Reflections on an Online Project-based Oral Interpretation Course: Seeking to Improve Student Emotional Well-being with a Parody Song Project

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Abstract

In April 2020, the corona virus pandemic caused most universities in Japan, and the rest of the world, to go online. This article reflects upon the challenges faced in creating an online asynchronous oral interpretation class. Through the reflection, the need for sensitivity and attention to student well-being, particularly mental well-being, is considered an essential focus for the teacher, in addition to learning. The article introduces a parody song project created which focused on nurturing the emotional well-being of the students.

2020 年度前期は新型コロナウィルスの影響により日本においても多くの授業がオンラインで行われた。この論文では、ドラマの授業の中でも、特にオーラルインタープリテーションの授業においてオンデマンド方式で授業を行った試みを取り上げる。オンラインであるからこそ、学生の、特に 1 年生のメンタルケアに心を配る必要がある。この論文では、その点を考慮して行ったパロディーソングプロジェクトを紹介する。

In April of 2020, after delaying the start of the semester due to the corona virus pandemic, my university, much like many universities in Japan and throughout the world, made the decision to move classes online. Like most teachers, I began frantically trying to learn how to use a multitude of applications and platforms available and assess how best to teach communication classes online. As noted by my colleagues from across the nation, some of the

primary concerns for universities at that time were how to provide adequate education and assess attendance through this new online medium, particularly as students have varying degrees of access to computers and the Internet. Differing institutions in my region opted for synchronous online learning, asynchronous online learning, or a combination of both. Due to several issues, including access to steady Wi-Fi, I followed guidelines provided by my university and chose asynchronous online teaching. For me, the greatest challenge was how I would go about teaching online the many drama-based courses I have developed for my university. The impetus for the development of these courses had always been about encouraging student engagement. Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) indicate that prior to university, the focus on test-taking is a significant factor in demotivation towards pursuing English language education for many students. Drama approaches focus not only on communication and making learning purposeful, but also allow teachers to provide students with activities which involve both emotional and embodied engagement with the learning using the conventions of drama (Piazzoli, 2018). Yet such activities are designed to be face-to-face, interactive activities which allow students to benefit primarily from working in groups with other students, while at the same time providing them a context for using the L2 language. I was thus concerned most with how I would be able to translate this type of learning to an online, asynchronous classroom environment. In this article I will reflect on the process I went through in order to implement this kind of drama approach in an online-based oral interpretation course that I taught last semester and discuss what I learned, particularly in terms of the mental well-being of students in an online learning environment.

Feeling generally overwhelmed by the task of teaching asynchronously, I was incredibly nervous about creating an online asynchronous oral interpretation course. Oral Interpretation is essentially taking a text and performing the text in a way that conveys the essence of the message, with focus on the aesthetics and emotions (Gura & Powell, 2019). This can be done as an individual but generally it is done as a group, much like a choir, using voices and bodies to create powerful oral and physical imagery. I initially designed an online oral interpretation course for mostly first year students that followed a "safe" structure, giving assignments for students to complete individually. Each unit of learning began with a video lecture explaining an overview of the assignment, a brief explanation of the text, some key points to consider for preparation, which included some concrete examples, and a detailed step-by-step description of how to achieve the

goal of performing the assigned text. I also included a tutorial on how to use Flipgrid, (Microsoft Corporation, 2018) an online website and mobile phone application which allows to students to record and share videos. Students were then instructed to upload the videos of their performance onto Flipgrid for feedback, which I gave as a comment in Flipgrid in video format. After feedback was given to the students, they were instructed to rehearse and post a final presentation of the text for grading, again via Flipgrid. While interaction did take place in this activity, it was between myself and each individual student only. Overall, the students worked diligently and I saw improvement in their abilities to be expressive, in their pronunciation, and in their intonation. I was pleased to see students using their faces, their hands, and more importantly, conveying emotion in their performance. There were some benefits to using the medium of video as the students seemed more at ease being expressive and creative in taking risks. In the past, it was incredibly challenging to get students to become comfortable with using their facial expressions, raising their voices, and changing up the rhythm of their speech. I was surprised to see and hear genuine feeling and vulnerability, with students taking different pauses, different stresses of words, rather than copying my own example. Although, in one sense, this mode gave freedom for students to try new ways of expression, students could not experience the joy of working together with other students, nor could they attempt the essential challenge of learning to communicate emotion to an audience. It was all pretty dry and feedback came only from the teacher. It was unlike a normal oral interpretation class where we could exchange ideas and work together as a class, and receive both teacher and peer feedback.

Around the time we completed this first assignment, the department began to conduct surveys and first year student advisors attained feedback via one-on-one online meetings. Overall, students were satisfied with the content of the classes, but the primary complaints, particularly for asynchronous classes, were a lack of immediate feedback on assignments and an overall lack of community feeling in their learning, regardless of the form of the class, whether it was in real time or asynchronous. Many students who had just moved to our area were living alone for the first time, and were highly concerned with trying to make friends. The short, real-time chats in communication classes did not seem enough for them to spark friendships. Reflecting on my own experience in my courses like these, I decided to incorporate pair project work into the oral interpretation course. The assignment was to work together in pairs on a poem that had some

dialogue. The assignment required that the students discuss the piece and rehearse together, all made possible via the chat and video chat functions of Microsoft Teams. This was an incredibly unsuccessful endeavor, with students not responding to chat messages by their partners or missing rehearsal video chat appointments. Lack of proper participation would have been easier to monitor in a face-to-face class, but with the students using chat, I was unable to see if the students had been in communication. I only learned of the lack of participation just prior to the assignment's due date and could do little to intervene. This issue ended with me being a partner to multiple students, and as a result, I could not dedicate enough attention to other students who also needed guidance. We finally settled on working in small groups of 3 or 4 rather than in pairs.

Online social media platforms and teacher groups soon became full of teachers, myself included, who were lamenting the hardships and workload of online teaching. This brought again to the foreground in my mind the issue of student care. Online learning did have its benefits, as the online medium seemed to reduce stage fright and allow the students to be more expressive. However, interactions I had with students indicated to me that finding a time to meet up with all the group members, albeit online, was challenging for them, despite the suggestions I had made to use the allotted class period. The students seemed to enjoy the social aspect of group work. Yet I felt there was more I could do to use the medium of drama to help them process the difficulties of this pandemic. Thinking back to my own initial research in process drama, there were several books related to drama in education (DiE) and process drama that connected drama to therapy. Indeed, there is an area, as many may be familiar with, specifically called "drama therapy" (Landy & Montgomery, 2012). Looking at the journal articles, it was apparent that I was not knowledgeable enough to dip into this particular field in the limited time at hand. However, in other readings I came across an idea that I thought might allow students to process their emotions and reduce stress related to the current situation—the parody song. This would allow the students a chance to express their frustrations, concerns, and emotions in a healthy way through comedy, and hopefully aid in uplifting their spirits as opposed to pulling them down into negativity. Humor is a common weapon against hardship and I hoped the parody song activity would help improve the emotional health of my students.

I put forth the parody song idea to my students and immediately received positive responses. I assigned them into groups of three or four and challenged them, not only to create

parody lyrics, but to ultimately create a music video. After I showed them some example videos (The Holderness Family, 2020a, 2020b), the students seemed extremely eager to get to work. As the university provided Microsoft Teams as our online platform, different channels (online spaces) were created where they could contact each other via video chat or text, and also upload files to share with one another. We discussed different songs and ultimately chose "Shake it Off" (Swift, 2014) by Taylor Swift as it was an upbeat song with a fairly simple melody. The initial assignment was to have a meeting where they could exchange ideas about experiences they felt were funny, challenging or frustrating, made them sad, or were good learning or positive experiences that occurred as a result of the pandemic, such as social distancing, or taking online classes. After the meeting, students were tasked to summarize their ideas via a handout. These were shared between the groups and were the basis for the development of lyrics. We discussed aspects of song and poetry writing, including consideration of syllables and rhyming sounds, as opposed to similar spellings. After several rounds of editing and idea exchanges, the students had a set of lyrics. I created a series of tutorial videos beginning with pronunciation, speaking the lyrics in rhythm, and then finally singing the lyrics slowly. The students were also given a karaoke and non-karaoke version of the parody of Taylor Swift's song titled, "Wash Your Hands" to practice and record individually (see Figure 1). I asked the students to clap at a specific point prior to singing (four counts before the first word) which aided in compiling the singing via a simple music editing application, GarageBand. The app allows the user to import audio files and move, cut, modify volume, and add effects, such as creating ambience through reverb, as desired. I used the large spike in the app's visual window that the claps in the audio at the beginning created in order to align the audio files and then cut out extraneous sounds, such as the clap, and modified volume on each track to create a balance between student recordings. I then added the karaoke audio and a few effects to make the audio sound a little more natural, exported the file, and shared it via the Teams classroom.

Figure 1

Song lyrics for "Wash My Hands"

Wash Your Hands: Oral Interpretation Parody Song Project

What classes do I take? Scared to make a mistake Coz my life just went on line, mmmm Coz my life just went on line, mmmm I have so much I could wear But I'm going no where So, it's PJs all the time mmm So, it's PJs all the time mmm But I'm a wiz at typing super-fast now Reports are getting easier more time to hang So, I think it's gonna be alright Coz people just keep cough, cough, coughing on me And the trains don't have enough space, space for me So, I'm just gonna chill, chill out at home And wash my hand wash my hands Coz my friends and I can chat, chat, chat online And there always twitter, tick tock, and the gram So, I'm just gonna chill, chill out at home And wash my hand wash my hands I can't hear my "teach" They are not within my reach Coz the 'net keeps breaking down, mmm Coz the 'net keeps breaking down, mmm *Combini* printers Are now my best friends Coz there's homework all the time, mmm Coz there's homework all the time, mmm	But I keep learning Through videos I star in Producing my own schooling Get family time So, I think it's gonna be alright Coz people just keep cough, cough, coughing on me And the trains don't have enough space, space for me So, I'm just gonna chill, chill out at home And wash my hand wash my hands Coz my friends and I can chat, chat, chat online And there always twitter, tick tock, and the "gram" So, I'm just gonna chill, chill out at home And wash my hand wash my hands wash my hand wash my hands wash my hand wash my hands wash my hand wash my hands wash my hand wash my hands

The students, again in their teams, focused on the second phase of the project which was to create a music video. The challenge lay in trying to recreate scenes, such as being in a crowded train, which would require the students to be out in public places. Because we were in a state of emergency, students were told specifically to limit all their filming to within their residence. This

limitation actually sparked their imagination more than I anticipated and students, enlisting the help of family members and pets, were incredibly innovative. Some students used clips of their family members' legs cramped up and stepping on one another. Some used footage of themselves with their printer and a homemade Lawson sign above it. Some speeded up versions of themselves playing the piano, watching movies, and relaxing. What surprised me the most was that while I had offered to edit the clips to match the music, some students took the initiative and did all the editing themselves. Each group's music video was unique, with different interpretations of the lyrics, different expressions of the ideas in the lyrics. I could also see them taking steps to be brave and be expressive, to think outside of the box, and to debate with each other on the best way to portray the lyrics. Once all the videos were complete, they were shared with the whole class. Student activity on the channel (group discussion thread) increased significantly throughout the process of group work, and I was pleased to see the same enthusiasm continue in the interactions we had after we returned from group work and came back together as a class. Students excitedly gave feedback and they noticed good interpretations of the lyrics, in addition to good examples of editing made by other students. After giving feedback and having a discussion about the project, the students moved on to their final project, which was a short drama they created and recorded via Zoom in the same groups.

Prior to writing this teaching reflection, I conducted a short survey through the forms function on the Teams platform in order to assess overall student satisfaction of the course. The questions were kept general, not focusing on any particular activity, and I concentrated on asking students what aspects of the course they liked, which aspects they found challenging, and if there was anything they would change. Some did indicate that finding a common time to work on the group projects was difficult and at times frustrating. However, in general, the students indicated that the group work aspect was one of their favorite parts of the course. They indicated that having video lectures, as opposed to real time, had the benefit of allowing them to watch the lecture several times, which they said was helpful. When asked what they had enjoyed the most, many indicated that the parody song was their favorite activity. Some explained that their choice of the parody song project was due to the enjoyment of sharing details of their current life, while many said they liked the music aspect, and the creativity of making videos. Several students suggested increasing the number of group projects in the course.

While the students did not directly express to me or in the survey that the parody song project was particularly therapeutic, the popularity of the project could indicate that it had some cathartic benefit. Students were able to express their frustrations with learning to navigate the online platform of Microsoft Teams or issues with printing their assignments with humor. For me the most significant point of reflection in my teaching of this course was that particularly for first year students, teachers need to focus, not only on learning, but also on the emotional health of our students. Incorporating activities that seek to improve the emotional well-being of our students can provide opportunities for them to make real connections. I was so focused in the beginning on making sure proper "learning" was occurring, that I did not stop to truly think about how I could recreate a sense of connection and community in the classroom. I do not suggest that all teachers try using drama as therapy, nor do I think we need to become counselors for our students. However, I hope this reflection paper might encourage teachers to take a moment to think about how they can create a real sense of community in their online classes. As is the case with many teachers' classes, my courses will continue to be conducted online for the rest of the year. I do not have the answers yet on how to best achieve true personal connections in online courses, and I still am daunted by navigating the difficult waters of online teaching. However, I believe that this parody song project, at least in part, has helped me plot my course in the right direction.

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