Comedy Improv Isn't the Only Improv: 4 Benefits of Improvisation for Actors*. Backstage Magazine. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/comedy-improv-improv-benefits-improvisation-actors-4850/>
- Besser, M., Roberts, I., & Walsh, M. (2013). *The Upright Citizens Brigade comedy improvisation manual*. Upright Citizens Brigade Theater.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Chase, J. L. (2019, September 22). Learning to say 'yes, and...' both on and off the stage. *The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2019/09/22/stage/learning-say-yes-off-stage/>
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>
- Gray, D. (2024). Why teach improv? Teaching improvisation in university EFL communication classes. *Mask & Gavel*, 11, 37–46.
- Halpern, C., Close, D., & Johnson, K. (1994). *Truth in comedy: The manual for improvisation*. Meriwether Publishers.
- Head, P. (2022). Genki: A case study of benefits for foreigners producing theatre in a Japanese regional dialect. *Mask & Gavel*, 10, 70–111.
- Head, P. (2023). Drama for foreigners' Japanese learning and integration: Theatre vs video. *Mask & Gavel*, 12(1), 209–214. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTPCP2022-24>
- Ito, K., & Sako, H. (2024). Research on practical leadership focusing on body language: Taking a cue from Jun Imai's workshop practice of improvisation. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education*, 46(1), 17–38. https://doi.org/10.9772/jpspe.46.1_17
- Johnstone, K. (1999). *Improv for storytellers: Theatresports and the art of making things happen*. Faber and Faber.
- Katzman, J., & O'Connor, D. (2018). *Life unscripted: Using improv principles to get unstuck, boost confidence, and transform your life*. North Atlantic Books

- Keates, N., & Beadle-Brown, J. (2022). The benefits of participating in improvisational comedy: A global confirmatory survey study. *Comedy Studies*, 13(2), 161–174.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610x.2022.2091719>
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon.
- Krueger, K. R., Murphy, J. W., & Bink, A. B. (2019). Thera-prov: A pilot study of improv used to treat anxiety and depression. *Journal of Mental Health*, 28(6), 621–626.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2017.1340629>
- Lobman, C. (2005). "Yes and": The uses of improvisation for early childhood professional development. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 26(3), 305–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10901020500371353>
- Narigon, N. (1995, May 26). Zany new Comedy Store troupe tickles Tokyo ribs. *Tokyo Weekender*, 26(9).
- Narigon, N. (2019, October). In the spotlight: Tokyo's stand-up comedy scene is brighter than ever. *Tokyo Weekender*. <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/2019/10/in-the-spotlight-tokyos-stand-up-comedy-scene-is-brighter-than-ever/>
- Okada, T. (2018). Voices of language learners in improvisations. *The Center for English as a Lingua Franca Journal*, 4, 26–35.
- Oldenburg, R. (1999). *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Marlowe & Company.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Rodenburg, P. (2008). *The second circle: How to use positive energy for success in every situation*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Sawyer, R. K. (2004). Creative teaching: Collaborative discussion as disciplined improvisation. *Educational Researcher*, 33(2), 12–20.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033002012>
- Sonobe, Y., & Fukuda, H. (2016). 日本における「インプロ」の導入と展開—1990年代を中心として [Introduction and development of “impro” in Japan: Focusing on the 1990s]. *Bulletin of the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies, University of Tokyo*, 32, 1–23.
- Spolin, V. (1999). *Improvisation for the theater: A handbook of teaching and directing techniques* (3rd ed.). Northwestern University Press.

- Tanner, S. J. (2019). "I needed that": An improvisational classroom ethos. *English Journal*, 109(1), 30–37.
- Tanner, S. J., & McCloskey, A. (2023). Improv theater and whiteness in education: A systematic literature review. *Review of Educational Research*, 93(1), 3–36. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221076885>
- Wells, C. (2018, January–February). But I'm a great improviser!!!: Is post-hoc rationalization making you get less out of workshops? *International Theatresports Institute Newsletter*.
- Wells, C. (n.d.). *Improvazilla*. Retrieved September 30, 2025, from <https://www.improvazilla.com/>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yebra Lara, Y. A. (2026). Performative Expressive Freedom (PEF): An analysis of L2 expressive experience from an autoethnographic perspective. *Language Education Research*, 26, 83–108. <https://takushoku-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2000411>
- Zondag, A., Larsen, A. B., Guldal, T. M., & van den Tillaar, R. (2020). The influence of improvisation activities on speaking confidence of EFL student teachers. *Nordisk tidsskrift for utdanning og praksis*, 14(2), 82–102. <https://doi.org/10.23865/up.v14.1879>

Yair Yebra is a Mexican actor and researcher based in Tokyo. He holds an MA in Performing Arts from Nihon University and is a PhD candidate in the Department of Language Education at Takushoku University. His research investigates the relationship between Performative Expressive Freedom (PEF) and improvisational theater practice in intercultural environments. As an actor in Japan, he has appeared in feature films such as *Sagasu* and *Tokyo Burst*. His academic focus grew out of an interest in cross-cultural exchange through theatre, which eventually led him to explore improvisation as a space for actor training, community building, and personal development.

