

Performance-Assisted Learning: A Proposal

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Abstract

Speech as a performance activity is accepted by English teachers and administrators, and speech performances are done in classes as well as at contests. Formal debate is accepted by teachers, but not taught so often in classes because of a perception that it requires special expertise on the part of the teacher, and that it is too complex and difficult a task for most students. Other performance activities, such as drama, dance, and music, receive less acceptance and support for a variety of reasons. This paper discusses the acceptance of performance in courses, explains the concept of Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL), and gives examples of what PAL would look like.

There is strong general support for the use of speech in English language education in Japan, along with acknowledgement of the ability of debate to teach, encourage the use of, and improve critical thinking skills. On the other hand, there is little interest in implementing formal debate in courses, and some, but not much, general interest in the use of drama in English. However, there seems to be no interest in the areas of puppetry, performing of songs with dance, the making of movies, lipdups (described below), and other activities that could benefit language learning.

Why is this? Of course, it could be a publicity problem, but it is more likely that the problem lies deeper, perhaps with teachers' preconceived notions of the value of such activities and of what is required to implement speech, drama, and debate (SDD) in their classrooms.

Preconceived Notions of Implementation of Speech, Drama, and Debate

In addition to a lack of information or publicity concerning SDD, perhaps many language teachers have the misconception that only a special type of person, a “drama” person, or specialists (such as a person who was a debater in high school and college), are able to implement speech, drama, or debate, which, of course, is not the case. Rather than sponsoring a speech contest, putting on an entire play, or hosting a debate tournament, some micro-activities such as short impromptu speeches, simple role-plays, or ten-minute debates can be done easily by any teacher using a step-by-step explanation of the activity, such as can be found in *CLASSROOM RESOURCES: Practical Ideas for Teachers* (Head, 2015), a resource book explaining performance activities.

There is another perception that perhaps inhibits teachers, making them reluctant to try to use these aids to language learning, and that is the false perception that these activities are not central to learning, but are fun, superfluous activities. To the contrary, as a result of research funded by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Newmann & Wehlage (1995) conclude that “academic achievement can be judged satisfactory only if students are required to express the results of [their] disciplined inquiry in written, symbolic, and oral discourse by making things, and in performances for audiences.” (p. 8). That is, performances, rather than being superfluous, are the necessary last step in demonstrating achievement of knowledge or skill, and so should be used more extensively in language and content courses.

Finally, there is the perception that these performances require a large amount of time; in the case of drama or debate, it could take an entire semester, which would not allow enough time for more “obviously useful activities” such as TOEIC practice, grammar and vocabulary lessons, or listening and writing activities. This is connected to the false impression that if a teacher is going to implement drama, debate, or speech, a large-scale activity has to be planned instead of the micro-activities mentioned above. This implementation of micro-activities of performance in order to learn, consolidate learning, and evaluate learning is the definition of Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL). PAL is not confined to language learning, but encompasses content courses, focusing on the use of micro-activities from performance areas of study in order to ensure that students have truly learned the material of the courses.

PAL Rationale

In discussion with Donna Tatsuki of Kobe City University of Foreign Studies (August 2017, personal communication), she stated that we need to move beyond the idea of language competence, especially as shown by commercial proficiency exam scores, and instead require language performance. Within the discussion, this first came from the position that students should show they have acquired language skills, but also included the idea that knowledge is not gained through memorization, but through constructing it in the mind. This idea that knowledge comes through constructing it in the mind is a key concept of Constructivism (Betts, 1991). Students who are not required to produce “expressions” that are meaningful outside of the classroom are generally not involved in “constructing or producing meaning or knowledge” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 8). Their conclusion that performance in front of an audience as one way students show academic achievement is a strong rationale for the need for dissemination of the PAL concept.

Another area of research that informs PAL is CAC (Communication Across the Curriculum), which came about as a result of the consensus that U.S. university students lacked the abilities to effectively communicate their research in writing and spoken word (Cronin & Glenn, 1991). WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) is the most accepted and effective form of CAC (Walvoord, 1996). Bellon (2000), building on the success of CAC, proposed DAC (Debate Across the Curriculum).

These movements form a basis for PAL. Perhaps PAC, Performance Across the Curriculum, would be a better term for the concept of PAL. Either of the two terms could be used interchangeably, depending on whether emphasis is placed on the use of the micro-activities (PAL), or on the use of performance in any course, no matter the content area (PAC).

PAL Performance Types

The performance types that would be included in PAL are theater (e.g., plays, role-plays, theater games, process drama, simulations, roleplaying games), oral interpretation/readers theater, speech, presentation (PowerPoint or lightning styles like PechaKucha – a twenty-slide presentation software presentation format where each slide is timed to automatically advance after 20 seconds),

debate, puppetry, music, dance, lipdub (described below), film-making, and other performance types.

PAL Scope

The scope of PAL would be language courses (oral communication, presentation, writing, reading, or discussion), but would also include content courses (e.g., intercultural communication, history, sociology, psychology, law, medicine, healthcare, etc.).

PAL Examples

What are some examples of PAL? Below are a few, but by no means an exhaustive list, of such activities in both language and content classes.

Theater (plays, roleplays, theater games, process drama, simulations, roleplaying games)

In oral communication classes, rather than the somewhat uninteresting reading of dialogues, the participants could create back-stories for the characters by giving them names, jobs, families, personality characteristics, etc. One teacher at Nanzan University, William Kumai (November 2017, personal communication) has his students write their own short dramas for other students to perform. This also could be done by turning generic textbook conversations into more interesting role-plays. For content classes, simulations and role-plays could be used to illustrate situations or events covered in the class.

Oral Interpretation/Readers Theater

In language classes, oral interpretation (expressive reading of text out loud) could be used in reading or writing classes. Students could read or write a poem or story and then perform it in solo or group performances. In content classes, students could perform short pieces of important text in solo or group performances.

Speech

In language classes students could take essays that they write in composition class and perform them in class. In content classes, students could do short one- to three-minute impromptu speeches on key concepts of the course. Important speech concepts, such as eye contact, varying voice volume, speed, pitch, and style, and the use of gesture and movement, could be required for oral reports.

Presentation (PowerPoint, PechaKucha)

In language and content courses, presentations using computers are common, but the principles of creating a good presentation (simple slides, with graphics and little or no text) with clear organization (introduction, body, conclusion) and good presentation style (eye contact, gestures, movement, not looking at the screen) could be taught. The format and standardized automatic movement of slides makes PechaKucha-like lightning presentations interesting, also make it more important for students to practice more, and often encourages more spontaneity.

Debate

In language classes, specifically discussion classes, one of the types of formal debate (policy, public forum, Lincoln-Douglas, etc.) can be used or modified to match your content course needs (IDEA, n.d.). In content classes, simplified formal debate can be used to deeply explore issues.

Puppetry

In language classes, puppetry is a little-used activity, but has great possibilities in that it allows one person to play both characters in a dialog, thereby allowing a small group of people to play a large cast of characters. In content classes, puppets, especially paper-stick puppets (a picture of the character attached to a stick) allow the student to easily play historical characters or important people in the world, recreate historical events, or recreate other narratives.

Music

In language classes, the lyrics of songs are often used to demonstrate grammar points, or songs are used as listening exercises. However, if a performance of the lyrics in karaoke-style is required, or if the students perform an oral interpretation by speaking the lyrics dramatically, the meaning of the lyrics can be more deeply experienced. In content classes, performance of lyrics to songs can be used to illustrate historical, social, or political situations.

Dance

In advanced language classes dance is not used much, although it is used with young low-level learners to teach basic vocabulary and grammar with songs like “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes,” or “The Hokey-pokey.” However, when included in drama or oral interpretation performances, dance can add more excitement and motivation for the students. In content classes, dance would probably be rarely used as it does not employ language, but could be used in psychology or mental health classes to portray emotions or emotional situations that would be too painful using words (death of a family member or friend, feelings about a natural catastrophe such as a flood, earthquake, or tsunami). Dance, without words, can be emotionally strong.

Lipdup

Lipdup, or lipdub, is making a music video where students do not actually sing, but lipsync (move their lips to match the words to a song). The video is done nonstop in one shot and the only editing done is the addition of the music track. In language classes it has been used to motivate students with lower level English skills (Kluge & Catanzariti, 2013). In content classes, this would probably not be used as it takes a large amount of time and practice.

Film-making

In language classes film-making is rarely done because of the expense of the equipment, the high level of technical knowledge required of the teacher, and for the students the large amount of preparation, the time to think, create a story, plan the shots, rehearse the scenes, and then edit the resulting material are prohibitive. However, with the use of the students’ own smartphones, and

with free video editing applications, it is becoming much easier to do, so that students can do their own editing (Ford & Kluge, 2015). In content classes, film-making could be used to create multi-media projects on the topic of study.

Conclusion

If attitudes toward performance in university education were changed so that performances were considered a necessary component of the education process and a good sign that learning has been internalized by students, and if teachers discovered ways like the ones described in this paper to use performance, not as the main goal, but as a tool to learn different skills and contents, then performance might be embraced by a larger number of teachers. This is a worthy goal of organizations like the Speech, Drama, & Debate SIG.

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